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The History and Philosophy of Radical Black Theology

Kennet D. Oliver

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THE HISTORY AND PHILOSOPHY OF
RADICAL BLACK THEOLOGY

A Graduate Thesis
Presented to
the Faculty of
Western Evangelical Seminary

In Partial Fullfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Divinity

by
Kenneth D. Oliver

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Approval Sheet

APPROVED BY

Major Professor: Robert V. Sacks

Cooperative Reader: Norman N. Bonner

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Kenneth D. Oliver

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Our's is an age of theological controversy. Even within the Christian ranks, the milieu of theological controversy has resulted in much theological confusion and misunderstanding. There seems to be an ever-deeping concern, in theological circles, which emphasizes that the individual must know what he believes and why he believes what he does. Along with this emphasis has come the idea that the individual has a right to believe what he wishes to believe, and his insistence that others must accept his right to believe as he does; without any infringement upon his person or his theology. No where is this idea more clearly advocated than in the area of radical Black Theology.

I. STATEMENT OF PURPOSE

It was the specific purpose of this intensified research to make a thorough investigation of (1) the historical setting and development of radical Black Theology, and (2) the characteristics, issues and implications which make radical Black Theology what it is.

The comprehensive purpose of the research was three-fold. The ~~first was to acquire a working knowledge of radical Black Theology. The~~ second was to present the truth of actual findings, based on thorough research, relative to the issues and tenets of radical Black Theology. The third area of purpose was to gain a better understanding of the black people; their culture, their lives, and circumstances, as they relate to their theological beliefs.

II. IMPORTANCE OF THE STUDY

It was the writer's contention that present American society is characterized by racism and racial pride. Our's is a day of slogans like "Black Is Beautiful," "White Is Right," "Black Power" and "White Backlash."

That the race issue looms large in the American mind today is impossible to successfully deny. Marks of identification such as natural or freedom haircuts, african-or-quasi-african-styled clothing, "Black and Proud" buttons and automobile stickers are symbols of race identity as well as signs of race awareness. In the meantime, while blacks grow in self-knowledge, and while national magazines devote issues to the problem, racial "polarization" continues.¹

Thus the American Negro is striving for self-identity, self-awareness, and black awareness. The black awareness emphasis is successfully and powerfully asserting a selfhood and racial pride for blacks. Not only are the American black people developing a self-hood and racial pride for themselves, they are also asserting that the only alternative open to the white American is to accept the selfhood and racial pride of the blacks. "White America" then is being forced to recognize the black people for who they are and for what they can become. "Too many, for far too long, have been intimidated by the white world, kept in ignorance, and brainwashed into believing they were inferior."² To this the American Negro would now respond, "No longer will this be the case." Thus the blacks are addressing themselves to the tradition of the conquering whites, and as an oppressed people,

¹William L. Banks, The Black Church in the U.S. (Chicago: Moody Press, 1972), pp. 5-6.

²Ibid., pp. 6-7.

they are dedicated to the struggle against alien rule or at the very least to the problem of coming to terms with the society structure which alien rule has brought into being.

In no other area, than that of Black religion or radical Black Theology, is the goal and objective of the American black people being more clearly and decisively achieved. It is here that black selfhood and awareness definitively and effectively administers a crushing blow to white racism and to the attitudes which are reflected in the tradition of the conquering whites.

It is the startling fact, as expressed by William Banks that, "There is also an appalling ignorance on the part of both blacks and whites concerning the religion of the American Negro. . . ." ³ that necessitates this intensive research and composition.

III. LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

It was not the task of this research to discern the minute differences or thought which are expressed through various advocates of Black Theology. The purpose was not to compare nor contrast differing Black theologians with regard to their opinions, convictions, or thought processes. Rather, this intensified study dealt only with the radical core of Black Theology. The sole intent of the research was to trace the historical development of radical Black Theology, and to explore its characteristics, issues, tenets and implications which make radical Black Theology what it is. The investigation is limited to radical Black Theology as it is expressed in American society by

³Ibid.

the American Negro.

There has been no attempt by the author to refute the concepts of radical Black Theology, nor to pass judgment upon them. The concepts have been described and set forth as the core of Black Theology itself advocates.

IV. METHOD OF PROCEDURE

The material for this investigation was gathered from three distinct sources--documentary material, correspondence, and personal interviews and discussions. Available books and periodicals relating to the subject and scope of the research were gathered and examined for all pertinent information. The author corresponded with The Institute Of The Black World, Atlanta, Georgia, for a bibliography pertaining to Black Theology, and with Rev. Gilbert H. Caldwell and Rev. J. Metz Rollins of New York Theological Seminary, Professor James H. Cone of Union Theological Seminary, and Professor William H. Bentley, president of the National Negro Evangelical Association, for specific information.⁴ Personal interviews and discussions were held with Rev. John H. Jackson, pastor of the Mount Olivet Baptist Church in Portland, Oregon, and with Rev. Charles H. Williams of Portland, Oregon who is the Pacific Northwest Director of the National Negro Evangelical Association. Various conferences with the author's major professor, Dr. Nobel V. Sack, proved beneficial throughout the research.

⁴See Appendix A.

V. DEFINITION OF TERMS

Radical Black Theology

Radical Black Theology is the term given to a "a theology whose sole purpose is to apply the freeing power of the gospel to black people under white oppression."⁵ Geddes Hanson has defined Black Theology in the following manner:

A process . . . a self-conconscious effort to relate the experience of American blackness to the corpus (main body) of Christian theology . . . (which) represents a determination to re-form the assumption of mainstream Protestant theology by relating seriously the peculiarities of the black experience in America to the gospel of a living Messiah who shares the broadest dimension of that experience.⁶

For purposes of this investigation, the author has added the term "radical" to Black Theology. This term was used to clarify the fact that this research dealt only with the mainstream or core of Black Theology.

Black Power

Black Power is the attitude and inner self-affirmation that says No to intolerable conditions and Yes to the worth of blackness, and Yes to black freedom and black self-determination.

It means complete emancipation of black people from white oppression by whatever means black people deem necessary. The methods may include selective buying, boycotting, marching, or even rebellion. Black Power means black freedom, black self-determination, wherein black people no longer view themselves as without human dignity but as men, human beings with the ability to carve out their own destiny. In short, as Stokely Carmichael

⁵James H. Cone, Black Theology & Black Power (New York: The Seabury Press, 1969), p. 31.

⁶Geddes Hanson, "Black Theology and Protestant Thought," Social Progress (Sept.-Oct. 1969), p. 37.

would say, Black Power means T. C. B., Take Care of Business--black folk taking care of black folks' business, not on the terms of the oppressor, but on those of the oppressed.⁷

Black Power, in short, is an attitude, an inward affirmation of the essential worth of blackness. It means that the black man will not be poisoned by the stereotypes that others have of him, but will affirm from the depth of his soul: "Get used to me, I am not getting used to anyone. . . ." This is Black Power, the power of the black man to say Yes to his own "black being," and to make the other accept him or be prepared for a struggle.⁸

Racism

Racism, as defined by advocates of radical Black Theology and Black Power, is the principle and practice of the white power structure in the exploitation of the black people. It is the attitude that white people are superior to the black people. It is the white effort to dehumanize the black man. Racism is the value system of a white world defining the black man as a non-person. "To this day, in the eyes of most white Americans, the black man remains subhuman."⁹

Black Revolution

The Black revolution is the attempt of black people to actively confront white society and the white power structure employing any and all means which black people deem necessary.

Revolution is not merely a "change of heart" but a radical black encounter with the structure of white racism, with the full intention of destroying its menacing power. I mean confronting white racists and saying: "If it's a fight you want, I am prepared to oblige you." This is what the black revolution means.¹⁰

⁷Cone, op. cit., p. 6.

⁸Ibid., p. 8.

⁹Ibid., p. 10.

¹⁰Ibid., p. 136.

Reconciliation

Reconciliation, as defined by radical Black Theology, is the breakdown of the "wall of hostility" between blacks and whites strictly on the terms of black people. As Professor Cone says, ". . . reconciliation on white racist terms is impossible, since it would crush the dignity of black people."¹¹

Black Liberation

Black liberation is the term used for total social freedom for black people. "Liberation is revolutionary-for blacks it points to what ought to be. Black Christians desire radical and rapid social change in America as a matter of survival. Radical Black Theology is a theology of liberation."¹²

VI. STATEMENT OF ORGANIZATION

Chapter two contained the historical background and development of radical Black Theology.

Chapter three was a special study devoted to the present status of radical Black Theology.

Chapter four dealt with those characteristics which distinguish radical Black Theology from other theologies. Included was an examination of the issues and problems which advocates of radical Black Theology contend are important.

¹¹Ibid., p. 144.

¹²J. Deotis Roberts, Liberation and Reconciliation: A Black Theology (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1971), p. 27.

Chapter five was a special study involving the unanswered questions posed by radical Black Theology.

Chapter six was composed of a final summarization and conclusion of the entire research. Other areas for further investigation were indicated.

CHAPTER II

THE HISTORICAL DEVELOPMENT OF RADICAL BLACK THEOLOGY

Radical Black Theology is historically rooted and grounded in the experience of the black man. Without a clear understanding of the black experience, there can be no understanding of radical Black Theology. The history of the black man and his experience is the foundation of radical Black Theology.

There can be no Black Theology which does not take seriously the black experience--a life of humiliation and suffering. This must be the point of departure of all god-talk which seeks to be black-talk. This means that Black Theology realizes that it is man who speaks of God; and when that man is black, he can only speak of God in the light of the black experience.¹

"The black experience is a source of Black Theology because the latter seeks to relate biblical revelation to the situation of black people in America."²

Radical Black Theology is closely related to and associated with black history. James H. Cone says:

Black Theology focuses on black history as a source for its theological interpretation of God's work in the world because divine activity is inseparable from the history of black people. There can be no comprehension of Black Theology without realizing that its existence comes from a community which looks back on its unique past, visualizes the reality of the future, and then makes decisions about possibilities in the present.³

¹James H. Cone, A Black Theology of Liberation (Philadelphia: J. B. Lippincott Company, 1970), p. 54.

²Ibid., p. 57.

³Ibid., p. 59.

It must of necessity be pointed out that radical Black Theology is not a new theology. Rather, it is as old as the history and experience of the black people in America. Again James H. Cone states:

Like Black Power, Black Theology is not new either. It came into being when black churchmen realized that killing slave masters was doing the work of God. It began when black churchmen refused to accept the racist white church as consistent with the gospel of God. The organizing of . . . black churches is a visible manifestation of Black Theology. The participation of the black churches in the black liberation struggle from the eighteenth to the twentieth century is a tribute to the endurance of Black Theology.⁴

This chapter has been subdivided into three primary sections in order to analyze the historical development of radical Black Theology. The first two division titles have been borrowed from Major J. Jones as he used them in his book, Black Awareness A Theology of Hope.

I. THE PRE-CIVIL WAR DEVELOPMENT

Victimization of the Black Man

For over three hundred years, the black people have been a victimized people.

Over three hundred years ago, and many years thereafter, black men, women, and children were extracted from their native land of Africa; deliberately by plan stripped bare psychologically, physically, and religiously; and transplanted in an alien land dominated by the white man.⁵

"Nearly twenty million Negroes were made captive over the span of some 300 years (1517-1840)."⁶ The Black people of Africa were exploited, kidnapped, captured and sold in the slave markets first by the

⁴Ibid.

⁵Major J. Jones, Black Awareness A Theology of Hope (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1971), pp. 18-19.

⁶William L. Banks, The Black Church in the U.S.A. (Chicago: Moody Press, 1972), p. 11.

Portuguese and Spanish, later by the English, Dutch and French, and still later by the Americans. Many were the hands of exploitation, torment, degradation, humiliation and dehumanization that laid grip upon the lives of black people.

Following the white capture of many black people, the ships were filled to far beyond capacity with black people who were herded onto the captive ships like animals. They were packed and jammed into the sea vessels which were to transport them from their homes and families across the Atlantic Ocean from the Gulf of Guinea to the New World through the Middle Passage. While nearly two million homeless Negroes were brought to the shores of the United States, twelve million were taken to Latin America.

Many millions of the captured Negroes never reached the New World.

Some died resisting capture; some died in captivity while being held in Africa waiting to be shipped out. Some committed suicide by eating quantities of clay. Others, beaten and too weak to continue the trek in the coffle (land convoy of slaves chained together), were abandoned to die. Most of the loss of life, however, came during the journey through the Middle Passage.⁷

The journey through the Middle Passage, by ship, was a terrible experience for the captured black people. They were treated as non-humans. They suffered untold misery and torture. The black captives were humiliated, degraded, and abused.

Shackled in irons, they huddled beneath the decks for sixteen hours at a time in unbearable heat, filth, and stench, barely surviving on stale, spoiled food and stagnant water. During the several weeks it took to make the trip, the slaves were given only a few minutes a day on deck for fresh air and exercise. Many died at sea from dysentery, smallpox, and other diseases. Some starved

⁷Ibid., p. 12.

themselves to death, refusing to eat. To prevent this form of suicide, hot coals were applied to the lips to force the slaves to open their mouths to eat. Some committed suicide by jumping into the ocean. Others rebelled, especially those who were warriors taken in battle; often these were beaten or shot to death. And some died soon after reaching American soil.⁸

Within the context of American life, the captured black people experienced "a negative self-image, self-concept, and distorted "who am I?"⁹ All African memories were erased. The homeland was forgotten with its people and conditions. Life for the kidnapped Negro took on a much different dimension. Family relationships were entirely absolved, as family members were delivered to different plantations in different sectors of the country, never to be reunited. To prevent rebellion among the slaves, tribal units were destroyed in much the same manner as the family units were. This resulted in the destruction of a common language among the slave people: one more step removed from the life they had known before.

In America, the enslaved Negro could not have a legal marriage. There were no marriage ceremonies. Thus in place of legal marriages, promiscuity ran rampant resulting in the further breakdown of family life among the enslaved people. Not only was there great promiscuity among the black slaves, but in many cases the black women were raped by their white masters, who prided themselves in their ability to take advantage of those whom they oppressed. All of this had a deleterious effect upon the family life of the Negro people.

The deleterious effect this had on Negro family life was tremendous and is still being felt today. Slaves faced a different climate, a new environment, an unknown tongue. The uprooting, fear

⁸Ibid.

⁹Jones, loc. cit.

and cruelty they experienced combined to make their life miserable.¹⁰

The Slave Trade

The slave trade in the United States was an economic process which resulted in the degradation of the black man to the point where he had experienced a sense of dehumanization. Black men were captured in Africa and brought to the New World for one reason: to be sold to the highest bidding white plantation owner who would employ him at the plantation as a slave.

