

A Reimagination of Liberation and Reconciliation in the Black Theology of James H.
Cone and J. Deotis Roberts: An Intergenerational and Interracial Analysis

by

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Date: ___11/30/2021___

Approved:



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Dr. William Willimon, D.Min. Director

Thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of
the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Ministry
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ABSTRACT

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Abstract

The inability of black and white Christians to bear compelling and sustained witness to God's love and justice in American society is reminiscent of Churchill's sentiment concerning Russia: it is "a riddle, wrapped in a mystery, inside an enigma."¹ This thesis seeks to explore how black leaders can faithfully engage a younger generation of black Christians who have grown increasingly frustrated with the American Church, specifically the lack of robust commitment to the liberation of black voices and bodies in the struggle against white racism. Additionally, it attempts to challenge all Christian leaders to reimagine the important work of liberation and reconciliation with this perspective in view.

Based on engagement of mostly primary sources, this research delves into the remarkably relevant influences of James H. Cone and J. Deotis Roberts to the current intergenerational and interracial work before Christians in America today. I will argue that Cone's revolutionary insight has been proven true: black rage against oppression is a very human reaction against unfreedom. Rebellion, in various forms, is a natural response to sustained systemic and structural violence against an oppressed people. However, I will also show that Roberts' work offers a more inclusive and methodical approach to Christian unity in this perennial struggle. Cone's liberating insight, balanced with Robert's scriptural mandate of reconciliation between equals, still provides hope for solution-driven intergenerational and interracial dialogue and action among Christians.

¹ Winston Churchill, "The Russian Enigma," The Churchill Society, October 1, 1939 broadcast, <http://www.churchill-society-london.org.uk/RusnEnig.html>.

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INTRODUCTION

On June, 5 1966, James Meredith was shot in the back as he began his March Against Fear, a two hundred and twenty-mile trek through Mississippi to “challenge the all-pervasive overriding fear”¹ still experienced by blacks attempting to assert their voting rights in the state. Meredith, the first black to enroll at the University of Mississippi, knew firsthand the intimidation tactics used by white mobs to incite violence, anarchy, and fear as black citizens looked to engage their most basic democratic right. Yet, the historic Voting Rights Act of 1965, signed almost a year earlier, remained largely ignored by southern states and flaccidly enforced by the Federal Government. Hard won legislative achievements were often treated as perfunctory add-ons and obstructed by segregationists with power. As Martin Luther King, Jr. noted, “The recording of the law is in itself treated as the reality of the reform.”²

Leaders of several civil rights organizations pledged to continue Meredith’s march. King, head of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC), Floyd McKissick, national director of the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE), and Stokely Carmichael, newly-elected director of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) all committed their organizations to the march’s completion. However, at the planning meetings that followed, young activists from CORE and SNCC argued against King’s insistence on nonviolence, as well as the inclusion of whites as prerequisites for the march. According to King, one young activist shouted, “I’m not for that nonviolence

¹ “Meredith March,” SNCC Digital Gateway, June 1966, <https://snccdigital.org/events/meredith-march/>.

² Martin Luther King, Jr., *Where Do We Go from Here? Chaos or Community* (New York: Harper and Row, 1967), 34-35, 5.

stuff anymore.” Then, another agreed, “If one of these damn white Mississippi crackers touches me, I’m gonna knock the hell out of him.”³

A patient King tried to reason with the young leaders. He understood, more than they, how frustration with a racist and duplicitous establishment tempts one to paint all whites with the same broad brush. He reflects, “I guess I should not have been surprised . . . I should have been reminded that disappointment produces despair and despair produces bitterness, and that the one thing certain about bitterness is blindness. Bitterness has not the capacity to make the distinction between *some* and *all*.”⁴ After much discussion about the integrity of the movement, and the morality of interracial cooperation, the two organizations agreed to King’s terms. If SCLC was to remain involved, the march would be nonviolent and inclusive of anyone wanting to protest fear, racism, and injustice. The March Against Fear continued but not without strong infighting. There remained severe ideological differences between generations torn between singing “we shall overcome” and “we shall overrun.”⁵

Skepticism about the commitment of the Black Church, organized religion, and white allies in the fight against racism remain among younger generations of African Americans. Currently, there is a growing exodus of Millennials and members of Generation Z from churches all across America. According to Pew Research, generational differences have been a key factor in the growth of religious “Nones” as a share of the general population, and the same appears to be true in the black community. This is especially concerning since, as the bedrock of the black community in a racialized

³ Ibid., 25.

⁴ Ibid., 26.

⁵ Terms in quotations taken from the book, *We Shall Overcome to We shall Overrun*, by Hettie V. Williams (Landham: University Press of America, 2009).

America, the Black Church has always provided safe haven for youth and their families. However, about three in ten black Millennials (29%) are religiously unaffiliated. By comparison, far fewer black Gen Xers (16%), Baby Boomers (10%) and members of the Silent and Greatest generation (7%) are unaffiliated. The survey also shows that black men are more likely to be religiously unaffiliated than black women (22% vs. 14%).⁶ Many cited the Church's irrelevance regarding social issues as a major cause of their exodus. Lamentably, King's observation in 1963 of the religious community's reactionary mode as a "tail light" instead of a "head light," remains a cautionary tale in 2021.

James H. Cone and J. Deotis Roberts represent a dialogue between generations of black Christians trying to make sense of their faith in a country that was born and baptized in racist ideology and its accompanying institutionalization. Through an analysis of freedom and liberation in Cone's *Black Theology*, this thesis seeks to reimagine much of the frustration, rage, and even rebellion experienced in younger generations of black Christians as an expression of the *imago dei* and *missio dei* reacting against white racism in America. Cone says as much regarding the black response to the race riots of the 1960s: "The rebellion in the cities, far from being an expression of the inhumanity of blacks, is an affirmation of their being despite the ever-present possibility of death."⁷

As a young theologian and activist, Cone felt the angst and rage of his generation. While teaching at Philander College, he experienced the "contradictions" of his seminary

⁶ David Masci, Besheer Mohamed, and Gregory A. Smith, "Black Americans are More Likely than Overall Public to be Christian, Protestant," Pew Research Center, April 23, 2018, <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2018/04/23/black-americans-are-more-likely-than-overall-public-to-be-christian-protestant/>. Nones are defined as adults who describe their religious identity as atheist, agnostic or "nothing in particular."

⁷ James H. Cone, *Black Theology and Black Power* (New York: The Seabury Press, 1969), 7.

education and its irrelevance to the lives of black students looking to him for answers to quotidian assaults on their humanity. He wrote, “What could Karl Barth possibly mean for black students who had come from the cotton fields of Arkansas, Louisiana, and Mississippi, seeking to change the structure of their lives in a society that had defined black as nonbeing? . . . Those black students drove me back to the primary art forms of the black religious experience by refusing to accept a prefabricated theology from the lips of James Cone.”⁸ Here, Cone reflects on the internal strife, perhaps even hypocrisy, of teaching a theology handed to him that seemingly ignored the generational suffering experienced by students, mirror images of himself, who sought an explanation of God’s activity in their midst.

Known as the Father of Black Theology, Cone appealed to young militants who demanded change from white pretensions that peddled self-serving racism as “Christian faith.” Identifying with the frustrations of Stokely Carmichael and other young activists, Cone decried the ubiquity and entrenchment of white racism as “a part of the spirit of the age, the ethos of the culture, so embedded in the social, economic, and political structure that white society is incapable of knowing its destructive nature.”⁹ Additionally, he despaired that the custodians of American Christianity were also its abusers, the indifferent oppressors of their black “sisters” and “brothers.” Therefore, Cone set out like a wrecking ball seeking to demolish this demonic stronghold through the development of a Black Theology of liberation for oppressed people, lauded by some and criticized by others. Gayraud Wilmore called Cone’s Black Theology a welcome reprieve in “a tired, shop-worn intellectual enterprise called Systematic Theology.” He writes, “Cone sets

⁸ James H. Cone, *God of the Oppressed* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1975), 5.

⁹ Cone, *Black Theology and Black Power*, 40, 41.

forth what, in its implications for theology—particularly as it relates to American minorities—is the most radical and far-reaching theological program since the publication of Reinhold Niebuhr’s *Moral Man and Immoral Society* in 1932.”¹⁰ While, American philosopher and Yale professor, Paul L. Holmer, questioned the relevance of a theology dedicated solely to collective black (or any race) suffering.

It seems to me that there is a great deal of fumbling here, both because we simply do not know about a lot of intimate psychological matters, but also because blacks, too, are simply human beings. And human beings, whether this or that, or however socially treated or maltreated, are highly independent variables. We ought not to suppose, therefore, that everything said to be a problem for blacks has a general solution; the deepest issues of life are those we entertain by ourselves as individuals.¹¹

For young African American Christians who felt perpetually unseen and unheard, Cone called into the question the relevance and intellectual hegemony of the white, male, Western theological tradition to the black experience. According to Cone, “It could be that what Black radicals are rejecting about Christianity has nothing to do with Jesus and his gospel but is distortion of his person and work. Just maybe what they are calling for in human life is not only consistent with the gospel but represents its essence and that without which true Christianity ceases to be.”¹² Theologian Dwight Hopkins, former student of James H. Cone, remembers the reviving influence of Cone and the liberating movement of Black Theology during his own identity crisis as a young black Christian. He writes,

Cone redirected the entire course of religious thinking in the United States . . .
Before his publications, many in the African American community saw the black

¹⁰ Gayraud Wilmore, “Book Review of Black Theology of Liberation,” *Union Seminary Quarterly Review* 26, no. 2 (1971): 413-419.

¹¹ Paul L. Holmer, “Crisis in Rhetoric,” *Theological Education* 7, no. 3 (1971): 208-215.

¹² James Cone, “Black Power, Black Theology, and the Study of Theology and Ethics,” *Theological Education* 66, no. 3 (1970): 202-214.

church as irrelevant to black freedom. They perceived the religious thinking or theology of Christians as an opiate focused on heaven, while the white community enjoyed their heaven on earth. Because Malcolm X and the Nation of Islam spoke so clearly on this position, they had cut deeply into the membership and recruitment of black churches. But Cone offered a resounding “yes” – Christianity was completely compatible with black consciousness and black power . . . Consequently, his books and articles helped to bring an entire generation of African American youth and young adults back to the church.¹³

J. Deotis Roberts, a middle-aged theologian, professor, and former seminary president took on a more pastoral and philosophical role in the Christian fight against racism. He explains, “What I am seeking is a Christian theological approach to race relations that will lead us beyond a hypocritical tokenism to liberation as a genuine reconciliation between equals.”¹⁴ Roberts brings balance to Cone’s laser-like focus on the particularity of God’s activity in the oppressed community only. As such, their dialogue has great implications for black and white Christians who seek to bear witness of reconciliation in a divided America still beleaguered by the sins of racism and injustice.

Roberts, who Hopkins called the “theologian of balance,” works to address both the particular contextual needs of the black Christian community and the universal brotherhood of the body of Christ. Roberts appealed to a group of blacks who, like their younger counterparts, demanded revolution but sought to maintain the reconciliation mandate implicit in the Christian ethic (2 Cor 5:18-20). Joseph Washington said of this double allegiance, “It is imperative that black people think in terms of how in the midst of Black Power a contribution can be made to God without violating faith and freedom.”¹⁵ The believer, as an ambassador of Christ, a member of a royal priesthood,

¹³ Dwight Hopkins, *Heart and Head: Black Theology: Past, Present and Future* (New York: Palgrave, 2002), 15.

¹⁴ J. Deotis Roberts, *Liberation and Reconciliation* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1971), 28.

¹⁵ Joseph R. Jackson, Jr., “How Black is Black Religion,” in *Quest for a Black Theology*, ed. James J. Gardiner, SA and J. Deotis Roberts, Sr. (Philadelphia: Pilgrim Press, 1970), 22-43, 32.

and peculiar people, is to represent God's way of liberation and reconciliation, not that of Black Power. This led Roberts to challenge Cone's priorities and allegiance in the work of a purely Christian, not simply black, framework of theology. Indeed, in reading Cone's works, one sometimes finds it difficult to determine if Cone's starting point is Black Theology or Black Power. This is why Roberts asserts, "James Cone is on the fence between the Christian faith and the religion of Black Power. It will be necessary for Cone to decide presently where he will take his firm stand. The present writer takes his stand within the Christian theological circle."¹⁶

Roberts' challenge to Cone is not to imply that he disagreed with all, or even most, of Cone's theology. Roberts, too, understood the difficult work of attempting to deconstruct a mindset deeply entrenched in a racialized America. As such, he defers to Cone's more charismatic nature for "such a time as this." He writes of Cone,

He is a pioneer writing a revolutionary theology. A theologian has to become an evangelist or a flaming prophet to start a new theological movement. This is the reason why Luther rather than Erasmus started the Reformation. This is why Karl Barth rather than Emil Brunner fathered the theology of crisis. Reason alone will not do it. Reason has to be mixed with passion. In order for Black theology to come to birth, much underbrush had to be cleared away, demons had to be exorcised, critics had to be silenced.¹⁷

These early discussions surrounding Black Theology played out on a public stage, and some sought to pit the two theologians against one another. Rufus Burrow Jr. referred to Roberts as "Cone's greatest nemesis in black theological circles,"¹⁸ while some saw a more balanced, and necessary relationship between the two. Peter Paris observed, "J. Deotis Roberts sets to exercise an appreciative, yet oppositional voice to Cone's thought

¹⁶ Roberts, *Liberation and Reconciliation*, 5.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Rufus Burrow, *James H. Cone and Black Liberation Theology* (Jefferson: McFarland, 1994), 1.

by demonstrating the need for a theology of reconciliation as a necessary complement to a theology of liberation.”¹⁹ The two enjoyed great respect for one another. The realities of age, life experiences, and ultimately, differing theological mandates influenced their perspectives. Roberts said of Cone, “In a real sense, he is the right age, at the right time, in the right place . . . his role is demolition . . . The task before us is to move from demolition to theological construction.”²⁰ Cone wrote appreciatively of Roberts, “All scholars engaged in studies of black theology and black religion are indebted to the major contributions of J. Deotis Roberts. He has been a friend, colleague, and critic of my perspective on black theology.”²¹

The Problem

The inability of black and white Christians to bear compelling and sustained witness to God’s love and justice in American society is reminiscent of Churchill’s quandary concerning Russia: it is “a riddle, wrapped in a mystery, inside an enigma.”²² This thesis seeks to explore the question presented early in this introduction: How do black Christian leaders faithfully engage a younger generation of black Christians who have grown increasingly frustrated with the American Church, specifically, the lack of robust commitment to the liberation of black voices and bodies in the struggle against white racism? Additionally, how do Christian leaders engage and include all Christians in the important work of liberation and reconciliation?

¹⁹ Peter J. Paris, “The Ethics of African American Religious Scholarship,” *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* LXIV, no. 3 (1996): 483-497.

²⁰ Roberts, “Black Liberation Theism,” *The Journal of Religious Thought* 33, no. 1 (1976): 25-35.

²¹ James Cone, “Martin, Malcolm, and Black Theology,” in *The Quest for Liberation and Reconciliation: Essays in Honor of J. Deotis Roberts* ed. Michael Battle (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2005), 53-62, 53.

²² Winston Churchill, “The Russian Enigma,” The Churchill Society, October 1, 1939 broadcast, <http://www.churchill-society-london.org.uk/RusnEnig.html>.

I believe the Christian faith provides the only hope of liberation and reconciliation among black and white Christians in America. The statement from the National Committee of Black Churchmen (NCBC) in 1966 reaffirms this aspiration, “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.”²³

This thesis will delve into the ways in which Cone and Roberts approached this much needed dialogue in ways remarkably relevant to the current intergenerational and interracial work before black and white Christians. Both sought to understand what being black and Christian means in America. Cone writes, “How shall we behave with a lifestyle that is both Christian and black? That is a difficult question . . .”²⁴ Concerning the task of the black theologian, Roberts writes, “He must seek to be faithful to the believing community, as a theologian. But he is required, at the same time, to give a helpful interpretation of the Christian faith to those who honestly seek to be their true black selves and Christian at the same time.”²⁵ I will argue that Cone’s revolutionary insight has been proven true: black rage against oppression is a very human reaction against unfreedom. Rebellion, in various forms, is a natural response to sustained systemic and structural violence against an oppressed people. However, I will also show that Roberts’ work offers a more inclusive approach against entrenched racism. Cone’s

²³ “Statement by the National Committee of Black Churchmen, June 13, 1969,” in *Black Theology: A Documentary History, 1966—1979*, ed. James H. Cone and Gayraud S. Wilmore (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1979), 101.

²⁴ Cone, *God of the Oppressed*, 205.

²⁵ Roberts, *Liberation and Reconciliation*, 14.

insight, balanced with Robert's scriptural mandate of reconciliation between equals, provides hope for solution-driven intergenerational dialogue for black Christian leaders and youth disenchanted with American Christianity. The acknowledgment of black rebellion (Cone) coupled with inclusive Christian action against racism (Roberts) offer a reimagined perspective in engaging "Nones" and "Dones" in the work and integrity of the Church.