Within this new context, the black man was to occupy the most degraded of all human conditions; that of a slave--a mere piece of property, a nobody in the fullest sense of the word. The black family, by plan, was broken up, scattered, and sold from auction block to auction block all over America. The black male, for all practical purposes, was completely emasculated, and the black female was systematically exploited and vilely degraded. The plantation system implanted a subservience and dependency in the psyche of the black man that has made him traditionally much too dependent upon the goodwill and paternalism of the white man.¹¹

The slave trade certainly made a deep and lasting impression upon the life of the black man. The lives of black people were disoriented. They were often moved about from one plantation to another without any consultation or consideration given to them. Their families were broken, their friendships were destroyed, and the slave trade presented constant turmoil and unrest for many Negroes. Though a few of the enslaved Negroes found themselves in appreciable surroundings and circumstances, the vast majority of the enslaved people led lives in flagrant disarray.

¹⁰Banks, op. cit., p. 13.

¹¹Major J. Jones, Black Awareness A Theology of Hope (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1971), p. 19.

The slave trade was perpetuated by greedy men who were concerned only for big money. The slave traders "contributed to the dehumanizing process and the subjection of the black man to many ordeals of slavery. . . ."¹² Economically, the institution of slavery made every risk taken worthwhile for the slave traders. Major J. Jones describes the slave traders well as he states:

The slave traders were hard-handed men, but generally brave. They were of all nationalities, but especially Portuguese, Spanish, Dutch, English, and American. They were respectable merchants taking on a little extra cargo, they were derelicts who had been press-ganged onto a slaver, they were adventurers eager to make a quick fortune, they were Bible-pounding preachers who had gone money mad, they were sedate clerks representing respectable commercial companies, they were pirates, and sometimes, they were mere sadists seeking satisfaction.¹³

Only the tremendous economic profits of two or three hundred percent could have cemented the determination and risk-filled efforts of the slave traders. The slavers responded to the economic opportunity by the thousands. It was the black people who paid in suffering, sorrow, and many times in death.

There was not a quick diminishing of the slave trade for it lasted for four centuries. During those four centuries, the effects of the slave trade upon the experience of the black people were great and far-reaching.

The four centuries of the slave trade brought about the greatest forced migration in human history--a migration which, for sheer misery and human suffering as well as for profit, was without equal in human experience.¹⁴

¹²Ibid., p. 21.

¹³Ibid.

¹⁴Ibid., p. 22.

". . . the slave trade hardened and degraded almost everyone who engaged in it--from the stay-at-home merchants to the slave ship captains and the crews, to the African tribes themselves."¹⁵

Why Slavery?

Though few, besides the black slaves themselves, openly asked questions as to the rationale for slavery, there were many conscious as well as unconscious efforts to justify the degrading and dehumanizing experience that the black slaves were subjected to. For the most part, the rationale for slavery was to be found in the white men's attitudes toward black people. Major J. Jones says: ". . . the white men's mentality toward the black man was most affected and impaired by its reciprocal contact with the black experience during slavery and the subsequent periods after slavery."¹⁶

Many white attitudes were reflected toward the Negro that served as reasons for the principle and practice of slavery. First, there was the attitude that the black man was not a human being; but rather a sub-human. As a non-human being he was not entitled to equality with the white man in terms of treatment, opportunity, place or status in life. Secondly, there was the theological attitude that the black race was a cursed race by reason of God's curse upon Noah's son Ham. Thus it was God's divine plan that there be the segregation of the races and that the black race was to always be the servant and the slave of all. In the third place, there was the attitude that the black people possessed

¹⁵Robert Goldston, The Negro Revolution (New York: Macmillan Company, 1968), p. 23.

¹⁶Jones, op. cit., p. 22.

an inferior mentality, and inferior physical and biological characteristics which were evidenced by the "blackness" of the people. Fourth, there were economic and social attitudes that contributed to the black experience. The economic attitudes asserted the substandard economic status of the blacks because of their inherent status as servants. From the social point of view, the attitude was that the Negro had to be kept in his place of inferiority. Major J. Jones has observed that,

. . . the black family had to be kept unstable and prevented from crystallizing into a social unit, and especially deprived of a strong black male image. There had to be no climate to allow the development of a positive or confident social ego; nor was the black man, because of the white cultural context, allowed to achieve a positive personal self-confidence.¹⁷

Lastly, there was the prevailing attitude of prejudice, based upon fear and hatred, that led to black discrimination. The blacks became an easy target for prejudice because of their color, foreign cultural background, and their unknown homeland.¹⁸

Reaction

The Civil War was inevitable. The South's economy had become dependent upon slavery. The industrial revolution was responsible for the increased value of the slave. The attitude was "give the least and get the most in the slaves."¹⁹ The slave could now do more work than ever, primarily because of the inventions of the cotton gin, woolcomber, spinning jenny, and the steam engine.

¹⁷Ibid., p. 24.

¹⁸Ibid., p. 25.

¹⁹William L. Banks, The Black Church in the U. S. A. (Chicago: Moody Press, 1972), p. 28.

While the Southern states depended heavily upon slavery, attitudes toward slavery were changing. Federal legislation forbade the African slave trade, but smuggling continued. Groups which were once against slavery now began to support it. Other groups became more aggressively abolitionist.

The slaves themselves experienced a more aggressive attitude of protest. Slave revolts broke out all over the South resulting in fear on the part of Southern whites and these rebellions greatly aided in turning the whites against the blacks.

The "black church" came into existence during the days of slavery. Some of the Negro churches had white leadership while others had black leadership. In some congregations there arose black preachers. Among these congregations, the most prominent were the Baptists and Methodists. Various black assemblies were organized.

It was within this context that the Southern states enacted stringent laws which placed heavy restrictions upon the blacks. The black churches were blamed, to a great degree, for all the trouble. A terrible demoralizing era waxed strong.

Cut off from the light of God's glorious gospel, the black man's old nature had a field day. Lying, cheating, stealing, brutality, sexual immorality--all increased. Loafing on the job, pretending to be sick in the field or on the auction block itself, destroying crops, killing animals, burning houses--these were but a few of the ways in which slaves showed their hatred for slavery.²⁰

Things were turbulent. Reaction and interaction had set in. H. B. Stowe's novel, Uncle Tom's Cabin, the Dred Scott decision, the capture and hanging of John Brown, and the election of Lincoln to the United States Presidency created "an emotional pitch never before

²⁰Ibid., p. 29.

reached."²¹ The smoldering sparks burst into flames; a bitter war between the North and South ensued.

II. THE POST-CIVIL WAR DEVELOPMENT

The period of history from the end of the Civil War up to the twentieth century has, in this particular section of this chapter, been designated the Post-Civil War development of the black experience in America. The primary purpose of this section was to highlight the development of the black experience, in this historical period, as it relates to the development of Black Theology.

The Reconstruction Period: 1866-1877

"Jim Crow" is the slang term which has been used to describe the social condition of the black man in America in the Post-Civil War era. The Civil War ended with the Southern States conceding defeat. Not long afterwards, the Emancipation Proclamation was signed into effect. In one sense freed by the Emancipation Proclamation, the Negro soon realized that in another sense, he was more enslaved than he was before the signing of the document.

Jim Crow is a slang term for the Post-Civil War practice of systematically segregating and suppressing the American black man. It was the successful attempt by whites to shackle the freed blacks and to establish a permanent caste system based on race. . . . The term probably came to have its present meaning because it described the Negro crippled by the many segregation laws established at this time.²²

The Civil-War had served to preserve the Union, but it served also to worsen the condition of the black people. The words of

²¹Ibid., p. 32.

²²Ibid., p. 33.

President Lincoln make clear that the war was not waged to liberate the blacks.

My paramount object in this struggle is to save the Union, and is not either to save or to destroy slavery. If I could save the Union without freeing any slave, I would do it; and if I could save it by freeing some and leaving others alone, I would also do that.²³

Again, President Lincoln asserted:

I will say then that I am not, nor ever have been in favor of bringing about in any way the social and political equality of the black and white races--that I am not nor ever have been in favor of making voters or jurors of Negroes, nor of qualifying them to hold office, nor intermarry with white people; and I will say in addition to this that there is a physical difference between the white and black races which I believe will forbid the two races living together on terms of social and political equality. And inasmuch as they cannot so live, while they do remain together, there must be the position of superior and inferior, and I as much as any other man am in favor of having the superior position assigned to the white race.²⁴

Thus as Major J. Jones states:

Almost all the early laws dealing with emancipation were politically inspired, and though there were moral grounds for the Emancipation Proclamation, it was issued because it was a politically prudent thing to do.²⁵

The period of reconstruction was filled with restlessness, uncertainty and inequality between whites and blacks. "Freed by the Emancipation Proclamation, Negroes found themselves far from enjoying

²³James H. Cone, Black Theology & Black Power (New York: The Seabury Press, 1969), p. 10, quoting from a letter which Abraham Lincoln wrote to Horace Greeley in mid-summer of 1862. See James Morgan, Abraham Lincoln The Boy and the Man (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1908), p. 312.

²⁴Charles Silberman, Crisis in Black and White (New York: Random House, 1964), pp. 92-93, citing Abraham Lincoln from a speech given by Abraham Lincoln during the Lincoln-Douglas Debates at Charleston, Illinois on September 18, 1858. See Albert J. Beveridge, Abraham Lincoln 1809-1858 Vol. II (New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1928), p. 673.

²⁵Major J. Jones, Black Awareness A Theology of Hope (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1971), p. 27.

equality."²⁶ Though at the outset of reconstruction many blacks were favored with high positions of power and prominence, even to holding of offices in Congress, such treatment of the blacks was short-lived.

William L. Banks describes the situation when he says:

Nonetheless, such progress was short-lived. The feeling of inferiority had been stamped deep into the souls of black folk for more than two hundred years and impressed, according to some, with God's sanction and approval. Such feeling is not a thing overcome at the snap of a finger or the signing of a piece of paper. Nor could anything the President proclaimed change the hearts of evil white men. Unfortunately, many who fought for the rights of black men (abolitionists and others) soon forgot about the Negro's plight after the war. Reconstruction ended with the shameful Compromise of 1877, when Republican politicians gave up all the moral purpose with which they had supposedly fought the Civil War in return for Southern Democratic support of Northern industrialists.²⁷

Reconstruction ended with the withdrawal of all Federal troops. Thus the black people had absolutely no protection from the southern whites who were vindictive because of their defeat. Bitterness raged unparalleled, and this raging bitterness witnessed the birth of the abominable Ku Klux Klan. Violence existed throughout the States. Hatred was at a high level. Because of the violence, hatred, and new laws, racial segregation was enforced. All black politicians were weeded out of office and certain laws were instituted to prevent blacks from ever holding political office again.

Black men were slowly disfranchised when qualifications for voting were set up which they could not meet: poll taxes, literacy tests, previous voting record, the "grandfather clause," knowledge of the Constitution, etc. . . . In 1896 the Supreme Court came out with its famous "separate but equal" facilities decree and set the pattern for racial separation for more than fifty years.²⁸

²⁶Banks, op. cit., p. 33.

²⁷Ibid., pp. 33-34.

²⁸Ibid.

Outside of the political arena, The Reconstruction Era witnessed the tremendous growth of the Black Church in America. Forced separation from the white world resulted in the Black Church becoming the very center of social life for the Negro. It provided the black people with a means to express themselves, to gain individual and corporate recognition and to find shelter from the anti-Negro White society. The "invisible church" of the black people which existed in days of slavery now became very visible. Negroes in the North broke away from the white churches.

In short, these days immediately following the Civil War were marked by a notable trend toward establishing independent, all-black churches. Negro preachers were now no longer silenced, their churches no longer proscribed by laws of the South. So the Negro began to withdraw from the white churches. And the invisible merged with the visible.²⁹

Thus, in light of the black experience in America, up to this period of history, the Black Church and the Negro preacher became very important in the black society. The black people sought for that which met their needs created by the circumstances of life they found themselves in and their experience, and they found their needs met through the Black Church.

For the most part, the black people found themselves in independent Baptist and Methodist Negro churches. Within the Baptist circles, large Baptist bodies or conventions were organized in many localities. Black Methodism existed in terms of independent assemblies, the African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church, and the Methodist Episcopal Church, South. The A M E Church became the strongest Black Church both organizationally and influentially.

²⁹Ibid., p. 44.

The Black Church made many definite contributions to Negro life. The Black Church made some improvement in the family life of the black people. To some degree the Negro Church helped to lessen the practices of promiscuity and the matriarchy. The moral support of the Black Church helped to bring about a degree of a proper male image in the black family, resulting in a more stabilized family situation. The growth of the Black Church also affected the educational life of the black people. William L. Banks emphasizes this point when he says:

Mutual-aid societies grew out of the church. Assistance in time of sickness and distress, help for widows and orphans, homes for the aged, handicraft clubs, and schools for domestic training were some of the types of mutual aid offered. The segregated society forced Negroes into these self-help organizations. Participation in American society was severely restricted, especially when Reconstruction ended, so the church filled the gap.³⁰

Excluded from the political arena of white society and secular politics, the Negroes turned to the church for the opportunity and hope to become leaders. It was within the Negro Church that the black male could exercise authority. Thus the Black Church assumed many functions which normally belonged to other institutions.

The Post-Reconstruction Period: 1877-1914

The term "Post-Reconstruction" was used here for the convenience of this study to include the historical period between 1877 and 1914.

This period of history has often been labeled as the worst period in the history of the American Negro. The black people were deserted by those who, in the days of slavery, had vociferously championed the cause of Negro freedom. Even the church was silent. The Negro

³⁰Ibid., p. 44.

people were neglected and left in an anti-Negro society to flounder. There was an abrupt repudiation of the promises offered in the days of Reconstruction.

The hard fact was that the Negro was not included in the economic and political life of the nation. Not only so, but the blacks themselves were the only ones who cared that this situation existed.

The center of Negro life itself remained within the Black Church. The Negro's outlook on life had a distinct religious flavor. Sunday was an all-day affair for the black churchmen.

Usually Negroes did not have to work on Sunday; it was a time of coming together to talk, gossip, have fellowship, flirt, court, eat, and sing. . . . It served as an emotional outlet, a spiritual catharsis, a cause for solidarity, and social cohesion, plus the fact that the gospel was preached and believed and people were saved.³¹

William L. Banks describes the religious emphasis of the Negro people:

Like any oppressed or enslaved people, Negroes were especially interested in the stories of the Bible which dealt with deliverance and freedom--the Israelites from Egypt, the three Hebrew boys from the fiery furnace, Daniel from the lion's den, heaven and a better life to come. Emancipation did not change this emphasis. There was biblical literalism of the first order.³²

The importance of the Black Church in relationship to the Black experience during the Post-Reconstruction Era is summed up by William L. Banks in the following words:

Through the church came social cohesion, self-expression, recognition, and leadership. Self-respect and pride were stimulated and preserved, and education was promoted. As nothing else, the church became the Negro's very own. It was the most powerful

³¹Ibid., p. 46.