Chapter one will examine Cone's intersections of freedom, liberation, and the *imago dei* in the black Christian experience. How these features guide the oppressed in the realization of God's intended freedom for humanity, particularly against white racism and white Christianity, will be the chapter's focus. Cone's dependence on the vast resources of neo-orthodoxy will be mined in order to ground claims of liberation as God's activity in the particularity of the oppressed community, with a trajectory toward the liberation of all humanity.

Chapter two seeks to discover how the *imago dei* leads organically to the *missio dei* in Cone's analysis. While many black Christians identify with Cone's indignation against racism and social injustice, many also seek to embody a faithful response to the mandate of Christian ambassadorship in the ministry of reconciliation (2 Cor 5:17-21). Liberation, as freedom *for others*, will be explored in the trajectory toward the actualization of reconciliation as the new creation. As such, reconciliation, as the separate and collaborative work of black and white Christians will be compared within the theological frameworks of Cone and Roberts.

Finally, chapter three will provide my analysis of Cone and Roberts in order to explore reconciliation as a liminal space in shaping black/white/other Christian

relationships. Reconciliation, vertical and horizontal, is an accomplished fact gifted (positionally) to humanity, as a result of the life, crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Yet, the practical living out and leaning into God's reconciled creation demands radical love and obedience. Therefore, contemporary approaches will be explored as means for actualizing liberation and reconciliation as God's "new creation." The Holy Spirit guides us into this risk-filled reality of the "already and not yet." I submit that Paul's admonition to the Church at Corinth, "Be ye reconciled," should be interpreted as an exhortation to live into the *new* reality in Christ, as *new* creatures in the *new* creation. Liberation and reconciliation, as understood in Cone and Roberts, provide helpful perspectives in the pursuit of transformative intergenerational and interracial dialogue toward this end.

CHAPTER 1

Liberation as the Imago Dei – A Divine Expression of Human Freedom

“Liberation is what God does to effect reconciliation, and without the former the latter is impossible.”¹

James H. Cone’s conception of freedom and liberation provide an empathic and elucidating lens into resurfacing black mistrust of Christianity in a divided America, particularly among young black Christians. This chapter will explore these twin concepts as constitutive of the *imago dei* and attempt to furnish a framework, aided by Cone’s reliance on the theology of neo-orthodoxy, for understanding this historical skepticism. Additionally, the chapter will explore how liberation, in the black experience, can be understood, ultimately, as the struggle of the oppressed to reimagine and assert one’s true freedom and humanity *for* God. As such, God’s activity of liberation, as articulated in the US context of the 1960s and 70s, begins in the particularity of the oppressed black community and progresses toward universal realization for all humanity (to be explored in chapter 2). J. Deotis Roberts will be cited as complimentary to Cone’s admittedly more “one-sided” focus.² Roberts seeks to articulate a vision of liberation and reconciliation that holds the two in necessary tension. He writes to “tired white liberals” and “angry black separatists,” “It is my view that liberation and reconciliation must be considered at the same time and in relation to each other.”³

¹ Cone, *Black Theology of Liberation* (New York: J.B. Lippincott Company, 1969), 229.

² Cone admits that his work is “intentionally one-sided” and that giving a “balanced interpretation of black religion” is not his intent. Instead, he seeks to define theology in light of God’s presence in the black experience, which had been ignored in white Christianity. Cone describes his attitude as that of “an angry black man disgusted with the oppression of Black people in America and the scholarly demand to be ‘objective’ about it.” See Cone, *Black Theology and Black Power*, 2.

³ J. Deotis Roberts, *Liberation and Reconciliation*, 1.

Contemporary Illustration

As Bree Newsome scaled the thirty-foot flagpole on the grounds of the South Carolina State Capitol, she eyed the waving emblem that long provoked disparate sentiments of heritage and humiliation. Ten days earlier, on June 17, 2015, a young, white supremacist, spurred on partly by his allegiance to the ideology of the Confederate flag, murdered nine black worshippers who welcomed him into Emmanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church in downtown Charleston. Determined to morally avenge the loss of these innocent lives, Newsome inched her way up the flagpole as she recited Psalm 27, “The Lord is the light of my salvation, whom shall I fear? The Lord is the stronghold of my life--of whom shall I be afraid?” When capitol police ordered her to descend, an undeterred Newsome channeled the defiance of young David before the soon-to-be-conquered Philistine, “You come against me with hatred, violence, and oppression; I come against you in the name of the Lord.”

An hour after successfully removing the flag, Newsome was handcuffed and led to a waiting police car. As she passed the throng of reporters, a fusillade of questions ensued concerning the nature of her protest. Newsome seized the moment and answered unapologetically, “I removed the flag not only in defiance of those who enslaved my ancestors in the southern United States, but also in defiance of the oppression that continues against black people globally in 2015. . . We can’t continue like this another day. It’s time for a new chapter where we are sincere about dismantling white supremacy and building toward true racial justice and equality . . .” And just in case her intentions were not clear, Newsome added, “I did it because I am *free!*”⁴

⁴ Caroline Bankoff, “Who Is Bree Newsome, the Woman Who Took Down South Carolina’s Confederate Flag?,” *New York Magazine*, June 29, 2015, <https://nymag.com/intelligencer/2015/06/who-is-bree->

Bree Newsome's protest against a menacing, state-sanctioned infringement of her *freedom*, and that of many others, is the embodiment of *liberation* in James Cone's Black Theology. Cone writes, "It is the mind and body in motion, responding to the passion and rhythm of divine revelation, and affirming that no chain shall hold my humanity down."⁵ In America, the chains that have historically held black "humanity down" have been tethered to institutional and systemic racism. Therefore, the nemesis to liberation, in Cone, is the structure of American white supremacy, and particularly that which disguises itself as white "Christianity." Against such dehumanizing powers of the church and state, Cone and black liberation theologians sought to create tension, discourse, and revolutionary action grounded in God's work of retrieving lost and stolen humanity.

Freedom, Liberation, and the Imago dei

Freedom and liberation have an inseparable and often interchangeable relationship, in Cone. For instance, liberation is a "divine gift of freedom," "the fight for freedom," and, "the project of freedom." Most often, however, liberation becomes the activity through which freedom, in response to God's work through Jesus, frees itself. This is why Cone insists, "Liberation is nothing but putting into practice the reality of human freedom."⁶ Similarly, both are grounded in the *imago dei* and prove critical in establishing Cone's revolutionary stance on black liberation as the revelation of the Gospel of Jesus Christ, "The biblical God is the God whose salvation is liberation."⁷ Freedom and liberation,

newsome-confederate-flag.html. The Confederate flag was officially removed from the statehouse grounds on July 10, 2015 and taken to the Confederate Relic Room and Military Museum, just blocks from the capitol in Columbia, South Carolina.

⁵ James H. Cone, *God of the Oppressed*, 152.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 164.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 141.

inherent in the *imago dei*, animate the human procession toward one's true freedom and true humanity--the new creation.

"The being of man as *freedom*," according to Cone, "is expressed in the Bible in terms of the *image of God*."⁸ Though rationality and freedom are long regarded as the constituents of the *imago dei*, Cone criticizes the historical failure of both European and American Christianity to give proper attention to existential freedom, the ability for humanity to determine freedom in relation to existence for God. Therefore, Cone insists, "Freedom is not a rational decision about possible alternatives; it is a participation of the whole man in the liberation struggle."⁹ He posits a definition inclusive of the plight of the oppressed,

The image of God refers to the way in which God intends for man to live in the world. The image of God is thus more than rationality, more than what so-called neo-orthodox theologians call divine-human encounter. In a world in which men are oppressed, the image is man in rebellion against structures of oppression. It is man involved in the liberation struggle against the forces of humanity.¹⁰

A careful review of Cone's corpus reveals that such bold claims regarding freedom, liberation, and the *imago dei* are largely unintelligible apart from the theological presuppositions of the neo-orthodox theologians, particularly Karl Barth and the so-called "Barthian school." Such dependence on the Swiss is one reason why J. Deotis Roberts labeled Cone "too Barthian."

Cone admits, "In the history of theology, the image of God has been frequently identified with the human capacity to reason. By contrast, theologians since Karl Barth, taking their

⁸ Cone, *Black Liberation of Theology*, 164.

⁹ Cone, *Black Theology of Liberation*, 168.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 170.

cue from the Reformation, have recognized the relational view of the image of God.”¹¹ Disavowing the substantive view as a relic of medieval scholasticism, neo-orthodox theologians rejected Aquinas’ *analogia entis* for Bonhoeffer’s *analogia relationis*. Barth even deemed the Thomistic analogy the “invention of the Anti-Christ.” For Emil Brunner, any presumption of the image as a self-existing substance opens the “gate by which a pantheistic or an idealistic deification of man can enter.”¹² Such a view tempts humans to believe that they possess a “spark” of divinity that makes them like God, an over-spiritualization which often leads to an individualism antithetical to God’s intended purpose and relation for all humanity. Therefore, a reliance on Barth’s definition of divine freedom will serve as the base from which Cone’s analysis of freedom, and subsequently, liberation is derived. Additionally, Bonhoeffer’s and Brunner’s scholarship on the relational view of the imago dei will help map out these intersections, so prevalent in Cone’s Black Theology.

Divine Freedom

*“Where else can we learn that freedom exists and what it is except in confrontation with God’s own freedom offered to us as the source and measure of all freedom?”*¹³

“God’s being as freedom,” writes Cone, “affirms the divine will *to be* in the divine-self . . . it is the affirmation of God’s self-existence and complete transcendence over creaturely existence.”¹⁴ In a nation rife with historical oppression against its black

¹¹ Cone, *God of the Oppressed*, 145. Cone is considered an expert on the theology of the Swiss-German theologian Karl Barth. Cone’s study of Barth led to his 1965 doctoral dissertation, “The Doctrine of Man in the Theology of Karl Barth,” where he critically examined Barth’s *Epistle to the Romans* and *Church Dogmatics*.

¹² Emil Brunner, *The Christian Doctrine of Creation and Redemption, Dogmatics*, Vol. II, trans. Olive Wyon (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1950), 60.

¹³ Karl Barth, *The Humanity of God* (Richmond: John Knox Press, 1960), 71.

¹⁴ James Cone, “Freedom, History, and Hope,” *The Journal of Interdenominational Theological Center* 1, no. 1 (1973): 55-64.

citizens, it is imperative for Cone to assert the incontrovertible and unqualified freedom of God. Analogous to God's being as "wholly other," divine freedom is beyond human appropriation and, especially in Cone, usurpation. A similar preeminence is conveyed in Barth's declaration, "God's freedom is His very own . . . He is the source and measure of all freedom, insofar as He is the Lord, choosing and determining Himself first of all."¹⁵ The God of freedom must be distinguished from the God of slavery, Jim Crow, historical police brutality, mass incarceration, and all forms of black oppression, the deity of political and economic self-interests that reigns falsely in America and white Christianity. That these entities become conflated in ways often indistinguishable (religious nationalism) is beyond the scope of this work and remains an exploration for another time. Sufficient for now, however, is Cone's insistence that both attempt to arrogate to themselves the lordship that belongs to God alone.

Most egregious, for Cone, is the white church's negligence and complicity in the dehumanization of black bodies. He writes, "How people could claim to be Christian theologians in twentieth-century America and not engage this country's original sin--racism--truly astounds me."¹⁶ Though Cone and Roberts agree on the disbursement of blame for white racism, Roberts acknowledges the contributions of liberation theologians such as Frederick Herzog and Rosemary Ruether as "examples of white theologians who have the ability to apply the concept of liberation to a number of causes." He writes,

¹⁵ Barth, *Humanity of God*, 69.

¹⁶ Cone, *Black Theology of Liberation*, 220. Through his study of the sociologists of knowledge (Werner Stark, Karl Mannheim, Peter Berger, and Thomas Luckmann), a later Cone also attributes white indifference to limitations of an "axiological grid" or "prior judgement" of white theologians due to "antecedently formed systems of valuations," through which they view and engage the world. Such ignorance, therefore, limits their theology to abstractions unrelated to the material needs of the poor, black and oppressed. See *God of the Oppressed*, chapter 3. See also Werner Starks, *The Sociology of Knowledge: An Essay in Aid of a Deeper Understanding of the History of Ideas* (London: Routledge and Keegan Paul, 1958), 17-18.

“Herzog’s summons to church folk to identify with the agony of ‘the wretched of the earth’ and to ‘become black’ is very helpful.¹⁷ Roberts’ hesitancy to paint all white theologians with a broad brush of apathy proved (and still proves) helpful in maintaining healthy intercommunication between black and white Christians. Indeed, Roberts adds, “While Cone confesses an indifference toward whites, I care.”¹⁸

Roberts’ more inclusive sentiments do not suggest, however, that he shuns the imperative to disentangle racist forms of Christianity from the true Christian faith. He acknowledges, “Racism is institutionalized not only in the general society but in the church, as well . . . Exponents of the Christian creed, if they are to overcome this challenge, must isolate the Christian faith from racist distortions. The history of the manner in which Christianity has been presented, misused, and applied in the area of race, at home and abroad, is a gigantic hoax.”¹⁹ That Christianity has been used historically to alienate and manipulate blacks for the social, political and economic interests of the white status quo is a truth that has to be acknowledged. The brutalities of colonial conquest, under the guise of Christianity, and perpetual racial indignities have rendered the white Christian God problematic for many blacks. Therefore, Roberts adds, “It is important that God be transcendent, that the divine be the ultimate standard of truth, holiness, love, goodness, and wisdom. A God relative in these superb moral attributes would be a matter of indifference to a people victimized by hypocritical ‘pale copies’ of these attributes among so-called white Christians and churchgoers.”²⁰ Roberts’ point is

¹⁷ J. Deotis Roberts, *A Black Political Theology* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1974), 205. For a more complete list of twentieth century white theologians who contributed significantly to scholarship on theological ethics regarding race, see J. Deotis Roberts, “Black Theological Ethics: A Bibliographic Essay,” *The Journal of Religious Education* 3, no.1 (1975): 69-109.

¹⁸ Roberts, *Liberation and Reconciliation*, 5.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 1, 94.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 43.

that God's character and might must be unquestionably absolute and anti-racist in a racist society; there is no room for ambiguity in declaring God's sovereignty. Like Cone, he insists that God's perfect power, and love are to be wholly distinguished from manipulations inherent in racist deformities of Christianity.

In a poignant reminder of black wariness, akin to the caution of both Roberts and Cone, Vincent Harding writes of the first and, for many blacks, lasting impression of the deity of white Christianity. Such words convey deep-rooted distrust, seared long ago in the psyche of a kidnapped people forced upon unwelcoming and dehumanizing shores. Harding writes of this "deep ambivalence,"

This ambivalence is not new. It was ours from the beginning. For we first met the American Christ on slave ships. We heard his name sung in hymns of praise while we died in our thousands, chained in stinking holds beneath the decks, locked in with terror and disease and sad memories of our families and homes. When we leaped from the decks to be seized by sharks we saw his name carved on the ship's solid sides. When our women were raped in the cabins they must have noticed the great and holy books on the shelves. Our introduction to this Christ was not propitious. And the horrors continued on America's soil. So, all through the nation's history many black men have rejected this Christ—indeed the miracle is that so many accepted him.²¹

Because Roberts and Cone understood the importance of religion to the early African and black experience, condemning faith in God was never an option. With little luxury to believe otherwise, most blacks have always accepted the reality of God and God's salvific work realized through Jesus. Though scholarship shows the exact beginnings of black Christianity as varied and complex, it is axiomatic that religion is native to black people. Therefore, even amid dehumanizing conditions in America, Cone could still insist, "The reality of God is presupposed in black theology."²² Roberts agrees,

²¹ Vincent Harding, "Black Power and the American Christ," in *The Black Power Revolt, A Collection of Essays*, ed. Floyd Barbour (Boston: Porter Sargent Publisher, 1968), 85-93, 86.

²² Cone, *Black Liberation Theology*, 55.

If there are no atheists in foxholes, it may likewise be said that few blacks have been afforded the luxury of disbelieving in the divine existence. The existence of God does not, therefore, need to be established through the several ‘proofs,’ and a Black Theology may begin with a primary faith that God is. The problem of God, for blacks, has more to do with the divine character.²³

Therefore, the Christian understanding of God, in fairness to blacks, must address almost four centuries of black oppression in a “Christian” America.

In a culture of slavery and violence against indigenous people in American history, the political and economic interests of white Christians became determining factors in evangelism. Slave masters could not withstand the economic toll of freedom. Therefore, in many instances, white Christianity preached that slavery was compatible with the gospel of Jesus Christ; such became the modus operandi of many missionaries, as well. For instance, in 1701, the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel in Foreign Parts (SPG) was founded to spread Christianity in the English colonies. History suggests, however, that the motivations of SPG were more bifurcated and less noble than purely sharing the “liberating” gospel of Jesus Christ. Historian Jemar Tisby writes in *The Color of Compromise*, “While many officials had an interest in sharing the gospel with non-Europeans, they were not interested in sharing power or promoting equality. Instead, the SPG, like many European missionary endeavors in North America, preached a message that said Christianity could save one’s soul but not break one’s chains.”²⁴

²³ Roberts, *Liberation and Reconciliation*, 4. Additionally, Pew Research reports that black belief in God holds steady, “Nine-in-ten Black “Nones” [21% of Black US adults]– people who describe their religious identity as atheist, agnostic or “nothing in particular” – believe in God or another higher power, according to the survey. Among religiously affiliated Black Americans – those who adhere to Christian and non-Christian faiths – 99% believe in God.” <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2021/03/17/nine-in-ten-black-nones-believe-in-god-but-fewer-pray-or-attend-services/>

²⁴ Jemar Tisby, *The Color of Compromise* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Reflective, 2019), 38. For further reading on the distortion of American religion (particularly southern) in support of slavery and racism, see H. Shelton Smith, *In His Image, But . . . Racism in Southern Religion, 1780-1910* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1972).