³²Ibid., p. 47.

organization of the black man in America.³³

III. THE TWENTIETH CENTURY DEVELOPMENT

The historical development of the black experience in America would be inadequate and incomplete without treating the contributions of the twentieth century to the black experience. As much as any other period of history, the twentieth century has indeed contributed to the development and growth of radical Black Theology.

The terms "Radicalism" and "Revolution" which serve as subdivisions of this section were borrowed from William L. Banks in his book, The Black Church In The U.S. for convenience of the investigation.

Radicalism: 1915-1953

Urbanization had a great effect upon the life of the black man. It resulted in a tremendous shift in the Negro population. There was a great influx of Negroes into the large urban centers. First, this influx was into the large cities of the South immediately following the Civil War. At the outset of the First World War, the black people began moving into the Northern cities. The migration of Negro families went from the rural areas to the cities and from the South to the North. The reasons for the migration were many. First, there were natural calamities which interfered with farming and caused many blacks to flee from the South. In contrast, the industrial growth in the North created a great demand for unskilled workers. Thirdly, the black people were subjected to inhuman treatment. They continued to experience human oppression. The blacks were subjected to forced labor. The Ku Klux

³³Ibid., p. 45.

Klan raged violently against the black people. Negroes were burned alive, lynched, dragged behind automobiles, mobbed, drowned, shot and hacked to death.

The great shift in the Negro population created a tremendous adverse atmosphere for the blacks. William L. Banks describes it thus:

In housing, there were restrictive covenants, segregation ordinances, and white landlord exploitation, all of which led to ghettos and the poor health and high mortality that accompany large families living in small, unsanitary homes. The city's impersonalness and destruction of family life, with increased desertion, illegitimacy, and juvenile delinquency, aggravated matters. Increased migration North created hostility there. Obviously the churches were greatly affected.³⁴

In fact, E. Franklin Frazier says that secularization of the churches began.³⁵ With this secularization there came into the thinking of the Negro Church a tolerance for the things it once considered wrong or immoral. Not only so, but the thinking and concern of the Black Church changed from other worldliness to the temporal aspects of here and now. The blacks tended to be less religiously oriented and to emphasize the temporal rather than the spiritual. Black churchmen "became more interested in self-help and racial-advancement organizations."³⁶

In contrast to the secularized Negro Church, there came into existence other Black Churches and groups which turned their emphasis to "holiness." To some degree, though significantly, these holiness groups stayed the secularization of the Black Church.

Along with this secularization, the storefront church was born.

³⁴Ibid., pp. 48-49.

³⁵E. Franklin Frazier, The Negro Church In America (New York: Schacken Books, 1963), p. 51.

³⁶Banks, op. cit., p. 51.

These storefront churches appealed greatly to the black people. A tremendous number of these churches came into being.

A storefront, as the name implies, is generally a church conducted in an unrented or abandoned store. Sometimes it is a house-front church; this is a home or private residence converted into a church, often to the dismay of the second-floor occupants or the adjoining homeowners.³⁷

The storefront churches are predominately Baptist, Apostolic, Holiness, or Pentecostal. Many of them are associated with the cults or sects.

William L. Banks describes the basis for the great appeal of the storefront churches.

The impersonal big cities have lost their sense of "people-ness"; members are just envelope numbers or dues-payers. Storefronts offer identification, belonging, acceptance, recognition, all lacking in large depersonalized congregations.³⁸

"Some Negroes have repudiated Christianity altogether and have joined radical cults. . . ." ³⁹ Such cults that they have joined are Christian Science, the Apostolics, Jehovah's Witnesses, Father Divine's Movement, and the Black Muslims.

Revolution: 1954-Present

Black people, since 1954, have shifted from a passive attitude, relating to the black experience, to one of revolution. The rebellion in the cities is an indication that blacks are no longer willing to "take-it-on-the-chin."

The atmosphere of black rebellion has been and remains to be

³⁷Ibid.

³⁸Ibid., p. 52.

³⁹Ibid., p. 53.

seasoned by the philosophy and practice of Black Power. Black Power seeks to destroy white racism by whatever means is available including revolution and rebellion. The cry of Black Power is total freedom for black people--"Freedom Now."

Black Power has grown out of a strong Black awareness movement. The movement is designed to bring black people to the point of recognizing who they are--human beings--and accepting who they are. Through the black awareness movement has come numerous emphases; the emphases being upon the courage to be black, the essential worth of blackness, black self-assertion, black self-affirmation, black self-love, and black self-esteem.

Thus radical Black Theology is grounded in the experience of the black people. Not only is radical Black Theology founded upon the black experience of the past, it is also based upon what the black experience is in the present and what it can be in the future.

Occasioned by the twentieth century development of the black experience in America, radical Black Theology has developed into a Theology of Black Awareness, of Black Power, of Black Revolution, of Black Liberation, of Black Violence, of Black Reconciliation, and thus a Theology of Black Hope. James H. Cone says:

If the gospel of Christ, as Moltmann suggests, frees a man to be for those who labor and are heavily laden, the humiliated and abused, then it would seem that for twentieth-century America the message of Black Power is the message of Christ himself.⁴⁰

⁴⁰James H. Cone, Black Theology and Black Power (New York: The Seabury Press, 1969), p. 37.

CHAPTER III

THE PRESENT STATUS OF RADICAL BLACK THEOLOGY

Having traced the historical development of radical Black Theology, it became necessary for the author to analyze the present status of radical Black Theology. The emphasis of radical Black Theology has not been lost in its history; rather its history and development have served to broaden and strengthen the emphasis and impact of radical Black Theology. Inasmuch as the black experience in America has not been erased, but continues to plague the black people, radical Black Theology is more prominent than ever.

A careful investigation of what black religious writers have written concerning the present status of radical Black Theology is quite discouraging. Only a few have addressed themselves to this subject, and that indirectly. For the most part, black writers have not dealt with this subject in any significant way. Because the present status of radical Black Theology was a very significant part of this particular investigation and is worthy of a place in the study of radical Black Theology, the author has attempted to research the subject and to present a succinct account of it.

I. THE PHASES OF RADICAL BLACK THEOLOGY

"There is, and always has been, two major phases of radical

Black Theology: the Conservative phase and the Militant phase."¹

There can be no understanding of the present status of radical Black Theology without a workable knowledge of these two current phases of radical Black Theology.

Both phases have their origin within the Black Church. Not only so, but both of these phases are in operation within the Black Church. "The Black Church has spawned both the Conservative phase and the Militant phase."²

The Conservative Phase

Those who compose the conservative camp of radical Black Theology are Bible believing persons. They are persons who take the biblical message in a most literal manner. They view the Bible and the Gospel as God's message to black people which meets the needs of blacks in every-day life.

Conservative Black Theology is very sensitive to the oppression to which blacks are subjected. As a result of this oppression, the religious mood of conservatism within radical Black Theology is characterized by two outlooks. The first outlook is "a religion of resignation--which has given up on the good life in this world and placed all of its hope on a life beyond."³ This is the view that life's circumstances cannot be changed in this world, and that which cannot

¹Quotation from Rev. John H. Jackson, Pastor, Mt. Olivet Baptist Church, Portland, Oregon, in a personal interview with the author, December 19, 1972.

²Ibid.

³Emmanuel L. McCall, ed., The Black Christian Experience (Nashville, Tennessee: Broadman Press, 1972), p. 85.

be changed in this world will definitely be changed in the life beyond. This view cannot be called a religion of satisfaction with the way Negro life is. Dissatisfaction with Negro life, as it is, is still paramount in the minds of those who are resigned to the fact that their dissatisfaction will not be justified until the life beyond dawns upon them. The second outlook is "a religion of accommodation--which attempts to adjust to and appease the status quo."⁴ This is the outlook that in light of the Negro's plight in America, the only option available to the Negro is adjustment, both individually and corporately, to the plight that is theirs. This religion of accommodation is not a religion of satisfaction either. Rather, it is a religion that recognizes the situation as it is, and because that situation cannot and will not be changed in this life, the only alternative the blacks have is to adjust to the circumstances and appease their white oppressors.

The Militant Phase

Belief in the Bible is also a characteristic of the largest spectrum of blacks who compose the militant camp of radical Black Theology. There is some difference as to the manner in which the militant advocates of radical Black Theology interpret God's message to black people. While conservative Black Theology interprets the message of God as an injunction to "turn the other cheek," militant Black Theology interprets God's message as an exhortation to strive for and achieve liberation. Thus, militant Black Theology is "a religion of liberation--which seeks to break the shackles of oppression."⁵ This is an

⁴Ibid.

⁵Ibid.

outlook which stands in direct opposition to a religion of satisfaction, to a religion of resignation, and to a religion of accommodation. This is black religion which operates within the philosophy (not always within the methodology) of Black Power; that is, complete emancipation of black people by whatever means black people deem necessary. Thus as Dr. James H. Cone says in the second chapter of his book Black Theology and Black Power:

My concern is, rather, to show that the goal and message of Black Power, as defined in Chapter I and articulated by many of its advocates, is consistent with the gospel of Jesus Christ. Indeed, I have even suggested that if Christ is present among the oppressed, as he promised, he must be working through the activity of Black Power.⁶

Again Dr. Cone states:

Black Power, then, is God's new way of acting in America. It is his way of saying to blacks that they are human beings; he is saying to whites: "Get used to it!"⁷

It is necessary, however, to point out that "what often times is considered to be conservative Black Theology within the Black Church is considered to be militant Black Theology outside of the Black Church."⁸ In other words, a phrase from a Negro Spiritual such as "God is a mighty man" would be considered conservative within the Black Church, but could easily be considered militant outside the Black Church. Reverend John H. Jackson further clarifies the issue when he says:

Thus, the difference between conservatism and militancy, in relation to Black Theology, is, at times, a matter of interpretation;

⁶James H. Cone, Black Theology & Black Power (New York: The Seabury Press, 1969), p. 48.

⁷Ibid., p. 61.

⁸Quotation from Rev. John H. Jackson, Pastor, Mt. Olivet Baptist Church, Portland, Oregon, in a personal interview with the author, December 19, 1972.

the difference being whether a certain philosophy is interpreted from within the Church or from outside the Church.⁹

II. THE STRUCTURE OF RADICAL BLACK THEOLOGY

Radical Black Theology has certain distinctive features which provide it with unique structure. The structure of radical Black Theology is quite unlike any other theological structure. Radical Black Theology is a theology of its own. Its structure reveals its present status.

A Practical Theology

Radical Black Theology is distinctively characterized as being a theology of practices. Reverend John H. Jackson describes it as "an earthly theology."¹⁰ By that description he means that radical Black Theology is concerned with the every-day life of the black man, and lends itself to the every-day practice of the black man who uses it in down-to-earth every-day experiences of his life and situation. John W. Fleming agrees when he says:

With more significance attached to man and his role, there is naturally a strong "this-worldly" emphasis in contemporary black theology. It is not a negation of eschatology or immortality, but a way of saying, "Seek the good life in the here and now."¹¹

The quest of radical Black Theology is "to give blacks a work-
able and usable theology based upon practicality."¹² Radical Black

⁹Ibid.

¹⁰Ibid.

¹¹Emmanuel L. McCall, ed., The Black Christian Experience (Nashville, Tennessee: Broadman Press, 1972), p. 97.

¹²Jackson, loc. cit.

Theology is not concerned with the theologizing process, but is interested in providing blacks with a more palatable future. It deals with the human existence of blacks.

The traditional content of systematic theology may well not correspond to that of much of the literature of black theology. Black Theology differs from traditional theology by the simple reason that it may not be as concerned to describe such traditional themes as the eternal nature of God's existence as it is to explore the impermanent, paradoxical, and problematic nature of human existence. Much of the task of black theology is to reclaim a people from humiliation, and in the process of so doing, it may well neglect such unrelated subjects as humility before man and guilt before God. If black theology is to speak realistically and cogently to a people whose lives have been worn down, whose best hopes have so often been frustrated, and who have been reminded at every turn by human word and action that they are less than worthy of so much that other ordinary humans possess, it must have a new and fresh message of hope for the future.¹³

A "Feeling" Theology

In conjunction with radical Black Theology's practicality, radical Black Theology is also characterized as a theology of feeling. Reverend John H. Jackson says: "The Black Church is a feeling church, and Black Theology is a theology of feeling."¹⁴

Radical Black Theology is structured around the feelings of black people in America. Radical Black Theology seeks to answer the dilemma of a black person who has a feeling of inferiority. It grapples with feelings of insecurity and dependency. It throws light upon the feelings of frustration, ambiguity, and oppression. James H. Cone articulates this phase of radical Black Theology in saying:

A black theologian wants to know what the gospel has to say to

¹³Major J. Jones, Black Awareness A Theology Of Hope (New York: Abingdon Press, 1971), p. 13.

¹⁴Jackson, loc. cit.

a man who is jobless and cannot get work to support his family because the society is unjust. He wants to know what is God's Word to the countless black boys and girls who are fatherless and motherless because white society decreed that blacks have no rights. Unless there is a word from Christ to the helpless, then why should they respond to him? How do we relate the gospel of Christ to people whose daily existence is one of hunger or even worse, despair?¹⁵

A Color Theology

In light of the ability of radical Black Theology to meet the feelings of black people, it cannot be overemphasized that radical Black Theology is color-conscious. The fact is that it is black-color-conscious. Radical Black Theology is addressed to black people. Dr. James H. Cone indicates the color-consciousness of radical Black Theology in the following paragraph.

Black Theology is primarily a theology of and for black people who share the common belief that racism will be destroyed only when black people decide to say in word and deed to the white racist: "We ain't gonna stand any more of this." The purpose of Black Theology is to analyze the nature of the Christian faith in such a way that black people can say Yes to blackness and No to whiteness and mean it.

It is not the purpose of Black Theology to address white people, at least not directly. . . . The goal of Black Theology is to prepare the minds of blacks for freedom so that they will be ready to give all for it. Black Theology must speak to and for black people as they seek to remove the structures of white power which hover over their being, stripping it of its blackness.¹⁶

Again Dr. Cone states:

The task of Black Theology is to inform black people that because of God's act in Christ they need not offer anyone an apology for being black. Rather, be glad of it! Shout it! It is the purpose for which we were created. This is the meaning of the gospel of reconciliation to black people.¹⁷

¹⁵James H. Cone, Black Theology & Black Power (New York: The Seabury Press, 1969), pp. 43-44.