Slave holders turned to Scripture to prove that slavery was the will of God. Pro-slavery ideologues defended slavery with the alleged Hamitic curse (Gen 9:25) and other faulty exegesis meant to invoke black fealty. Roberts insists, “Paul’s conservatism and legal doctrines aided in establishing the permanent split between spiritual and physical liberation from which American Christianity has not recovered.”²⁵ In *Jesus and the Disinherited*, Howard Thurman shares a childhood memory of his grandmother’s painful aversion to the Pauline epistles because of such tactics. As an illiterate ex-slave, she often called on young Howard to read long passages from the Bible. Thurman writes,

With a feeling of great temerity, I asked her one day why it was that she would not let me read any of the Pauline letters. What she told me I shall never forget. ‘During the days of slavery, the master’s minister would occasionally hold services for the slaves. Old man McGhee was so mean that he would not let a Negro minister preach to his slaves. Always, the white minister used as his text something from Paul. At least three or four times a year he used as a text: ‘Slaves be obedient to those who are your masters . . . as unto Christ.’ Then he would go on to show how it was God’s will that we were slaves, and how, if we were good and happy slaves, God would bless us. I promised my Maker that if I ever learned to read and if freedom ever came, I would not read that part of the Bible.’²⁶

These are the memories that fueled anti-“Christian” animus among the black militants and intelligentsia of Cone’s day. These stories, as well as their own personal experiences of racism in America, didn’t square well with the image of an omnipotent God who was no “respector of persons.” Such seeming contradictions drove young Christians to the black-affirming, justice-seeking, anti-white rhetoric of Malcolm X,

²⁵ Roberts, “Black Liberation Theism,” *The Journal of Religious Thought* 33, no. 1 (1976): 25-35. This author takes exception to Roberts’ characterization of Paul’s teachings as “conservatism and legal doctrines” that enabled white oppressors. Instead, it is believed that the subjective use of Paul’s teachings (with intentional disregard for contextual nuance) led oppressors to neglect the more consistent, though complex, liberating theme in the apostle’s corpus. In Cone, the language of master and slave can refer only ultimately to God’s relationship with all humanity; God, unlike humanity, is no respector of persons (James 2:1).

²⁶ Howard Thurman, *Jesus and the Disinherited* (Richmond, VA: Friends United Press, 1984), 30-31.

Stokely Carmichael, the Black Panthers, and other similar grassroots organizations. Many advocates of Black Power deemed the American Church either apathetic (black) or racist (white). Similar stories confront the consciences of young black Christians, even today; stories that point to the depths of white racism that persist (most covertly) in structures of policing, housing, healthcare, and religious institutions.

Like many during the pandemic, my twenty-four-year-old son binged on a brain-numbing amount of Netflix. Specifically, a series called *Watchmen* piqued his interest. Though a fictionalized mini-series based on a graphic novel of the same name, the first episode opened with the true story of the Tulsa Race Massacre. In 1921, over 300 black men, women, and children were murdered by a white mob in the thriving Greenwood District of Tulsa, Oklahoma known as Black Wall Street. With great solemnity, my son phoned after viewing the episode and asked, “Why didn’t I know anything about the massacre in Tulsa?” He persisted, “Why didn’t I learn about this in school? In church? Anywhere?” Truth is, I, too, was only barely familiar with the hundred-year-old travesty. Yet, a mini-series about masked, superhero vigilantes affirmed a nagging distrust that my Christian, college-educated, Gen Zer intuitively held for his country. And though theories abound about the cause of the massacre, the history of oppression in America all but guarantees that the death toll in Tulsa resulted from racist indignation over black success. That many of the perpetrators in the massacre were “good, Christian people” is, too, all but assured.

When narratives such as these are ignored or minimized by contemporary Christian dialogue, black skepticism and cynicism become legitimated in black/white relationships. This observation is not made to litigate the highly contentious issue of

Critical Race Theory; it's simply an acknowledgement of how neglected kindling, overtime, stokes the fires of black distrust of white Christianity in America. Archbishop Tutu's warning about the avoidance of truth-telling as an essential ingredient for national healing is instructive, "Unless we look the beast in the eye, we find it has an uncanny habit of returning to hold us hostage."²⁷ Chapter 3 will argue that the Holy Spirit provides resources to help black and white Christians reimagine a condemning past into a more hopeful future.

Cone understood and agreed with many of the arguments of the black nationalists; indeed, religion unrelated to black liberation was grossly irrelevant. Alas, this was precisely Cone's point! However, he could not underwrite their constant derision of the black church, the institution that mothered the faith of his fathers. Cone writes, "How could I be a member of nationalist groups that insultingly rejected the black Church and biblical Christianity, both of which had been so important in my early life in Bearden? Rejecting the black church and the Bible would have been like rejecting my mother and my father, and I could not do that."²⁸ Instead, Cone was able to take a position that, for him, united the Christianity of Martin King, Jr., with the black nationalism of Malcolm X in ways that sought to show that "justice and blackness are essential ingredients in the identity of the Christian faith for African-Americans."²⁹

With such inspiration, Cone sought to make sense of the impact of divine freedom in the historic and quotidian travails of black Americans. If divine freedom is all powerful, and

²⁷ Desmond Tutu, *No Future Without Forgiveness* (New York: Doubleday, 1999), 28.

²⁸ James H. Cone, *My Soul Looks Back* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1982), 56.

²⁹ James H. Cone, *Malcolm and Martin, A Dream or a Nightmare in America* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1991), x.

uniquely God's, Cone must clarify the allegiance and activity of said freedom, particularly its connection to black humanization in America.

Divine Freedom for us

“The human freedom,” Cone insists, “to hope for a new heaven and a new earth is grounded in God's freedom to be *for us* in history, both now and in the future.”³⁰

Therefore, the human desire, hope, and, consequential, inner thrust for freedom is inseparable from the One who is absolute freedom. Hope is freedom's transcendence, the “soul's recognition that what is ain't supposed to be.”³¹ The black presence in America has been chock-full of injustices that point to what “ain't supposed to be.” Human bondage (emotional, physical, and otherwise) “ain't supposed to be”; human beings forced to live in “rat infested ghettos,” drink lead-poisoned water, and live in constant fear of law enforcement sworn to “protect and serve,” “ain't supposed to be.” Therefore, the human hope to anticipate and actualize existence beyond the injustices of *what is* is grounded in God's advocacy for human creativity and flourishing, *the way it is supposed to be*. Black hope, and consequently, black frustration and anger at the way things are stem from the assurance that God seeks the liberation of the oppressed. This is why Cone insists, “The image of God refers to the way in which God intends for man to live in the world.”³²

As an expression of God's “unlimited possibility,” “formal majesty,” and “omnipotence,” divine freedom is also, according to Karl Barth, “the sovereign grace wherein God chooses to commit Himself to man. Thereby, God is Lord as man's God . . .

³⁰ Cone, “Freedom, History, and Hope,” 55.

³¹ Ibid.

³² Cone, *Black Theology of Liberation*, 164

God's own freedom must be recognized as freedom to be a partisan for man."³³ Barth refers to God's historical dealings with man as prime evidence of such partisanship. It must be clarified, however, that "partisanship" here is not meant to convey a petty, juvenescent playing of favorites. Instead, God is partial to "man" becoming what God intended in the creation of "man"--freedom and humanity. For Cone, God's freedom *for us* is revealed most profoundly in the Exodus and Resurrection events, Moltmann's "two creative symbols of freedom," which provide deliverance "in history" and "from history," respectively."³⁴ This is the reason for Cone's assertion that, "Divine freedom expresses God's will to be in relation to his creatures in the context of their striving to fulfill their humanity. That is, he *is free for us*."³⁵ Since God has created us in freedom, God insists on aiding His creation in actualizing freedom.

As a partisan for "man," God chooses sides. In the Exodus, an oppressed Israel cries out to Yahweh, who, with divine prerogative, liberates her from the false gods of Egypt. Here, the unmistakable sign of God's "partisanship" for the "oppressed" is seen in God's solidarity with the plight of Israel, and against that of the cruel and tyrannical Egyptians. It is not the might of Pharaoh with which God chooses to align Godself; instead, the "little ones" are deemed as God's "treasured possession" (Deut 7:6). Indeed, God rejects and even kills the oppressor in defense of the oppressed--"You have seen what I did to the Egyptians and how I carried you on eagles' wings and brought you to myself. Now, therefore, if you obey my voice and keep my covenant, you shall be my own possession among people. For all the earth is mine, and you shall be to me a

³³ Barth, *Humanity of God*, 70.