¹⁶Ibid., pp. 117-118.

¹⁷Ibid., p. 149.

Major J. Jones in his book, Black Awareness A Theology of Hope, records a further affirmation of the black-consciousness of radical Black Theology when he records:

. . . Black Theology is a theology of black liberation. It seeks to plumb the black condition in the light of God's revelation in Jesus Christ, so that the black community can see that the gospel is commensurate with the achievement of black humanity. Black Theology is a theology of "blackness." It is the affirmation of black humanity that emancipates black people from white racism thus providing authentic freedom for both white and black people. It affirms the humanity of white people in that it says "No" to the encroachment of white oppression.¹⁸

Rev. John H. Jackson says there is good reason for the black-consciousness of radical Black Theology.

There is at present a social stigma placed upon blackness. A black person can go to the same place as a white person and yet not receive the same privileges as the white person because his skin is black. Blackness has been and still is degraded and held in disrespect. Therefore, blacks have the need to lift blackness up. The purpose of Black Power and Black Theology is to bring whites to the place where they see a man, not a black man; a church, not a black church; a community, not a black community; a home, not a black home; etc. If and when this is achieved, there will be less emphasis on blackness, because blacks won't have to lift their blackness up.¹⁹

Dr. Cone agrees in saying: ". . . for the oppressed blacks to regain their identity, they must affirm the very characteristic which the oppressor ridicules-blackness."²⁰

An Immanent Theology

It is safe to state that radical Black Theology holds to the

¹⁸Major J. Jones, Black Awareness A Theology Of Hope (New York: Abingdon Press, 1971), p. 14.

¹⁹Quotation from Rev. John H. Jackson, Pastor, Mt. Olivet Baptist Church, Portland, Oregon, in a personal interview with the author, December 19, 1972.

²⁰Cone, op. cit., p. 18.

concept of a transcendent and an immanent God. However, it is also true that radical Black Theology places a stronger emphasis upon God's immanence rather than upon His transcendence.

Black Theology is not interested in talking about a God who sits upon a celestial throne somewhere ruling the universe with a sovereign hand. Black Theology is concerned with the God who shares the every-day life of the Negro. This theology sees the God of the Ghetto who is down living among the oppressed. He is there when the breadwinner has no job, when there is no bread on the table, and when the children are bitten by rats. He is out on the streets which belong to white society taking all kinds of hell during the week. Instead of being up there somewhere, He is where His oppressed people are.²¹

John W. Fleming addresses himself to the point by stating:

. . . the emerging theology is placing greater stress on the immanence of God, a God who is confronted in life situations. This is not a denial of God's transcendence but a way of saying that his transcendence has been overstressed at the expense of his immanence. Black theology wants a greater recognition of God who acts in history, who meets us in the suffering and problems of mankind, and with whom we come into an understanding through involvement in humanity.²²

Thus it could not be more clear that radical Black Theology identifies with a God who is active in the lives of black people right where they live. To black theologians, God has come down to make His abode in the black experience in America. This is what gives radical Black Theology its impact, appeal and its meaningfulness to black people.

A Power Theology

Because of God's immanent involvement in the black history and experience in America, radical Black Theology is essentially a theology of power. It is a theology of God-power and thus of Black-Power.

²¹Jackson, loc. cit.

²²Emmanuel L. McCall, ed., The Black Christian Experience (Nashville, Tennessee: Broadman Press, 1972), p. 97.

Rev. John H. Jackson says: "Black Power has always resided within the Black Church. The Black Church is the storehouse of Black Power."²³

In speaking about the relationship between power and radical Black Theology John W. Fleming says, "Black Power is a central theme in the theology which I have discussed."²⁴ He goes on to say, "Contemporary black theology which stems from the religion of liberation sees God as love and power."²⁵

Dr. Cone expresses the tenor of radical Black Theology with respect to Black Power by stating:

If the gospel is a gospel of liberation for the oppressed, then Jesus is where the oppressed are and continues his work of liberation there. Jesus is not safely confined in the first century. He is our contemporary, proclaiming release to the captives and rebelling against all who silently accept the structures of injustice. If he is not in the ghetto, if he is not where men are living at the brink of existence, but is, rather, in the easy life of the suburbs, then the gospel is a lie. The opposite, however, is the case. Christianity is not alien to Black Power; it is Black Power.²⁶

Dr. Cone elucidates further:

It is my thesis, however, that Black Power, even in its most radical expression, is not the antithesis of Christianity, nor is it a heretical idea to be tolerated with painful forbearance. It is, rather, Christ's central message to twentieth-century America. And unless the empirical denominational church makes a determined effort to recapture the man Jesus through a total identification with the suffering poor as expressed in Black Power, that church will become exactly what Christ is not.²⁷

~~In no manner is it implied that all Black Power advocates are~~

²³Jackson, loc. cit.

²⁴McCall, loc. cit.

²⁵Ibid., p. 98.

²⁶James H. Cone, Black Theology & Black Power (New York: The Seabury Press, 1969), p. 38.

²⁷Ibid., pp. 1-2.

Christian or that all operate within the context and framework of the Black Church. Dr. Cone says, "It is not my thesis that all Black Power advocates are Christians or even wish to be so."²⁸ The important thing is that radical Black Theology is a theology which operates within the philosophy and theme of Black Power in that it focuses in on the liberating power of Jesus Christ as it is demonstrated through the liberating power and message of the Gospel of Christ. Again Dr. James H. Cone speaks to this point by way of summation:

Black Power and black religion are inseparable. Both seek to free black people from white racism. It is impossible for Black Power to be effective without taking into consideration man's religious nature. It is impossible for black religion to be truly related to the condition of black people and to the message of Jesus Christ without emphasizing the basic tenets of Black Power. Therefore, Black Theology seeks to make black religion a religion of Black Power. It does not attempt to destroy Christianity but endeavors to point to its blackness. The task of Black Theology is to make Christianity really Christian by moving black people with a spirit of black dignity and self-determination so they can become what the Creator intended.²⁹ ". . . Christ means Black Power!"³⁰

An Action Theology

Contemporary radical Black Theology, as essentially a theology of Black Power, demands putting power into action. Thus radical Black Theology embodies all those qualities essential to a theology of action. Dr. James H. Cone speaks very graphically to this point when he says:

Speaking a true language of black liberation, the black church must teach that, in a white world bent on dehumanizing black people, Christian love means giving no ground to the enemy, but relentlessly insisting on one's dignity as a person. Love is not passive, but active. It is revolutionary in that it seeks to meet the needs

²⁸Ibid., p. 48.

²⁹Ibid., p. 130.

³⁰Ibid., p. 112.

of the neighbor amid crumbling structures of society. It is revolutionary because love may mean joining a violent rebellion.

The black church must ask about its function amid the rebellion of black people in America. Where does it stand? If it is to be relevant, it must no longer admonish its people to be "nice" to white society. It cannot condemn the rioters. It must make an unqualified identification with the "looters" and "rioters," recognizing that this stance leads to condemnation by the state as law-breakers. There is no place for "nice Negroes" who are so distorted by white values that they regard laws as more sacred than human life. There is no place for those who deplore black violence and overlook the daily violence of whites. There is no place for blacks who want to be "safe," for Christ did not promise security but suffering.³¹

Rev. John H. Jackson agrees with Dr. Cone as is indicated by his following statement.

Involvement is a key to Black Theology. If the Church sees a structure that it wishes torn down, it places the hammer in God's hand and sends him out to tear the structure down. Black Power is the hammer God uses.³²

Dr. James H. Cone agrees concerning the importance of world involvement as a key to radical Black Power Theology. Dr. Cone states, "The black church has a heritage of radical involvement in the world."³³

Radical involvement, as it is expressed by the Black Church, is in terms of a fight against social injustice. Rev. John H. Jackson is quite clear in stating:

Black Theology embraces a strong social thrust. The radical involvement of the Black Church is directed toward changing the social injustice and structure. However, the social thrust of Black Theology is to be differentiated from the social gospel. Whereas the social gospel talks a lot accompanied by little action or involvement directed toward social injustice, the social thrust of Black Theology talks little, but acts alot.³⁴

³¹Ibid., pp. 113-114.

³²Quotation from Rev. John H. Jackson, Pastor, Mt. Olivet Baptist Church, Portland, Oregon, in a personal interview with the author, December 19, 1972.

³³Cone, op. cit., p. 112.

³⁴Jackson, loc. cit.

By way of summarization, Dr. Cone further explains the concept of radical Black Theology relative to radical involvement when he states:

In this new era of Black Power, the era in which blacks are sick of white power and are prepared to do anything and give everything for freedom now, theology cannot afford to be silent. Not to speak, not to "do theology" around this critical problem, is to say that the black predicament is not crucial to Christian faith. At a moment when blacks are determined to stand up as human beings even if they are shot down, the Word of the cross certainly is focused upon them. Will no one speak that Word to the dead and dying? . . . Could a black man hope that there are still others who, as theologians, will join the oppressed in their fight for freedom? These theologians will speak unequivocally of revelation, Scripture, God, Christ, grace, faith, Church, ministry, and hope, so that the message comes through loud and clear: The black revolution is the work of Christ.³⁵

³⁵Cone, op. cit., pp. 88-89.

CHAPTER IV

THE BASIC TENETS OF RADICAL BLACK THEOLOGY

The primary purpose of this chapter was to explore the basic principles involved in radical Black Theology. It was an attempt to investigate the issues which advocates of radical Black Theology deem vital to their theology. These issues were researched from two standpoints. The first area was the issues of radical Black Theology in relation to the black condition in America. In other words, this is radical Black Theology directed toward the oppressed black people and their situation in life. The second area of investigation was concerned with the tenets of radical Black Theology in relation to its theological concepts. In other words, this is radical Black Theology directed toward God and His relationship to man.

I. VITAL ISSUES IN RADICAL BLACK THEOLOGY

Radical Black Theology speaks to the life situation of black people in America. With regard to the black experience in America, radical Black Theology holds to certain basic issues which it deems vital and important to a theology of and for black people. It has become the task of radical Black Theology to communicate these vital issues to black people in order to bring about meaningfulness and purpose to the lives of blacks.

Black Awareness

Radical Black Theology contends strongly that black people must

fully and completely become aware of themselves. Blacks must be aware of who they are. They are black people who are oppressed because they live in a white power society. The cry is for blacks to realize that they are human; to become aware that blackness is as good as, if not better than, whiteness.

Not only are blacks to become aware of who they are as men, but radical Black Theology insists that blacks must become aware of who they can become. Radical Black Theology contends that black people can, indeed, become what the Creator intended them to be, including a chosen people of God who are free to determine their own destiny.

Advocates of radical Black Theology are insistent upon the fact that blacks have been taught by white society to hate blackness. They agree with Malcolm X: "The worst crime the white man has committed," writes Malcolm X, "has been to teach us to hate ourselves."¹

Radical Black Theologians then contend that black self-hatred has led black people, in many cases, to condemn their blackness and wish they were white.

As Elijah Muhammad, the leader of the Black Muslims, rightly says: "The Negro wants to be a white man. He processes his hair. Acts like a white man. He wants to integrate with the white man, but he cannot integrate with himself or his own mind. The Negro wants to lose his identity because he does not know his own identity."²

In light of this black self-hatred, radical Black Theology exhorts blacks to affirm the beauty of blackness and to become aware of a black identity without any sense of condemnation, shame or remorse.

¹James H. Cone, Black Theology and Black Power (New York: The Seabury Press, 1969), p. 18.

²Ibid., p. 19.

Dr. James H. Cone speaks to this point by saying:

What is needed, then, is not "integration" but a sense of worth in being black, and only black people can teach that. Black consciousness is the key to the black man's emancipation from his distorted self-image. . . . Black identity is survival. . . .³

Dr. Cone again says that blacks "must affirm the beauty of blackness and by so doing free the black man for a self-affirmation of his own being as a black man."⁴

The emphasis upon black awareness, in radical Black Theology, is articulated by Major J. Jones in his book Black Awareness A Theology Of Hope, in which he says that black awareness composes a black theology of hope. Jones states:

Black theology has given new meaning to blackness, and it seeks to relate that blackness to a truth that is liberating; thus it becomes for many, in current times, a new light of freedom under God. Having tasted that freedom through identification with God's intention for black humanity, the black man will stop at nothing in expressing an even stronger affirmation of black selfhood.⁵

Again Major J. Jones says:

To be adequate for the black community, black theology must bespeak a new vision; if there is no clear vision of the future, black people might easily reconcile themselves to the present. In a real sense, without the hope that arises in the full realization of blackness, derived from an adequate theology of the black awareness movement, many black people themselves have begun to realize that conditions of black people have become intolerable. Black theology must provide them with some new words of hope; it must provide them with the will to break away from the present toward the future.⁶

Black Dignity

³Tbid.

⁴Tbid., pp. 19-20.

⁵Major J. Jones, Black Awareness A Theology Of Hope (New York: Abingdon Press, 1971), p. 15.

⁶Tbid., pp. 16-17.

In conjunction with its emphasis on black awareness, radical Black Theology puts great stress on the dignity of the black man. Blacks should be able to possess a sense of personal worth and value. Rather than being made to feel important, the Negro should be accepted as being important. Thus, the Negro is viewed as a person who has, who is making, and will continue to make a worthwhile contribution to society and to humanity. Rev. Bob Harrison says:

This is what the black of America really wants--to be accepted for his actual value. The black man wants and needs a job like everyone else, of course. But he wants to be given the job not because someone is being kind to him or as a handout but because he has something to contribute. This is what gives him a sense of dignity--a sense of worth as a human being. . . . What he really wants and needs is not charity but acceptance.⁷

Thus the black awareness movement with its emphasis upon the dignity and worth of blackness spawns such concepts as black self-assertion, black self-affirmation, black self-love, and black self-esteem. Thus as Major J. Jones says:

The current movement toward black awareness merely means that the black man has come to a point in history where he is both willing and free to assert his right to self-determination, to possess racial pride, and to engage in the pursuit of blackness.⁸

Radical Black Theology fosters this pursuit of blackness through a framework of personal dignity which is attached to the worth of blackness. As the Negro senses his worth to God, he realizes his worth to himself and his value to the whole of society. He then senses that in every area of life, he, as a human being of value, has a definite and enriching contribution to make.

⁷Bob Harrison, When God Was Black (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zandervan Publishing House, 1971), pp. 107-108.

⁸Jones, op. cit., p. 64.