³⁴ Jurgen Moltmann, *Religion, Revolution and the Future*, trans. by M. Douglas Meeks (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1969), 67.

³⁵ Cone, "*Freedom, History, and Hope*," 55.

kingdom of priests and a holy nation” (Exod 19:4). As divine freedom for us, God is the particular God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob who acknowledges and relieves the concrete suffering of oppressed Israel and, ultimately, the oppressed everywhere. Robert McAfee Brown adds, “The bias is clear beyond any doubt. God sides with the oppressed. The oppressors are on the wrong side. It is as clear as that. And as disturbing as that.”³⁶

Throughout the black experience in America, the Exodus motif has long been a source of spiritual and political inspiration. For slaves and black Christians, John Evans suggests, “The Exodus experience was the archetypal myth that, while drawn from Scripture, became the lens through which the Bible was read.”³⁷ Cone finds the deepest resonance of these associations in the spirituals and blues. Here, biblical passages that point to God’s deliverance from oppression expose the grave contradictions inherent in the slave masters’ religion. Cone insists, “Black people sang about Joshua and the battle of Jericho, Moses leading the Israelites from bondage, Daniel in the lion’s den, and the Hebrew children in the fiery furnace. Themes of black confidence in God’s liberation from oppression can be heard in slave spirituals of deliverance.”³⁸ Passages such as these allowed Thurman’s grandmother and other slaves and oppressed blacks to trust the character of God over the gross misrepresentations of their oppressors. Throughout the fight for freedom in America, black voices can be heard insisting on the partiality of God for the oppressed. One hears such certainty in King’s appeal to courageous blacks early in the Montgomery bus boycott, “And we are not wrong, we are not wrong in what we

³⁶ Robert McAfee Brown as quoted in Alan Aubrey Boesak, *Farewell to Innocence: A Socio-Ethical Study on Black Theology and Black Power* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1977), 9.

³⁷ Evans, *We have Been Believers: An African American Systematic Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1992), 40.

³⁸ James Cone, *The Spirituals and the Blues: An Interpretation* (New York: Seabury Press, 1972), 35.

are doing. If we are wrong, the Supreme Court of this nation is wrong. If we are wrong, the Constitution of the United States is wrong. If we are wrong, God Almighty is wrong .

”³⁹

Depending on the time and context, black freedom in America has been meagerly rationed based on the nature of the exigency. C. Eric Lincoln and Lawrence H. Mamiya write, “During slavery, it [freedom] meant release from bondage; after emancipation, it meant the right to be educated, to be employed, to move about freely from place to place. In the twentieth century, freedom means social, political, and economic justice.”⁴⁰ Incredulously, in twenty-first century America, freedom, for many blacks, still awaits its fullest realization. Black men are still incarcerated at disproportionate rates and are 2.5 times more likely to be killed by police than white men. Historical educational achievement gaps persist between the races, which, consequently, lead to higher unemployment rates for blacks. According to the U. S. Bureau and Labor statistics, black Americans are almost twice as likely as white Americans to lack health insurance, making it difficult to receive proper care.⁴¹ As a result, black women die in childbirth four times more often than white women and communities of black and brown residents are currently ravaged by growing cases and deaths from COVID-19. For a people who make up only 13% of America’s population, the historical trauma of injustice and systemic racism continues to take a dangerous disproportionate toll. The cries of Freedom

³⁹ Martin Luther King, Jr., “MIA Mass Meeting at Holt Street Baptist Church,” December 5, 1955, <https://kinginstitute.stanford.edu/king-papers/documents/mia-mass-meeting-holt-street-baptist-church>.

⁴⁰ C. Eric Lincoln and Lawrence H. Mamiya, *The Black Church in the African American Experience* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1990), 4.

⁴¹ Mabinty Quarshie, N’dea Yancey-Bragg, Anne Godlasky, Jim Sargent and Veronica Bravo, “12 charts show how racial disparities persist across wealth, health, education and beyond,” USA Today, June 18, 2020, <https://www.usatoday.com/in-depth/news/2020/06/18/12-charts-racial-disparities-persist-across-wealth-health-and-beyond/3201129001/>.

Now! Black Power! and, most recently, Black Lives Matter! are all irresistible expressions of demands for long denied freedom and respect for humanity. Simply put, freedom, inherent in the *imago dei*, is still not the automatic birthright for black Americans. These, too, are the very issues which make black freedom a political, as well as a spiritual pursuit. The moniker of Christianity alone has never been enough to make the oppressor empathize with the oppressed to the point of making his plight his own. In this way, white Christianity has failed to “love thy neighbor as thyself.”

Divine Liberation From History

In the Incarnation and Resurrection, Cone writes, “Jesus was born like the poor, was baptized with them, lived among them, and died for them. In Jesus Christ, God disclosed his divine Person so that they might have a new future, different from their past and present miseries.”⁴² As in the Exodus event, God intervenes again in a decidedly partisan way. Cone continues, “In Jesus, God entered history and affirmed the condition of the oppressed as his own existence, thereby making clear that poverty and sickness contradict the divine intentions for humanity.”⁴³ The crucifixion was God suffering with oppressed humanity in order that, in the resurrection, the oppressed could obtain liberation for the divine struggle against oppression. Freedom from every type of oppression is the will of God for the oppressed of the earth. Most significantly, liberation is the definition of the way of being truly human and free in the world, as revealed in Jesus’s life and ministry. As the “firstborn of creation” and the “image of the invisible God,” Jesus reveals our true identity to us. Cone’s thesis is that God’s consistent stand and victory against oppression,

⁴² Cone, “Freedom, History, and Hope,” 60.

⁴³ Cone, *God of the Oppressed*, 230.

culminating in Jesus, is affirmation that all people have a common humanity found in freedom.

Like Bonhoeffer, Cone does not dilly-dally long in the world of the “lost beginning” to speculate about the freedom of humanity before the divine-human encounter; freedom is understood through a thoroughly Christo-centric lens. He agrees with Bonhoeffer, who writes, “Only in the middle, as those who live from Christ, do we know of the beginning.”⁴⁴ Neither does Cone elaborate on any sharp line of demarcation between Old and New Testament understandings of freedom; that one has moral agency as a human being is assumed. Barth and Brunner speak limitedly about “formal,” “natural,” and “material freedom,” but focus mainly on “Christian freedom.” This is because, according to Barth, “Freedom is made known to us by God as Christian freedom alone.”⁴⁵ Therefore, Cone’s understanding of freedom and liberation is seen through the lens of the new creation, the reimagined humanity realized in the divine-human encounter. Cone’s objective and subjective views of reconciliation, to be discussed in chapter 2, further explicate his appropriation of liberation (new creation) toward reconciliation.

In the divine-human encounter, God imparts the promised Holy Spirit (Eph 1:13,14). In this way, God sees Godself in the creature. Bonhoeffer builds on the paradox, “In the free creature, the Holy Spirit worships the Creator, uncreated freedom praises itself in freedom.” In Barth, this encounter is the “event wherein the free God gives and man receives this gift.” God avails Godself by granting “man” the freedom he is meant to have. Cone calls this encounter, wherein God’s intended freedom for

⁴⁴ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Creation and the Fall* (New York: MacMillan Publishing Co., Inc., 1959), 40.

⁴⁵ Barth, *Humanity of God*, 71.

humanity is actualized, “conversion,” “communion,” and liberation. He writes, “Because God has created us in freedom and thus wills to be in relation to human beings outside the divine self, freedom is bestowed upon us as a constituent of our created existence . . .”⁴⁶

Humans, unlike determined creation, are more than just the form of God’s command; we are created to live in relation with our Creator. As such, human freedom is the gift, “joy,” to carry out the creative commission of God, ostensibly, unhindered and unbothered. This is why Bonhoeffer insists, “only this image in freedom would fully praise him and fully proclaim the honor of its Creator.”⁴⁷ Similarly, Brunner acknowledges that “*freedom* is the very purpose for which man has been created.” Barth adds, “Man’s freedom is his as the gift of God. It is the joy wherein man appropriates God’s election.” This “election” is God’s decision to be for man in the striving for freedom and selfhood. As such, “man is God’s creature, His partner, and His child as God’s man.”⁴⁸ In Barth, and subsequently Cone, human freedom finds its *raison d’être* as the gift of God *to be* for all creation. Therefore, any suppression of what God has freely given for this purpose becomes a violation of the will of God. This is why Cone could declare the defiant shouts of “freedom,” “Black Power,” and all accompanying activism for black liberation commensurate with the true Christian faith.