Liberation

Liberation is the theme of Black Theology. Christ is the Liberator and the Christian faith promises "deliverance to the captives." It promises to let the oppressed go free.⁹

Radical Black Theology is concerned with the liberation of the black people in America. Freedom or liberation is the core and unifying principle of radical Black Theology. Joseph R. Washington, Jr., says that "any worthy Black Theology must be a "theology of liberation."¹⁰

Freedom is the test of the quality of black existence. Without freedom black people will perish, and with them their neighbors. Freedom is the only salvation the black church as to offer, and freedom is the only hope of mankind. According to Washington, no one can be faithful to the Lord of history who does not take this theme of freedom seriously. The task of the black church and Black Theology is rethinking upon black religion as a religion of freedom. Black people must look again at what freedom has meant in their history and what it means in their present. Freedom, as the essence and unifying principle of black religion, must be illuminated by Black Theology.¹¹

The liberation to which radical Black Theology addresses itself is social liberation. It is liberation from the menace of white racism for the black man in America. It is a complete emancipation from white power. Again Roberts says:

Liberation is revolutionary--for blacks it points to what ought to be. Black Christians desire radical and rapid social change in America as a matter of survival. Black Theology is a theology of liberation.¹²

Dr. James H. Cone agrees concerning this concept of liberation

⁹J. Deotis Roberts, Liberation and Reconciliation: A Black Theology (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1971), p. 32.

¹⁰Ibid., p. 40.

¹¹Ibid.

¹²Ibid., p. 27.

and ties it in with Black Power when he says:

What is this freedom for which blacks have marched, boycotted, picketed, and rebelled in order to achieve? Simply stated, freedom is not doing what I will but becoming what I should. A man is free when he sees clearly the fulfillment of his being and is thus capable of making the envisioned self a reality. This is "Black Power!" They want the grip of white power removed what black people have in mind when they cry, "Freedom Now!" now and forever.¹³

Radical Black Theology derives its cry for freedom from the message of the Cross upon which Christ suffered and died. In other words, radical Black Theology holds that the liberation of the oppressed is the central concern and message of the Cross. Jesus Christ died for the liberation of oppressed people. More specifically, Christ died for the oppressed black people that they might be liberated and emancipated from social oppression. Joseph R. Washington, Jr. is clear in his treatment of this principle when he states:

Black theologians need only to read the Bible in the light of the Cross to discover that its central message is about freedom and power. In the Cross freedom and power are available as the grace to counter all that keeps us from responding to the source of all freedom, power, and truth in its light.¹⁴

In his chapter entitled "Black Power Theology," Washington says:

The freedom which Black Power says black Americans must wrench from White Power is, in essence, the gift of God for humankind. . . . Black Power is consistent with the Cross in its demand that freedom be a reality, that blacks fully express the liberating power of freedom, for this power is the only human force for the creation of a new community of new men and women.¹⁵

Dr. James H. Cone indicates his agreement by asking:

¹³James H. Cone, Black Theology and Black Power (New York: The Seabury Press, 1969), p. 39.

¹⁴Joseph R. Washington, Jr., Black And White Power Subreption (Boston: Beacon Press, 1969), p. 124.

¹⁵Ibid., p. 130.

Is this not why God became man in Jesus Christ so that man might become what he is? Is not this at least a part of what St. Paul had in mind when he said, "For freedom, Christ has set us free": (Gal. 5:1)? As long as man is a slave to another power, he is not free to serve God with mature responsibility. He is not free to become what he is--human.¹⁶

Dr. Cone further elucidates by stating:

It was not until Christ's death on the cross that the decisive battle was fought and won by the Son of man. In that event, the tyranny of Satan, in principle, came to an end. The Good News is that God in Christ has freed us; we need no longer be enslaved by alien forces. The battle was fought and won on Good Friday and the triumph was revealed to men at Easter.¹⁷

Dr. Cone asserts that even though the crucial battle against the evil forces of enslavement has been waged and won, the war is not over. The war goes on in the ghettos across America where "the demonic forces of racism are real for the black man."¹⁸

Thus, in the words of Dr. Cone,

It would seem that Black Power and Christianity have this in common: the liberation of man! If the work of Christ is that of liberating men from alien loyalties, and if racism is, as George Kelsey says, an alien faith, then there must be some correlation between Black Power and Christianity. For the gospel proclaims that God is with us now, actively fighting the forces which would make man captive.¹⁹

Revolution

Social liberation, for the blacks in America, as the central thesis of radical Black Theology has led to a theology of revolution based upon the black experience. Joseph R. Washington, Jr. holds that "it is the responsibility of black theologians to develop a theology of

¹⁶Cone, loc. cit.

¹⁷Ibid., p. 40.

¹⁸Ibid.

¹⁹Ibid., p. 39.

revolution."²⁰ The fact that radical black theologians have indeed developed a theology of revolution is a matter which cannot be mistaken. Indeed, radical Black Theology advocates a certain kind of revolution.²¹ That kind of revolution is that which is social in context aimed at the destruction of white racism.

Revolution is not merely a "change of heart" but a radical black encounter with the structure of white racism, with the full intention of destroying its menacing power. I mean confronting white racists and saying: "If its a fight you want, I am prepared to oblige you." This is what the black revolution means.²²

Revolution, within the context of radical Black Theology, is not mere protest. Protest appeals to the conscience of white America in hopes that white society will change some course of action. Revolution directly confronts a white racist society in an effort to destroy and replace it with another system which is more just and non-racist.

The black revolution is based upon an interpretation of the Scriptures which views the Gospel as a gospel of revolution. The Old Testament is viewed as the record of God's revolutionary acts through His chosen people. The New Testament is viewed as the record of the revolutionary acts of God in the person of Jesus Christ as He sought to establish a new revolutionary order through His disciples. In this interpretation of Scripture, radical black theologians emphasize the biblical message of freedom and revolutionary means of obtaining that freedom. Within this framework, radical Black Theology points to the

²⁰Joseph R. Washington, Jr., Black And White Power Subreption (Boston: Beacon Press, 1969), p. 122.

²¹Cone, op. cit., p. 136.

²²Ibid.

revolutionary aspect of the Cross of Christ. This is the basis for the black revolution.

Dr. James H. Cone addresses himself to this issue:

The revolutionary attitude of Black Theology stems not only from the need of black people to defend themselves in the presence of white oppression, but also from its identity with biblical theology. Like biblical theology, it affirms the absolute sovereignty of God over his creation. . . . Therefore, black people must be taught not to be disturbed about revolution or civil disobedience if the law violates God's purpose for man. The Christian man is obligated by a freedom grounded in the Creator to break all laws which contradict human dignity. Through disobedience to the state, he affirms his allegiance to God as Creator and his willingness to behave as if he believes it.²³

Again, Dr. Cone says:

When man denies his freedom and the freedom of others, he denies God. . . . It is this fact that makes black rebellion human and religious. When black people affirm their freedom in God, they not only say Yes to God but also to their own humanity and to the humanity of the white oppressor.²⁴

Joseph R. Washington, Jr. addresses his attention to the rationale for the black revolution. He states:

The historical and religious precedents for revolution are ample. Theologians need but recall the protestant revolution for a clear-cut theologically based calling of structures and systems into question. . . . Indeed, it is evident that only through revolution against evil forces that act to control unjustly does responsible freedom or the power of self-determination become authentic and a new and better order result. Other revolutions which readily come to the minds of theologians need only be mentioned: for example, the Exodus led by Moses and its resulting wars of liberation, the early Church against the Roman Empire, the American people against the British Commonwealth, the French Revolution, and the Cuban Revolution.²⁵

Thus the relationship of revolution to radical Black Theology

²³Ibid., p. 137.

²⁴Ibid., pp. 137-138.

²⁵Joseph R. Washington, Jr. Black And White Power Subreption (Boston: Beacon Press, 1969), p. 124.

is clearly and distinctively defined. Dr. James H. Cone is definitive when he says:

Because Black Theology is biblical theology seeking to create new value-perspectives for the oppressed, it is revolutionary theology. It is a theology which confronts white society as the racist Antichrist, communicating to the oppressor that nothing will be spared in the fight for freedom. . . . Black Theology believes that the problem of racism will not be solved through talk but through action. Therefore, its task is to carve out a revolutionary theology based on relevant involvement in the world of racism.²⁶

Gayraud S. Wilmore also puts forth a definitive summary when he states:

Black Theology expresses both affirmation and negation. It affirms the real possibility of freedom and manhood for Black people, and it negates every power that seeks to demean and rob Black people for the determination of their own destiny.²⁷

Rebellion

Very closely associated with the concept of revolution, radical Black Theology deems the concept and practice of rebellion vital and necessary to its theology. As radical Black Theology is a theology of revolution, it is also therefore a theology of rebellion. Riots and rebellions have relentlessly poured forth from black communities across the country. Rev. Albert B. Cleage, Jr. says that "In America today, we have riots or rebellions taking place in almost every city across the country."²⁸

Rev. Cleage distinguishes between a riot and a rebellion when he says:

²⁶Cone, op. cit., pp. 135-136.

²⁷Gayraud S. Wilmore, Black Religion and Black Radicalism (New York: Doubleday and Company, Inc., 1972), p. 297.

²⁸Albert B. Cleage, Jr., The Black Messiah (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1968), p. 116.

There is a difference then between a riot and a rebellion. A riot is a little group, perhaps more interested in looting than in freedom. But a rebellion is a community that has decided that it will no longer tolerate the kind of racial oppression that it has been forced to tolerate. So across the country we are getting a combination. . . . And in other communities, it is not a riot at all; it is a rebellion. People look around and say, we are tired of these slums. We are tired of all the conditions that we have to put up with. We are tired of the whole situation and we are not going to tolerate it any longer. And then a whole community erupts, and other people say, we don't know why it happened. That is rebellion.²⁹

Again Albert B. Cleage, Jr. elucidates the rebellious attitude reflected in radical Black Theology when he definitively states:

The rebellion goes on. There is no halfway revolution. When it starts, it is going to go to its logical conclusion. Either we get free or we end up in concentration camps. . . . There is no turning back, no stopping. . . . So we have got to do everything possible to get free because this is what we started and this is the process in which we are engaged. And you don't stop a process. It goes on.³⁰

This is the atmosphere advocated by radical Black Theology. Revolution and rebellion are in full harmony with the Old and New Testaments and are in full accord with the liberating work of Jesus Christ. Not only so, but both elements are in agreement with God's intention for oppressed black people in a white racist society. Because this is true, radical Black Theology adopts a concept of violence.

Violence

Violence is another vital issue to which radical Black Theology gives primary consideration. Dr. James H. Cone describes the difficulty radical Black Theology faces in adopting a concept of violence. He says, "we must realize that to carve out a theology of black

²⁹Ibid., p. 117.

³⁰Ibid., p. 126.

revolution which does not sidestep the question of violence is difficult."³¹

While Dr. Cone is reluctant to state decisively that radical Black Theology is a theology of violence, other advocates of radical Black Theology are not so. In brief, Dr. Cone holds that the question of violence is not the primary question with which radical Black Theology must deal. Because violence already exists, Cone says the Christian has to decide only between the lesser of two evils--violence or racism. According to Dr. Cone, racism is by far the greatest evil of the two, and thus the only alternative to black people is violence.

However, other radical black theologians such as Joseph R. Washington, Jr. are more outspoken on this issue. Because radical Black Theology is so very intimately associated with Black Power, Washington states:

Black Power, the actualization of freedom and equality, is nothing if it is not the turning of the social order and the social system with its structures upside down. This is only possible in murderous combat between blacks and whites.³²

Again Joseph R. Washington, Jr. says:

. . . Black Power is a precocious call to revolution through violence to attain freedom and equality for all. . . . Black Americans in the mass are certain that their liberation, and that of all Americans, must come in the way of violence.³³

Washington is quite direct in saying: Central to the real thrust of Black Power is the demand for change now, which

³¹James H. Cone, Black Theology and Black Power (New York: The Seabury Press, 1969), p. 138.

³²Joseph R. Washington, Jr., Black And White Power Subreption (Boston: Beacon Press, 1969), p. 173.

³³Ibid.

pessimistically or realistically assumes that there will be little change without blood and death.³⁴

Black Power advocates share precisely the same view. Stokely Carmichael and Charles V. Hamilton address themselves to the question of violence in the following terms.

Those of us who advocate Black Power are quite clear in our own minds that a "non-violent" approach to civil rights is an approach black people cannot afford and a luxury white people do not deserve. It is crystal clear to us--and it must become so with the white society--that there can be no social order without social justice. White people must be made to understand that they must stop messing with black people, or the blacks will fight back!³⁵

Thus, Black Power and radical Black Theology share the same philosophy, and to some degree the same practice. Without doubt, whether it is articulated reluctantly or harshly, radical Black Theology is a theology of violence both in theory and in practicality.

Reconciliation

In light of a theology of revolution, rebellion and violence, it seems to be a paradox to speak of a radical Black Theology of reconciliation. And indeed it is a paradox when reconciliation is viewed in the traditional sense.

In speaking about reconciliation, blacks do not mean the same thing that whites do. Therefore we blacks do not use the term as often as we use the term restored, etc. By reconciliation between whites and blacks, most whites mean reconciliation on terms of the white racist society. The same concept as advocated by Black Theology means reconciliation or a restored position, not on white

³⁴Ibid., p. 172.

³⁵Stokely Carmichael and Charles V. Hamilton, Black Power: The Politics of Liberation (New York: Vintage Books, 1967), p. 53.

man's terms, but according to the terms of the oppressed.³⁶

Radical Black Theology, therefore, is not interested in a white man's reconciliation. Believing that reconciliation is a problem belonging to the oppressor, Dr. James H. Cone says, "the real question is not whether Black Theology sees reconciliation as an end but, rather, on whose terms we are to be reconciled."³⁷ Again he states emphatically:

. . . let me say that reconciliation on white racist terms is impossible, since it would crush the dignity of black people. Under these conditions blacks must treasure their hostility, bringing it fully into consciousness as an irreducible quality of their identity.³⁸

The point is emphasized by Joseph R. Washington, Jr., When he says:

But reconciliation in Black Power does not come on the other side of power; it comes on the other side of revolution and redemption. Black Power is a demand for a theology of revolution that includes reconciliation after conflict, not just after separation.³⁹

Though, in the context of radical Black Theology, reconciliation between blacks and whites is impossible as long as whites continue to define the basis of the relationship, this is not to say that reconciliation is totally impossible. Dr. Cone explains the terms upon which reconciliation is possible in stating:

Black people can only speak of reconciliation when the black

³⁶Quotation from Rev. John H. Jackson, Pastor, Mt. Olivet Baptist Church, Portland, Oregon, in a personal interview with the author, December 19, 1972.

³⁷James H. Cone, Black Theology and Black Power (New York: The Seabury Press, 1969), p. 145.

³⁸Ibid., p. 144.

³⁹Joseph R. Washington, Jr., Black And White Power Subreption (Boston: Beacon Press, 1969), p. 120.

community is permitted to do its thing. The black community has experienced the crushing white thing too long. Therefore, Black Theology believes that in order for reconciliation to be meaningful and productive, black people must have room to do their thing. The black community itself must lay down the rules of the game.⁴⁰

Radical Black Theology firmly believes that "God's reconciling act in Jesus Christ" is indeed "the heart of the New Testament message."⁴¹

But in a white racist society, Black Theology believes that the biblical doctrine of reconciliation can be made a reality only when white people are prepared to address black men as black men and not as some grease-painted form of white humanity. . . . The task of Black Theology is to make the biblical message of reconciliation contemporaneous with the black situation in America.⁴²

Dr. Cone explains this tenet of radical Black Theology by emphasizing:

Reconciliation not only means that black people are reconciled to themselves and thus to God, but also to other men. When the other men are white people, this means the black people will bring their new restored image of themselves into every human encounter. They will remain black in their confrontation with others and will demand that others address them as black people. They will not let Whitey make an It of them, but will insist, with every ounce of strength, that they are people.

For white people, God's reconciliation in Jesus Christ means that God has made black people a beautiful people; and if they are going to be in relationship with God, they must enter by means of their black brothers, who are a manifestation of God's presence on earth.⁴³

Radical Black Theology, then is concerned with a black-white reconciliation. Within this particular frame of reference, blacks are interested in reconciliation from the standpoint of power, not of weakness. In other words, blacks will not be reconciled to whites out of

⁴⁰Cone, op. cit., pp. 144-145.

⁴¹Ibid., p. 147.

⁴²Ibid., pp. 147-148.

⁴³Ibid., pp. 149-150.

a position of weakness, but out of a position of strength, based upon a real confrontation and conflict with the white racist society, which results in a restored position for the black people. This reconciliation is contingent upon the full and complete racial liberation of the black people. J. Deotis Roberts says:

There can be no real reconciliation between blacks and whites henceforth without liberation. . . . We must be liberated--Christ is the Liberator. But the liberating Christ is also the reconciling Christ. The one who liberates reconciles and the one who reconciles liberates.⁴⁴

II. VITAL THEOLOGICAL CONCEPTS IN RADICAL BLACK THEOLOGY

Clearly, the manner in which black people look at themselves, at their situation in America, and at other people, especially white people, greatly determines how they look at God and His relationship to them as well as to other men. That is to say that the life and situation of black people have much influence upon their theological concepts as they are expressed in radical Black Theology. It is significant to note that radical Black Theology, and thus the black view of God and man, arises out of a framework of oppression and the struggle for social liberation.

A Radical Black Theology Of The Church

Since the early days of slavery in America, the Church has been paramount in the lives of black people. It has served blacks as their social and religious center. The black Church has given blacks a sense of community, togetherness and equality that met the needs of their

⁴⁴J. Deotis Roberts, Liberation and Reconciliation: A Black Theology (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1971), pp. 47-48.

lives which nothing else could fulfill. Thus, from out of the Black Church which spoke to the situation of black people, emerged a radical Black Theology. Therefore, radical Black Theology takes the nature of the Church seriously.

The Church, according to radical Black Theology, is not a building or an institution. Rather it is the congregated community of God's called-out or chosen ones. It is a community which God has called to be God's suffering people."⁴⁵ Black theologians contend that "The call of God constitutes the Church, and it is a call to suffering."⁴⁶ Not only is the Church called to suffering; it is also called to revolution. "The Church is that people called into being by the power and love of God to share in his revolutionary activity for the liberation of man."⁴⁷

The membership of the Church is unique, but not limited "by standards of race, class, or occupation."⁴⁸

Unlike Old Israel, their membership is not limited by ethnic or political boundaries, but includes all who respond in faith to the redemptive act of God in Christ with a willingness to share in God's creative activity in the world. . . . The Church, then, consists of people who have been seized by the Holy Spirit and who have the determination to live as if all depended upon God.⁴⁹

Old Israel is viewed as a type of the Church. Dr. James H.

Cone says:

The history of Israel is a history of God's election of a special, oppressed people to share in his creative involvement in the

⁴⁵Cone, op. cit., p. 65.

⁴⁶Ibid.

⁴⁷Ibid., p. 63.

⁴⁸Ibid., p. 65.

⁴⁹Ibid.

world on behalf of man. The call of this people at Sinai into a covenant relationship for a special task may be said to be the beginning of the Church.⁵⁰

Radical Black Theology believes that God's choosing of Israel was significant. Israel was an oppressed people whom God chose to revolt against Egyptian power, domination and rule, and to be an example to all nations of God's intention in the world. Thus, the black people are God's chosen oppressed that they too might rebel against what is and demonstrate to the world what God says should be. This point is emphasized in the words of Albert B. Cleage, Jr.:

We are God's chosen people, God is with us in our struggle. Our freedom struggle, our movement, our Black Revolution is in the hands of God. And the things we do, we do with the guidance, the strength, the support of God. . . .⁵¹

Cleage continues:

We are trying on the other hand to build a Nation that takes in all black people, where we are fighting for the freedom of all black people and where we understand that there are a lot of different ways of fighting and where we try to include everybody in what we are trying to do.⁵²

The Church is identified fully with the black community. It is in the black community that Christ is at work liberating the oppressed people of God. In speaking about Christ's involvement in the world of blackness, Dr. Cone says, "He is not in our peaceful, quiet, comfortable suburban "churches," but in the ghetto fighting the racism of churchly white people."⁵³ Again Dr. Cone states emphatically:

⁵⁰Ibid., p. 64.

⁵¹Albert B. Cleage, Jr., The Black Messiah (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1968), p. 133.

⁵²Ibid., p. 135.

⁵³Cone, op. cit., p. 66.

"Where Christ is, there is the Church." Christ is to be found, as always, where men are enslaved and trampled under foot; Christ is found suffering with the suffering; Christ is in the ghetto--there also is his Church.⁵⁴

Not only is the Church identified with the ghetto; it is identified with blackness. Because Christ "meets the blacks where they are and becomes one of them."⁵⁵ Dr. Cone says:

It is the job of the Church to become black with him and accept the shame which white society places on blacks. But the Church knows that what is shame to the world is holiness to God. Black is holy, that is, it is a symbol of God's presence in history on behalf of the oppressed man. Where there is black, there is oppression; but blacks can be assured that where there is blackness, there is Christ who has taken on blackness so that what is evil in men's eyes might become good. . . . And if the Church is to join Christ by following his opening, it too must go where suffering is and become black also.⁵⁶

Radical Black Theology believes the function of the Church is three-fold. First, the Church is to preach, and its preachment is to be the Word of liberation. The preaching centers in the victory of Christ over all alien hostile forces bringing freedom and liberty to the captives. Secondly, the Church is to render service. This service is active involvement in the affairs of men, especially of blacks who find themselves in a white racist world. Thirdly, the Church is to function as a fellowship which demonstrates to the world "the nature of the new society."⁵⁷

While the Church has three primary functions, radical Black Theology insists that the main purpose of the Church is for worship.

⁵⁴Ibid.

⁵⁵Ibid., p. 68.

⁵⁶Ibid., p. 69.

⁵⁷Ibid., p. 71.

Rev. John H. Jackson speaks to this emphasis:

The main purpose of congregating in the Black Church is for worship to God. Though it serves in various other capacities, the people come together for worship.⁵⁸ The time of worship is a high-point in the lives of black folk.

In no area is Christ more actively at work in history and in the affairs of men than in the ministry of the Church. The Church is the suffering people of God called to be the ministering servant to the suffering and the oppressed.

A Radical Black Theology of God

Radical Black Theology believes in the God of the Old and New Testaments. Indeed, radical black theologians shape their theology by what they see God doing in the Old Testament and what they see Jesus doing through the New Testament. Two main things are seen which are common both to God's activity in the Old Testament and the activity of Jesus in the New Testament. First, that God works through a chosen oppressed people. Secondly, there is the fact that God's work is a work of liberation for that chosen oppressed people.

Thus radical Black Theology insists that God has chosen the black people as His oppressed suffering servants. With regard to such a view, Major J. Jones says:

Basic to the black man's struggle to liberate himself from his oppressor is the age-old idea of God's chosen people. From Old Testament times until our time, the idea has occurred among many peoples, both privileged and oppressed, in quite different ways and for many different reasons. Black awareness has picked up this kind of hope, and it is left for the current black theologians to

⁵⁸Quotation from Rev. John H. Jackson, Pastor, Mt. Olivet Baptist Church, Portland, Oregon, in a personal interview with the author, December 19, 1972.

interpret such a hope from a black theological frame of reference.⁵⁹

Therefore, radical Black Theology holds to a chosen people concept; that God has chosen black people to lead in the battle of liberation for the socially oppressed. Many black leaders have risen up, at different times, believing they have "been chosen by God to lead a chosen black people."⁶⁰

This chosen people idea has contributed greatly to the concept of an immanent God. Radical Black Theology insists on a God who is active in history and who works within His creation. Radical Black theologians do not deny the transcendency of God, but they do more definitely stress the immanence of God. To them God is in the ghetto; God is on the job. He is in the streets and in the homes and schools. God is where the action is, and the action is in the ghettos of black oppressed people.

Not only is God immanent, He is also black. "There is current in the black community a widespread reaction against the tendency on the part of the white oppressor to project the image of a white God."⁶¹

Major J. Jones states:

In the writings of Cleage and other black awareness advocates, there is now not only a strong tendency to relate God to the black man's struggle; there is also the tendency to relate his color to the people oppressed.⁶²

Dr. James H. Cone graphically agrees when he states:

⁵⁹Major J. Jones, Black Awareness A Theology Of Hope (New York: Abingdon Press, 1971), p. 107.

⁶⁰Ibid., p. 108.

⁶¹Ibid., p. 111.

⁶²Ibid., p. 113.

We see him there with his black face and big black hands lounging on a streetcorner. "Oh, but surely Christ is above race." But society is not raceless, any more than when God became a despised Jew. White liberal preference for a raceless Christ serves only to make official and orthodox the centuries-old portrayal of Christ as white. . . . The "raceless" American Christ has a light skin, wavy brown hair, and sometimes--wonder of wonders--blue eyes. For whites to find him with big lips and kinky hair is as offensive as it was for the Pharisees to find him partying with tax-collectors. But whether whites want to hear it or not, Christ is black baby, with all of the features which are so detestable to white society.⁶³

While some radical black theologians speak of the blackness of God figuratively or symbolically, it is clear through the investigation of radical Black Theology that in the mainstream it holds to a literal meaning of the blackness of God. Major J. Jones relates to the issue by stating:

But of late, God is being more and more identified with the struggle with reference to color. In much of the black community there is almost a complete rejection of any white art forms that would make God appear white. Black awareness is fast coming to the black church, and there is an effort to recolor God totally black. Cleage has done this with Jesus; others are doing it with God. This is because a white God, they contend, has tended to accept the meaning of blackness in its most degraded sense, and the Christian religion has not addressed itself ecclesiastically to the problems of being black in white America.⁶⁴

Clearly the, God is viewed as a black God who takes sides in the social struggle for liberation. Without exception, radical Black Theology holds that God is on the side of the oppressed black people and against white racist society. The following is taken from Major J.

Jones:

However, closely related to the tendency in the black community to color God black is also the tendency to commit God to the side of the black man and to make of him a God who is only concerned for the liberation of black people. Such a concept of God

⁶³James H. Cone, Black Theology and Black Power (New York: The Seabury Press, 1969), p. 68.

⁶⁴Jones, op. cit., p. 114.

has been derived partly from the Old Testament conception of God, and partly from a radical reinterpretation of the person and work of Jesus.⁶⁵

Thus, radical Black Theology would agree with Cone when he speaks of "Jesus as the Black Christ who provides the necessary soul for black liberation."⁶⁶

A Radical Black Theology of Man

Through thorough research it was found that radical Black Theology says very little concerning the nature of man. Indeed, it says little about the sinful nature of man, of original holiness, of original sin, the carnal nature or the depravity of man. What is clear, however, is that man was created by God in an act of divine creation. "Man was created to share in God's creative (revolutionary) activity in the world (Gen. 1: 27-28)."⁶⁷ Black theologians consistently talk of man's divine Creator.

Though radical Black Theology affirms the divine creation of man, it also holds that man is separated from God, his Creator. Dr. James H. Cone says:

But in his passion to become super-human, man becomes subhuman, estranged from the source of his being, threatening and threatened by his neighbor, transforming a situation destined for intimate human fellowship into a spider web of conspiracy and violence.⁶⁸

Cone goes on to say:

⁶⁵Ibid., p. 119.

⁶⁶James H. Cone, A Black Theology of Liberation (Philadelphia: J. B. Lippincott Company, 1970), p. 80.

⁶⁷Cone, op. cit., p. 63.

⁶⁸Ibid.

God, however, will not permit man thus to become less than the divine intention for him. He therefore undertakes a course of not-so-gentle persuasion for the liberation and restoration of his creatures.⁶⁹

Also in radical Black Theology's doctrine of man, there is the concept of man the oppressor and man the oppressed. Dr. Cone says that blackness symbolizes oppression and liberation therefrom, and whiteness symbolizes the oppressors and enslavement.⁷⁰ This is the main thrust of radical Black Theology in its concept of man's nature. Thus, for the most part, the discussion of the nature of man, in the context of radical Black Theology, is to be found within a social frame of reference. Black is oppressed; white is oppressing.

A radical Black Theology of man is also described by J. Deotis Roberts when he says:

Human nature is a good thing spoiled. Man is a fallen creature. Man is morally neutral. He is in a state of becoming one or the other. Man is the "Adam of his own soul." He is free and rational. He has been given "the knowledge of good and evil."⁷¹

A Radical Black Theology of Sin

Just as radical Black Theology deals only in a limited way with a theology of man, the doctrine of sin is given restricted treatment. Sin is viewed, in radical Black Theology, both as a vertical and a horizontal relationship. J. Deotis Roberts says distinctly: "Sin is vertical--it is a broken relation with God. Sin is horizontal also--it

⁶⁹Ibid., pp. 63-64.

⁷⁰James H. Cone., A Black Theology of Liberation (Philadelphia: J. B. Lippincott Company, 1970), p. 12.