Freedom from, as a necessary corollary to *freedom for*, is conveyed in both Cone’s and Barth’s political views of freedom as a consequence of salvation. In Barth, freedom as the “gift of God” is the “divine call to human action” in the *causa dei*. In

⁴⁶ James Cone, “Freedom, History, and Hope,” 59.

⁴⁷ Bonhoeffer, *Creation and the Fall*, 40.

⁴⁸ Barth, *Humanity of God*, 69.

Cone, freedom necessitates a political responsibility directed toward the setting free of the oppressed from “demonic forces” that seek to deny freedom. Liberation grants one responsibility *for God* and against such forces. Writing on one’s burden as a result of justification, Barth notes,

there follows from this character of faith a political attitude, decisively determined by the fact that man is made responsible to all those who are poor and wretched in his eyes, that he is summoned on his part to espouse the cause of those who suffer wrong. Why? Because in them it is to him what he himself is in the sight of God; because the living, gracious, and merciful action of God towards him consists in the fact that God himself is in his own righteousness procures right for him, the poor and the wretched . . . The man who lives by the faith that this is true stands under a political responsibility.”⁴⁹

More will be said about Cone’s appropriation of *freedom from* in chapter two.

This inbreaking of liberation provides a new socio-political context wherein faith is given for the creation of a new future for ourselves and humanity. In Cone, the gift of faith does not come by way of the long, guilted march of repentance down carpeted church aisles; nor, is it induced by rote recitation of the Sinner’s Prayer. One’s historical encounter with Jesus proves that God meets us right where we are, where our needs, hopes, and dreams are. Joseph Johnson Jr. writes what Cone and other blacks knew (and still know) all too well, “White theologians never conceived of Jesus walking the dark streets of the ghettos of the North and the sharecropper’s farm in the Deep South.”⁵⁰ Such lack of imagination is unfortunate since the New Testament abounds with the intentionality of Jesus’ mission among the poor and oppressed. For instance, our Lord embarked upon the less traveled road into Samaria to engage a woman, no less, whose

⁴⁹ Cone, *Black Theology Black Power*, 46-47. *Freedom from* as a corollary to freedom for will be explored in greater detail in chapter 2.

⁵⁰ Joseph Johnson Jr., “Jesus the Liberator,” in *Quest for a Black Theology*, ed. J. Deotis Roberts and J. Gardiner (Philadelphia: Pilgrim Press, 1971), 101.

gender, religion, and reputation deemed her unworthy of a king's audience. After a divine-human encounter, the formerly despised and oppressed announced her liberation at the hands of the Messiah (liberation) who had come!

Liberation and Relationality

God's freedom is relational; this is made evident in the trinitarian reality of the Godhead. Barth writes "In His own freedom, as the source of human freedom, God above all willed and determined Himself to be the Father and the Son in the unity of the Spirit. This is not abstract freedom nor aloof isolation. Likewise, God's God-given freedom is not to be sought and found in any solitary detachment from God."⁵¹ Throughout Scripture, one sees the relationality of God's own freedom within the Trinity, freedom that cooperates and acts on behalf of humanity. At Jesus' baptism, the interdependence of divine freedom is observed in the Father's affirmation, the Son's act, and the Spirit's acknowledgment. Each had a role wherein the affirmation of one, revealed the cooperation of the other. This is the relational character of divine freedom. As the "us" who created humanity, this relational character was originally appropriated to the "them" of creation. Therefore, humans experience freedom in relationship to one another, in partnership. This is why Bonhoeffer says,

No man is free in a vacuum . . . In truth, freedom is a relationship between two persons . . . Only in relationship with the other am I free . . . God's freedom has bound us to itself, that his free grace only becomes real in this relation to us, and that God does not will to be free for himself but for man. Because he does not retain his freedom for himself, the concept of freedom only exists for us as 'being free for.'⁵²

⁵¹ Barth, *Humanity of God*, 73.

⁵² Bonhoeffer, *Creation and Fall*, 37.

This, too, is why Cone could insist, “No man is free until all men are free.”⁵³ Such is the cry of our Lord in John 17:21: “I pray that they will all be one, just as you and I are one—as you are in me, Father, and I am in you. And may they be in us so that the world will believe you sent me.” Perhaps, more belligerent and bellicose in his assertion than the Barthians, Cone’s words, too, convey the essential interdependency of all humanity. In this way, the oppressed and oppressor share a common destiny. The horizontal application of freedom as “*freedom for others*” will be explored at greater length in chapter 2.

God is Black

An examination of freedom and liberation in Cone, particularly the emphasis of divine freedom *for us*, is not complete without Cone’s most revolutionary declaration of God’s solidarity with the oppressed -- God is *black*. Henry McNeal Turner, the nineteenth-century African Methodist Episcopal bishop, proclaimed that a people needed to see their reflection in their deity and, therefore, insisted, “I worship a Negro God. I believe God is a Negro. Negroes should worship a God who is a Negro.”⁵⁴ Cone’s writings, however, were among the first in academia to explore the relationship between black oppression and the activity of God in the world. In this way, Cone’s work becomes grounded in black theological anthropology.

“Whiteness,” as the structure of oppression in America, is against God’s intention for all humanity, and therefore incompatible with the *imago dei*. Therefore, Cone insists that the symbol of a white God has no power to point to meaning for blacks. God

⁵³ Cone, *Black Theology of Liberation*, 160.

⁵⁴ Henry Lyman Morehouse, “The Spirit and Policy of the American Baptist Home Mission Society in its Work for the Colored People of the South,” *Baptist Home Mission Monthly* 17, no.11 (1895): 412–22, 414.

language, however, cannot be discarded because, as alluded to earlier, the “black community perceives its identity in terms of divine presence.” Therefore, Cone sets about the “iconoclastic task” of killing the aloof, white God, and as a prophetic declaration of what God is doing in the context of the oppressed community, insists that God is black! “Either God is identified with the oppressed to the point that their experience becomes his,” Cone insists, “or he is a God of racism . . . Because God has made the goal of black people his own goal, black Theology believes that it is not only appropriate but necessary to begin the doctrine of God with an insistence on his blackness.”⁵⁵

“God is black,” Cone insists, “not because of some cultural or psychological need of black people . . . but because and only because God *really* enters into our world where the poor, the despised, and the black are, disclosing that he is one with them, enduring their humiliation and pain and transforming oppressed slaves into liberated servants.”⁵⁶ Therefore, Jesus does not sit in judgment of the righteous indignation of angry militants who brave the justice-deprived streets of America with protests against injustice. Quite the contrary, in Cone, Jesus leads every protest, sit-in, march, and insurrection as the *imago dei* expressing liberation from “demonic forces” of “whiteness.”⁵⁷ This inbreaking provides a new socio-political context where faith is given for the creation of a new

⁵⁵ Cone, *Black Liberation Theology*, 120-121.

⁵⁶ James H. Cone, “Black Theology and Ideology: A Response to My Respondents,” *Union Seminary Quarterly Review* 31 no. 1 (1975): 71-86. Sin, in Cone, is a community concept.

⁵⁷ In Cone, “Sin is a theological concept that describes the separation of man from the source of his being . . . It is a condition of estrangement from the source of meaning and purpose in the universe.” Therefore, sin is not an indictment on ethical behavior, instead it is a communal concept. Among the oppressed, sin is refusing to live in the freedom granted by the source of one’s being. Cone writes, “It is believing that one can live independently of that source that is responsible for the community’s existence.” Liberation defines “man’s being in the world;” one’s true being is revealed when one is liberated. Sin, for blacks then, is a refusal to live into one’s new identity as a liberated being and saying “yes to white absurdity – accepting the world as it is by letting white people define black existence.” See Cone, *Black Theology of Liberation*, 186-196.

future for the oppressed, and ultimately, all humanity. As the Oppressed One, Jesus liberates the oppressed community to live in God's intended expressions of true freedom and humanity.

The blackness of God and Christ has both literal and symbolic meaning. God is black because Jesus was of a specific ethnicity. Using Paul Tillich's system of semiotics, Cone employs a symbolic description of blackness.

Blackness is an "ontological symbol and a visible reality which best describes what oppression means in America . . . It is an ontological symbol for all people who participate in the liberation of man from oppression. This is the universal note in Black Theology. It believes that all men were created for freedom, and that God always sides with the oppressed over the oppressor."⁵⁸

In a racist society that uses "God-language" as a form of dehumanization, Cone admits that theological speech is "difficult," "dangerous," and will always move "on the brink of treason and heresy." Yet, he notes,

Being black in America has very little to do with skin color. To be black means that your heart, your soul, your mind, and your body are where the dispossessed are . . . Therefore, being reconciled to God does not mean that one's skin is physically black. It essentially depends on the color of your heart, soul, and mind.⁵⁹

Therefore, the focus on blackness does not mean that only blacks suffer as victims in a racist society.