⁷¹J. Deotis Roberts, Liberation and Reconciliation: A Black Theology (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1971), p. 114.

is an estrangement from the brother."⁷²

The doctrine of sin is given some treatment by Dr. Cone when he states:

But through sin man rejects his proper activity and destiny. He wants to be God, the creator of his destiny. This is the essence of sin, every man's desire to become "like God."⁷³

In summarizing, J. Deotis Roberts defines sin in terms of radical Black Theology when he says:

Sin is moral evil. Sin is personal, but it is also "collective." Guilt likewise is personal and social. Man is impaired throughout his personal and social nature and existence by sin. Sin is choosing the worst when a better choice is both known and possible. Sin is a form of enslavement from which man needs to be delivered. Sin is self-centeredness which includes sensuality and pride--it also includes unrighteousness and self-righteousness.⁷⁴

Therefore, sin is held to be the "great separator."⁷⁵ It separates man from God, and man from man. Again Roberts says, "Sin, the great separator, must be overcome by the love of God that unites man with God and man with man."⁷⁶

A Radical Black Theology of Forgiveness

Forgiveness of sin, according to radical Black Theology, is possible in man's relationship to God, and man's relationship to man. In both cases, forgiveness is entirely dependent upon a repentant spirit of the man to be forgiven. When a man repents of his sin against

⁷²Ibid.

⁷³James H. Cone, Black Theology and Black Power (New York: The Seabury Press, 1969), p. 63.

⁷⁴Roberts, op. cit., pp. 114-115.

⁷⁵Ibid.

⁷⁶Ibid.

his fellow man, he receives forgiveness.

More specifically, however, this forgiveness, as discussed in radical Black Theology, is related to the repentant spirit of white people for the way in which they have exploited, degraded and dehumanized black people. Radical Black Theology seems to advocate that when a white person repents of his racism, he receives forgiveness of God and of his black brothers. Thus, the white man is reconciled to God and to his black brother. Dr. Cone states, "Reconciliation to God means that white people are prepared to deny themselves (whiteness), take up the cross (blackness) and follow Christ (black ghetto)."⁷⁷

A Radical Black Theology of Revelation

Though any detailed treatment of the position of radical Black Theology on the matter of divine revelation, in the literature relative to the subject is lacking, it can be stated that radical Black Theology holds to a divine revelation, of God. This revelation of God has been made in two ways. First, radical Black Theology insists that God has revealed Himself through the Scriptures. The Scriptures are the authoritative Word of God. Secondly, radical Black Theology asserts that God was definitely, and most importantly, revealed in the person of Jesus Christ. It was Jesus Christ who revealed God as the God of the oppressed.

Radical Black Theology occupies a unique position relative to God's divine revelation, and divine authority issuing out of the revelation of Himself. Dr. James H. Cone states:

It is this common experience among black people in America that

⁷⁷Cone, op. cit., p. 150.

Black Theology elevates as the supreme test of truth. To put it simply, Black Theology knows no authority more binding than the experience of oppression itself. This alone must be the ultimate authority in religious matters.⁷⁸

A Radical Black Theology of Eschatology

While the prevailing attitude of black theologians and black Christians a few years ago was that of concern with an other-worldly reality, the position has definitely shifted to this-worldly reality.

Again, Dr. James H. Cone speaks graphically concerning the position of radical Black Theology on the doctrine of last things in saying:

If eschatology means that one believes that God is totally uninvolved in the suffering of men because he is preparing them for another world, then Black Theology is not eschatological. Black Theology is an earthly theology! It is not concerned with the "last things" but with the "white thing." Black Theology like Black Power believes that the self-determination of black people must be emphasized at all costs, recognizing that there is only one question about reality for blacks: What must we do about white racism? There is no room in this perspective for an exchatology dealing with a "reward" in heaven. Black Theology has hope for this life. Heavenly hope becomes a Platonic grasp for another reality because one cannot live meaningfully amid the suffering of this world.⁷⁹

Radical Black Theology refuses to accept the suggestion that black suffering is in accord with the will of a God who "rules, guides, and sanctifies the world."⁸⁰ Dr. Cone states that radical Black Theology

refuses to embrace any concept of God which makes black suffering the will of God. Black people should not accept slavery, lynching, or any form of injustice as tending to good. It is not

⁷⁸Ibid., p. 120.

⁷⁹Ibid., p. 123.

⁸⁰Ibid., p. 125.

permissible to appeal to the idea that God's will is inscrutable or that the righteous sufferer will be rewarded in heaven. . . . To be the God of black people, he must be against the oppression of black people.⁸¹

Thus, radical Black Theology only sees meaningfulness in an earthly existence. Its whole emphasis is on changing the white racist structure of this world. So, "The idea of heaven is irrelevant for radical Black Theology."⁸² Within the context of radical Black Theology, "eschatology comes to mean joining the world and making it what it ought to be."⁸³

In light of this investigation, radical Black Theology is a unique theology having distinctives all its own. In summarizing the theological stance of radical Black Theology, Dr. Cone states:

Concretely, this means that Black Theology is not prepared to accept any doctrine of God, man, Christ, or Scripture which contradicts the black demand for freedom now. It believes that any religious idea which exalts black dignity and creates a restless drive for freedom must be affirmed. All ideas which are opposed to the struggle for black self-determination or are irrelevant to it must be rejected as the work of the Antichrist.⁸⁴

Along the same line of emphasis, Dr. Cone says that

Black Theology is not prepared to discuss the doctrine of God, man, Christ, Church, Holy Spirit--the whole spectrum of Christian theology--without making each doctrine an analysis of the emancipation of black people. It believes that, in this time, moment, and situation, all Christian doctrines must be interpreted in such a manner that they unreservedly say something to black people who are living under unbearable oppression.⁸⁵

⁸¹Ibid., pp. 124-125.

⁸²Ibid., p. 125.

⁸³Ibid., p. 126.

⁸⁴Ibid., p. 120.

⁸⁵Ibid., p. 121.

CHAPTER V

THE UNANSWERED QUESTIONS OF RADICAL BLACK THEOLOGY

Even though radical black theologians have written very little in consideration of the ethical implications and unanswered questions of their theology, it was necessary to the fulfillment of this research, and its purpose, to explore the implications and unanswered questions arising from the philosophy and involvement of radical Black Theology. The sole purpose of this portion of the investigation was to briefly point out and clarify the ethical and theological questions which flow from radical Black Theology. This objective is in harmony with the overarching purpose of this investigation. No attempt has been made to answer the ethical and theological questions posed herein. The purpose was merely to raise certain ethical and theological questions which are highlighted by the basic tenets of radical Black Theology.

In keeping with the author's stated purpose and intention, a broad categorization was followed.

Flowing out of radical Black Theology there is a milieu of ethical and theological questions that are raised, especially in the mind of the evangelical Christian. These questions are directly applied to the ethical implications which are posed by radical Black Theology. These ethical and theological considerations probe deeply into the philosophy, characteristics, and involvement of radical Black Theology. Specifically, these areas of ethics and theology speak to the very validity of radical Black Theology itself.

Concerning Liberation

Radical Black Theology basically is concerned with the social liberation of the black people in America. A vast array of precise questions are raised. Is the Gospel of Jesus Christ primarily a gospel of social liberation? What is the evidence, from where does the evidence come, and to what does the evidence point that God is a God of social liberation? The question arises as to how the liberating theme of radical Black Theology is related to such Scripture lessons as Romans, chapter thirteen; First Peter, chapter two; and the Epistle of Paul to Philemon.

In speaking about Jesus' involvement with the oppressed in the New Testament, Dr. Cone says:

To suggest that he was speaking of a "spiritual" liberation fails to take seriously Jesus' thoroughly Hebrew view of man. Entering into the Kingdom of God means that Jesus himself becomes man's ultimate loyalty, for he is the Kingdom.¹

Does this in any way mean that in Jesus' own life and activity, social liberation took precedence over any spiritual liberation? How is this reconciled with Jesus' own claim and testimony "For the Son of man is come to seek and to save that which was lost" (St. Luke 19:10)? Does the Cross of Christ stand for social freedom?

While ethical and theological questions are asked of radical Black Theology concerning its position on social liberation, it can also be raised in question as to what this emphasis has to say to white racist society. Especially, what does it say to the white Christian living in a racist society, and who himself may either be consciously

¹James H. Cone, A Black Theology of Liberation (New York: J. B. Lippincott Company, 1970), p. 20.

or unconsciously prejudice?

Concerning Revolution and Violence

In conjunction with the ethical and theological problems associated with the discussion of liberation in radical Black Theology, there are also ethical responsibilities suggested in the concept of the black revolution and violence. The implication is that God endorses and approves revolution, rebellion and violence. This makes God the God of rebellion, and revolution and violence issue out of divine approval and commandment. Dr. Cone says man "is liberated and thus free to rebel against all powers that threaten man's life in the Kingdom."²

Has God so freed man that there are no restrictions leveled against him with respect to revolting against any threatening power? If the black man is freed by God to rebel, then all other oppressed people--white and colored--are liberated to rebel under God's stamp of approval. Can order result from chaos, or will chaos alone lead to social order and justice? Will revolution and violence accomplish social justice?

A final question in this area, directed to radical Black Theology is, What would God's activity in the world be once social liberation is achieved?

Concerning Racial Pride

The Black Awareness Movement has greatly contributed to the racial pride concept which exalts blackness. In essence, this is pride of something over which one has no control. One does not choose race or

²Ibid.

racial color. Therefore, what is significant to be proud of in either blackness or whiteness? Does this contribute to man's exaltation of himself rather than to his exaltation of God? There is implied in this type of philosophy a glorying in the flesh.

Concerning Black Power

Along with the matter of the ethics of racial pride, the ethical implication of Black Power is to be found in its humanistic emphasis. The stress is on attitudes and actions which issue out of distinct human interests and ideals which are to be accomplished solely through man's intellect, strength, ambition and revolutionary ability.

The inference of Black Power is that God is left out of that which the black man can do for himself. This power is derived from the black man himself. Thus, it becomes his responsibility to make whites accept and recognize him or be prepared for a struggle. Because of his inalienable rights, the black is free to exert humanistic power to compel white people to recognize those rights.

Concerning Reconciliation

Focusing in on Christ's work of reconciliation, radical Black Theology insists on social reconciliation between blacks and whites on the terms of black people. Further, radical Black Theology holds that reconciliation between God and man is only possible when black people are liberated from white oppression. This view implies that Christ's work of reconciliation is to be found in a social rather than spiritual context. It also strongly suggests that God's reconciliation to man is dependent upon man's social and ethical deportment relating to the white man's liberation of the black man in America. Since the American Negro has not been completely liberated, how effective has Christ's work of

reconciliation been? In a social framework, has Christ been a failure in providing reconciliation between man and man, and God and man?

Concerning The Black Experience

The rationale for the emphasis of radical Black Theology upon reconciliation on black terms is to be found in the black experience in America. Radical Black Theology insists that the experience of black people in America is worse than the experience that other peoples have shared in the course of history. Radical Black Theology implies that black people have suffered, at the hands of white racist America, as no other people has ever suffered in any social context. In this consideration is found the insistence of radical Black Theology on the fact that the nation of Israel is a type of the black experience in America.

The implication, that stands out in this area, is that radical Black Theology is a theology grounded in human experience rather than in God. Are the Bible, God and Jesus to be squeezed through a fine mesh screen of the black man's experience in America? Are God and Jesus poured into the mold of social experience in America? The implication is also raised as to whether the Gospel can only speak in terms of the black experience, or if the Gospel is only relevant when discussed in terms of the black experience in America. Thus, a suspicion might arise suggesting that the Gospel has nothing to say to people who have not shared nor known the experience of black people. Therefore, in this light, is the Gospel limited, thus limiting God as He speaks to man?

Concerning The Chosen People Concept

In conjunction with its emphasis on the meaning of the black experience, radical Black Theology propagates a concept centering in the action of God in choosing the black people to be His people. In this area of thought, the black people are viewed as a suffering people who have been chosen by God to be His suffering people now in the world.

The inference definitely is that black people in America have superseded Israel as God's chosen people. Is this biblical? What has happened to the nation of Israel, and is the Bible in error when it indicates that Israel shall be restored in future years (Romans 11: 17-27)?

Another ethical and theological problem is found within this idea of the divinely chosen blacks. If black people in America have been chosen by God as a suffering people to suffer for Him, how is this concept related to the concept of black liberation? Is God's call of the blacks to suffering and to liberation fused into one divine call? How do suffering and liberation interrelate with God's choosing of black people? The question would also be posed as to whether or not the chosenness of black people would be consummated upon the achievement of social liberation for black people.

Concerning The Oppressed

Similar to the chosen people concept advanced by radical black theologians is the emphasis of radical Black Theology concerning the oppressed black people. Radical Black Theology is a theology oriented to social oppression. Its contention is that God is totally and unequivocally identified with oppressed people. Dr. James H. Cone states:

If the history of Israel and the New Testament description of the historical Jesus reveal that God is a God who is identified with Israel because she is an oppressed community, the resurrection

of Christ means that all oppressed peoples become his people. . . . The resurrection-event means that God's liberating work is not only for the house of Israel but for all who are enslaved by principalities and powers.³

Again, Dr. Cone states that "there can be no theology of the gospel which does not arise from an oppressed community."⁴ The ethical and theological implications of this concept are vast. It is implied that the Gospel is limited to the oppressed community, and that it has no meaning outside the framework of oppression. When the Negro community ceases to be an oppressed community, will the Gospel have any meaning to black people?

The nature of this oppression is also called into question. Radical Black Theology is concerned with the social oppression of black people in America. What about the oppressive forces of sin? Radical Black Theology infers that the forces of social oppression are indeed in essence the oppressive forces of sin.

Since radical Black Theology affirms the oppression of Israel as similar to the oppression of blacks, the following problem areas are identified. Why was Israel oppressed socially? Scripture indicates that Israel was delivered into the hands of bondage primarily because of Israel's rejection of and disobedience to God. Israel was socially oppressed because of sin and carnality. Would radical black theologians identify that as the reason for the oppression of black people? Are Israel and black people in America that comparable in relationship to the chosen people of God?

³Ibid., p. 21.

⁴Ibid., p. 23.

Jesus Christ."⁸ On the other hand, Dr. Cone is quite definitive in treating the essence of the sin of black men. He states:

Because sin represents the condition of estrangement from the source of one's being, for black people this means a desire to be white and not black. It is the refusal to be what we are. Sin then for black people is the loss of identity. It is saying Yes to the white absurdity--accepting the world as it is by letting white people define black existence. To be in sin is to be contented with white solutions for the "black problem" and not rebelling against every infringement of white being on black being.⁹

Thus sin is viewed by radical black theologians as a corporate act of men in corporate society. This concept raises a probing question concerning the sin of man in relationship to the holiness of God which demands the wrath of God upon sin. Is sin an act against man or an act against God? Is sin a state of alienation from man or between God and man? What is the idea of radical Black Theology relative to such biblical concepts as the "carnal mind," the "old man," carnality or the sin nature?

Radical Black Theology doesn't speak about the efficacious shed blood of the Lord Jesus Christ. It doesn't talk of Christ's vicarious suffering and death. It isn't concerned about the atoning work of Christ. Therefore, the implication is that the white man's sin may be removed by rejecting his whiteness and affirming blackness. The black man's sin may be blotted out by black awareness and Black Power. Does man solve the sin problem, or is that the work of God in Christ?

Concerning Salvation

Salvation, according to radical Black Theology, is held to be

⁸Ibid., p. 190.

⁹Ibid., p. 196.

the black revolution against white racist America. The revolution of the social structure in America becomes salvation for the black man. Not only is the social liberation of blacks the salvation for black people, it is also the means of the white man's salvation. The ethical and theological implications are that man can earn his salvation through a revolutionary activity that liberates black people from white oppression. Salvation through works! How is this concept of salvation related to the response of faith in the atoning work of Christ?

The idea of salvation as held by radical Black Theology implies that salvation is God's redeeming power liberating black people from social oppression rather than the redeeming power of God which offers freedom from the shackles of sin.

The question further arises as to the theology of missions which is to be found in radical Black Theology. Revolution in the social realm against social structure then is an expression of missions. The message of social liberation is the message of missions. To help people into a better social climate or to create a better social environment is the work of missions. Rev. John H. Jackson states it thus:

To give food to the hungry is missions. To invite the NAACP (National Association for the Advancement of Colored People) into the church to take an offering is missions. To strive for a better social climate is missions. Missions is the carrying out of God's revolutionary activity in the world for the purpose of liberating oppressed people.¹⁰

Is this concept of missions a biblical theology of Christian missions? The question is posed as to whether God has called His people to a social mission or to a spiritual mission which seeks to communicate

¹⁰Quotation from Rev. John H. Jackson, Pastor, Mt. Olivet Baptist Church, Portland, Oregon, in a personal interview with the author, December 19, 1972.

the Gospel in such a way that men are lifted out of the slavery of sin into a life-relationship with God through Christ, by faith. Does this latter sense of mission also involve a concern for the poor, the sick, the needy, the oppressed, and the problem of human relations?

Concerning Revelation

God's self-disclosure is the essence of divine revelation. Dr. James H. Cone elucidates the position of radical Black Theology on divine revelation as follows:

According to Black Theology, revelation must mean more than just divine self-disclosure. Revelation is God's self-disclosure to man in a situation of liberation. To know God is to know of his activity of liberation on behalf of the oppressed. God's revelation means liberation, an emancipation from the political, economic and social structures of the society. This is the essence of the biblical revelation.

. . . There is no revelation of God without a condition of oppression which develops into a situation of liberation. His revelation is only for the oppressed of the land.¹¹

Again, the ethical and theological inference lies in the limitation of God in that He only makes Himself known to the oppressed and that for the purpose of bringing the oppressed to the place of social, political and economic liberation. This is to say that God's revelation of Himself is totally dependent upon the occasion of oppression. Social oppression must exist if God is to reveal Himself. The implication is likewise that without social oppression there is no need for God's self-disclosure. If God's revelation is necessary to man, then social liberation stands in direct opposition to the revelation of God, for without oppression God does not disclose Himself to man.

Therefore, God's revelation is subordinate to the black man's

¹¹Ibid., p. 91.

experience and condition of oppression in America. The Bible is not the supreme authoritative infallible Word of God; the supreme authority for life and practice of black people is the black man's experience in America.

Concerning God's Blackness

Dr. Cone sharply states that "The blackness of God, and everything implied by it in a racist society, is the heart of Black Theology."¹² In other words, radical Black Theology insists that God is so identified with the humiliation, suffering and dehumanization of black people that He is indeed black in color and the condition of the black people in America is also the condition in which God is found.

The question may be raised if this concept takes God out of being white racist only to put Him into the category of being black racist.

The implication is that God is black in color because He fights for the social liberation of man. How does this idea relate to Rev. Bob Harrison's concept that God becomes black wherever Jesus Christ has found a home in the heart of black men who have experienced the new birth and the washing of regeneration?¹³

Concerning Heaven and Hope

Radical Black Theology unequivocally asserts that the concept of heaven has no relevance to radical black theologians because there is hope in heaven precludes the possibility of hope in this life on earth.

¹²Ibid., p. 120.

¹³Bob Harrison, When God Was Black (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan Publishing House, 1971), pp. 9-10.

What about the biblical message assuring man of the glorious hope of a new heaven and earth? Is this part of Scripture irrelevant to black people?

Relating to the stance of radical Black Theology on heaven and hope, the question simply arises: "Is that all there is?"

Concerning Eschatology

The ethical and theological implications of a radical Black Theology of eschatology are to be found in the emphasis or the lack of emphasis upon the Second Coming of the Lord Jesus Christ. The inference of radical Black Theology is that the black man will so revolutionize his society that the black man himself will usher in a Utopia. But radical Black Theology also infers that God is at work aiding the black man in bringing about a social Utopia. It strongly suggests that the Second Coming of Christ is nothing more than a horizontal moving along with the life and history of black people.

Within the context of radical Black Theology, exchatology is to be interpreted in terms of the past and present. Rather than being concerned about an end of all things, radical Black Theology is engaged in an effort to change present things. Therefore its eschatology is this-worldly, and is fitted into the molds of the past and present.

Dr. James H. Cone provides a summary when he states:

Black Theology refuses to embrace an interpretation of eschatology which would turn our eyes from injustice now. It will not be deceived by images of pearly gates and golden streets, because too many earthly streets are covered with black blood.¹⁴

¹⁴James H. Cone, Black Theology and Black Power (New York: The Seabury Press, 1969), p. 127.

CHAPTER VI

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

I. SUMMARY

The purpose of this research was to investigate the historical atmosphere and development of radical Black Theology and to explore the characteristics, tenets and implications which make radical Black Theology what it is. It was the state purpose of the writer to present the actual findings of the research so that a working knowledge of radical Black Theology may be acquired, and a better understanding of American black people developed.

The material for this investigation was gathered from three distinct sources--documentary material, correspondence, and personal interviews and discussions.

In Chapter II the historical development of radical Black Theology was surveyed. It was found that radical Black Theology originated with slavery, and that it is grounded in the black experience in America. Radical Black Theology sharply focuses on black history in America and uses this framework for its theological interpretation. Prior to the Civil War, black people were victimized and kidnapped from Africa by white slave traders who brought them to America for economic reasons. These black people were sold into slavery, dehumanized and degraded. Following the Civil War, the situation worsened for black people. The Union was preserved, but federal legislation did not accomplish freedom for the blacks. Rather, the black people were subjected to new laws, restrictions, and fear. Restlessness, insecurity and inequality

prevailed. Bitterness raged violently. The dehumanization and degradation of black people continued. It was at this time that independent black churches were started and these soon filled the gap in the lives of the blacks. The twentieth century witnessed both radicalism and revolution within the black community. The Black Awareness Movement and the Black Power movement caused blacks to look at themselves in a new light, refusing to be door-mats for the whites any longer. The cry for social liberation was taken up with demands that white America listen.

Chapter III was a brief treatment of the present status of radical Black Theology. The militant phase and the conservative phase of radical Black Theology were discussed, along with the structure of radical Black Theology. It was found that radical Black Theology is a theology of practices which emphasizes that it is a theology of living in the Ghetto. It is a theology that focuses in on the black people exclusively. Radical Black Theology emphasizes the immanence of God as He lives and moves and has His being in the Ghetto facing life right along with black people. A color-consciousness is to be found in radical Black Theology. Blackness is exalted. Radical Black Theology stresses power. God has endued black people with divine power enabling ~~blacks to refuse to be governed by white racism and to reaffirm their~~ blackness and freedom. This theology demands action; action which leads to the destruction of white racism.

Chapter IV was a detailed account of the basic tenets of radical Black Theology. It was an account of the issues that advocates of radical Black Theology deem vital and essential. It was found that black awareness, black dignity, black liberation, revolution, rebellion and

violence are all key issues of radical Black Theology which emphasizes black liberation from white racism at any cost, even if it means a blood-bath issuing out of revolution and violence. It was also found that reconciliation is only important to radical Black Theology when it is discussed in terms of white racism. The vital theological concepts in radical Black Theology were treated extensively. A radical Black Theology of the Church, of God, of Man, of Sin, of Forgiveness, of Revelation, and of Eschatology were all discussed. It was found that all of these theological concepts in radical Black Theology are held and propagated from a rootage in the experience and condition of the black people in America.

Chapter V discussed unanswered questions raised in radical Black Theology. Basic issues concerning the primary tenets of radical Black Theology were discussed. Certain vital theological and ethical questions were raised regarding the theological position and interpretation as found in radical Black Theology. It was found that radical Black Theology poses a host of questions and considerations relative to its basic tenets and philosophy, which will need further study and research.

II. CONCLUSIONS

As a result of the study, the following conclusions are presented:

1. Radical Black Theology has its Rootage in the black experience in America. It says that white people have victimized, humiliated, degraded, abused, and dehumanized blacks for centuries.

2. Radical black religion made a positive contribution to the very existence of black people.

3. Radical Black Theology is a theological interpretation, of and for black people, which provides blacks with an answer to the basic needs and problems of black life in America. It is oriented to the social oppression of blacks.

4. Radical Black Theology is prevalent and wide-spread in America. It is to be found in the religious thinking of the majority of American blacks in one form or another. It has something positive to say to both blacks and whites.

5. Radical Black Theology is a theology of social liberation, revolution, violence and rebellion. Its theological concepts of the Church, God, Man, Sin, Forgiveness, Revelation and Eschatology are interpreted within the context of social revolution and liberation.

6. Radical Black Theology poses a host of unanswered questions which need to be answered both ethically and theologically.

7. The constructive work of Black Theology is yet to be done.

III. AREAS FOR FURTHER INVESTIGATION

On the basis of this research, the following areas for further investigation are suggested.

1. A comparative analysis of the various positions of black theologians, contrasting the differences in thought, conviction, and theology.

2. A study structured to investigate the ethical implications which are posed by radical Black Theology.

3. An evaluative study of the theological concepts of radical Black theology.

4. An investigation relating to an Evangelical Black Theology.

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APPENDIXES

APPENDIX A

LETTERS FROM AUTHOR REQUESTING INFORMATION

Western Evangelical Seminary
4200 S.E. Jennings Avenue
Portland, Oregon 97222
June 5, 1972

The Institute Of The Black World
87 Chestnut Street, S.W.
Atlanta, Georgia 30314

Gentlemen:

I am a senior graduate student at Western Evangelical Seminary this year. I'm in the process of organizing my graduate thesis entitled "The Historical Development of Black Theology."

I am writing to ask if you might be able to send me a bibliography of available sources on the subject of Black Theology. I would appreciate this favor greatly.

Thank you for your anticipated help. I will look forward to receiving your reply.

Sincerely yours,

/s/

Kenneth D. Oliver

Western Evangelical Seminary
4200 S.E. Jennings Avenue
Portland, Oregon 97222
July 5, 1972

Rev. Gilbert H. Caldwell
Dean of Black Theological Studies
New York Theological Seminary
235 E. 49th Street
New York, New York

Dear Rev. Caldwell:

I am a senior graduate student at Western Evangelical Seminary. Since I am writing my graduate thesis on the subject of Black Theology, I'm writing to ask you if you could provide me with a bibliography of available sources on Black Theology.

Thanking you in advance for your help and consideration, I remain:

Sincerely yours,

/s/

Kenneth D. Oliver

Western Evangelical Seminary
4200 S.E. Jennings Avenue
Portland, Oregon 97222
June 5, 1972

Rev. J. Metz Rollins
Professor in Black Studies
New York Theological Seminary
235 E. 49th Street
New York, New York

Dear Rev. Rollins:

I am a graduate student at Western Evangelical Seminary. I am in the process of organizing my thesis. My subject is "The Historical Development of Black Theology."

I'm writing to ask you if you could send me a bibliography of available resources relative to Black Theology. I'll appreciate this favor greatly.

I'm thanking you in advance for your assistance. I'll be anxiously awaiting your reply.

Sincerely yours,

/s/

Kenneth D. Oliver

Western Evangelical Seminary
4200 S.E. Jennings Avenue
Portland, Oregon 97222
September 10, 1972

Professor James H. Cone
Union Theological Seminary
Broadway at 120th Street
New York, New York 10027

Dear Dr. Cone:

I am a senior graduate student at Western Evangelical Seminary, and I'm writing to you in hopes that you can assist me. I am writing my graduate thesis on the subject of Black Theology.

I am wondering if you could provide me with an extensive bibliography of source material relating to Black Theology. I would deeply appreciate this favor. I'll be anxiously looking forward to receiving your reply. Thank you kindly for your interest and help.

Sincerely yours,

/s/

Kenneth D. Oliver

Western Evangelical Seminary
4200 S.E. Jennings Avenue
Portland, Oregon 97222
October 2, 1972

Professor William H. Bentley
President of the National Negro Evangelical Association
2150 W. Madison
Chicago, Illinois 60612

Dear Bro. Bentley:

As a senior student at Western Evangelical Seminary, I am writing my graduate thesis. My subject is "The Historical Development of Black Theology."

Could you please suggest some source material relative to Black Theology with which you are acquainted? I'm thanking you in advance for your help.

Sincerely yours,

/s/

Kenneth D. Oliver

APPENDIX B

Selected Names and Addresses of Persons
and Organizations Relative to
Studies in Black Theology

Persons

1. Rev. William H. Bentley
President of The National Negro Evangelical Association
2150 W. Madison
Chicago, Illinois 60612
2. Rev. Gilbert H. Caldwell
Dean of Black Theological Studies
New York Theological Seminary
235 E. 49th Street
New York, New York
3. Dr. James H. Cone
Union Theological Seminary
Broadway at 120th Street
New York, New York 10027
4. Rev. John H. Jackson
Pastor, Mt. Olivet Baptist Church
2503 N.E. Liberty
Portland, Oregon
5. Rev. Leon C. Jones
American Baptist Churches of the Northwest
1424 - 31st Avenue
Seattle, Washington 98122
6. Professor Major J. Jones
Gammon Theological Seminary
653 Bechwith Street, S.W.
Atlanta, Georgia 30314
7. Rev. J. Metz Rollins
Professor in Black Studies
New York Theological Seminary
235 E. 49th Street
New York, New York

8. Rev. Charles H. Williams
Pacific Northwest Director of N.N.E.A.
3905 N. Vancouver Avenue
Portland, Oregon 97227

Organizations

1. The Institute Of The Black World
An Independent Research Center
87 Chestnut Street, S.W.
Atlanta, Georgia 30314
2. Interdenominational Theological Center Library
671 Beckwith Street, S.W.
Atlanta, Georgia 30314

APPENDIX C

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