Howard Thurman, spiritual mentor to both Cone and Roberts, draws on the profound similarities between the cultural and political conditions of Jesus and that of blacks in America. Though he doesn't assent to Cone's symbolic "blackness," Thurman

⁵⁸ James H. Cone and William H. Hordern, "Dialogue on Black Theology," *The Christian Century* 88, no. 37 (1971): 1079-1085.

⁵⁹ Cone, *Black Theology and Black Power*, 151

still insists, “The striking similarity between the social position of Jesus in Palestine and that of the vast majority of American Negroes is obvious to anyone who tarries long over the facts . . . It is the similarity of a social climate at the point of denial of full citizenship which creates the problem for creative survival.”⁶⁰ Thurman’s insight undergirds Cone’s attempts to prove the solidarity of God with the despised and rejected of the land. That God chose to enter history as a specific kind of human being is more than a casual observation by Thurman. He adds, “Of course it may be argued that the fact that Jesus was a Jew is merely coincidental, that God could have expressed himself as easily and effectively in a Roman. True, but the fact is he did not. And it is with this fact that we must deal.”⁶¹ The ontological symbol of blackness reflects God’s contemporary identification with the plight of the oppressed in America, similar to God’s identification with the oppressed Jews, both in God’s *freedom for* and appearance as a Jew. In America, theology must begin with focusing on the plight of the “crucified people in American history,” and those people are black.⁶²

J. Deotis Roberts offers a more “wholing” reimagination of the blackness of God, and Jesus; one that addresses the “psychological need,” of blacks, rejected in Cone. Roberts reacts to the dehumanizing effects of white oppression to black self-perception. Blacks need liberation from ingrained, negative impositions on one’s self-worth. He writes, “The visualization of Christ as black may enable the black person to have a real encounter with self and God through Christ. The black person has in the black Messiah a

⁶⁰ Thurman, *Jesus and the Disinherited*, 34.

⁶¹ Ibid.

⁶² In *Said I wasn't Gonna Tell Nobody*, Cone says he writes “on behalf of all those whom the Salvadoran theologian and martyr Ignacio Ellacuría called the ‘crucified peoples of history.’”(Maryknoll NY: Orbis Books, 2019), 132.

savior. He or she discovers his or her own dignity and pride in a self-awareness that is rooted in black consciousness.”⁶³ Roberts alludes to a type of ontological violence which involves the suppression and silencing of indigenous ways of conceptualizing and experiencing the world as an authentic self. Suffice it to say, image bearers whom God has called “good,” white Christianity has called “not good.” Historically, many blacks have adapted or assimilated to ways-of-being in America that have often denied their most authentic existence. Such adaptations range from hair straightening to tolerance of daily racial microaggressions just to fit in or get along in a racialized culture. As a result, I believe varying levels of self-abhorrence, and accompanying behavior could not be avoided.

Though Roberts understands the need to strengthen the black self-perception, he treads carefully in this controversial appropriation of blackness. As an older theologian with a more pastoral and universal mission, he realizes that any radical restatement of Christology, the “fortress of the Christian faith,” must have good reason. Therefore, he writes,

Our concern is psycho-cultural. We are attempting to particularize God’s redemptive act in a special human situation. Jesus as the Christ is the ‘desire of all nations’ but he is also the savior of *each* person and *every* people. Christ needs to speak to black people in their situation and in terms of a ‘black presence’ in their midst. The epiphany of Christ is among black people and, as of old, Jesus promises to be with us always.⁶⁴

Just as liberation and reconciliation must be pursued simultaneously, particularism and universalism demand theological symbiosis in Roberts. He writes, “The black Messiah liberates the black person. The universal Christ reconciles the black person

⁶³ Roberts, *Liberation and Reconciliation*, 72.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 70.

with the rest of humankind.”⁶⁵ Liberation, in this sense, is the embracing and living out of one’s most authentic self; the loving acceptance of one’s true self, as revealed in Christ. The urgency of this need in the black experience caused Roberts to sometimes prioritize liberation for blacks over reconciliation between the races, a seeming contradiction to his simultaneous approach. This perceived inconsistency caused Cone protégé Dwight Hopkins to note, “It appears as if Roberts has incompletely synthesized a movement for political liberation from white racism with a movement toward reconciliation with whites.”⁶⁶ Hopkins’ references Roberts’ sometimes varying language regarding these twin concepts. For instance, he cites Roberts statements, “Liberation from oppression is the heart and center of my program.” And elsewhere, “Reconciliation is the more excellent way.” Roberts’ seeming vacillation, I believe, is understandable on many fronts; three stand out most clearly--the infancy of a studied black theology, evolving black consciousness regarding freedom, and the volatility of black/white relationships that necessitated imminent community care (focus on liberation) for blacks. Roberts’ verbiage lends itself to a pragmatic approach rather than an inconsistent one.

To begin with, in the early development of black theology, “First Generation” black theologians had to wrestle with complex issues that required imagination and nuance while building an inchoate theology in a still unfree America. Their creativity awaited more defining voices, and diverse proliferations to help map out the complex intersections of liberation and theology. Roberts’ task in focusing on the relationships of

⁶⁵ Ibid., 73.

⁶⁶ Dwight Hopkins, *Black Theology USA and South Africa: Politics, Culture, and Liberation* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1989), 48-49. While Hopkins critique is helpful, it is important to remember that Roberts’ specific emphasis on liberation and reconciliation allows for proximate usage that doesn’t deny the interdependency of this concepts. Additionally, Hopkins applies the benefit of a different (younger) historical perspective.

all Christians who share a common humanity and mandate (reconciliation), while nurturing and encouraging black self-development, acceptance and confidence is a difficult one. Next, as the oppressed (blacks) accept the psychological benefits of God's solidarity and advocacy, greater self-acceptance and authenticity emerge. Such elucidation does not lend itself to neat, linear developments in any discipline, let alone, theology. Perhaps, such evolving awareness is one of the reasons that black self-identification has progressed generationally as "Colored," then "Negro," then "Black," and now "African-American." While some express frustration over the ever-changing moniker, evolving self-awareness necessitates a reclaiming and renaming of lost and stolen black identity in America. As blacks began to establish community and national institutions such as churches, colleges, and economic association in the late nineteenth century, greater clarity of black identity emerged.⁶⁷ These involvements helped blacks to appreciate aspects of their experience and personal and collective beings long denigrated by their white oppressors. Over time, growing self-awareness enabled blacks to redefine themselves and choose racial designations more reflective of black acceptance.

As one might imagine, Cone experienced severe blow-back to his controversial reimagining of God and Jesus. Gayraud Wilmore, a close Cone associate, took exception to Cone's ontological, and ultimately universal, appropriation of blackness. The black experience proved too specific and personal for such easy appropriation to others, particularly white oppressors. The black presence in America provided an experience so viscerally unique that Wilmore insisted it defied even symbolic cultural appropriation. Wilmore writes,

⁶⁷ Tom W. Smith, "Changing Racial Labels, From 'Colored' to 'Negro' to 'Black' to 'African American,'" *The Public Opinion Quarterly* 65, no. 4 (1992): 496-514.

Simply being oppressed, or psychologically and politically in empathy with the poor and dispossessed, does not deliver one into the full experience of blackness any more than putting on a blindfold delivers one into the full experience of being blind . . . Black Theology authenticates itself in the unique experience of being an African American in the particular circumstances of white, Euro-American civilization.⁶⁸

Wilmore was skeptical, like many blacks today, of the arbitrary nature in which the majority culture appropriates the seemingly more appealing elements of an oppressed culture. Such entitlement fails to grasp an appreciation for the meaning, value, and sacrificial investment associated with this appropriation; indeed, it often appears a mockery. Thoughtless appropriation leads to omission of crediting the proper source (and people), misinformation, and reinforcement of harmful stereotypes. As a result, all parties suffer. Blacks, and other minorities, suffer the lack of universal respect attributed to something indigenous to their culture, something that affirms personally and collectively. Whites suffer lack of knowledge, learned humility, and a true understanding of gifts and people not native to the majority culture.

To Wilmore's point, even well-intentioned cultural association does not commit one to the struggles and dangers of possessing an unambiguous identification with an oppressed race. For instance, there seems a certain skepticism emerging in some black spaces around the longevity of white support against systemic and structural racism. The protests of Summer 2020 in response to the killing of George Floyd echoed some of this sentiment. Some black activists are suspicious of a familiar trope--early white support and engagement that wane as telegenic opportunities give way to sobering realities. "All of these white people on the front lines of these protests go back to their white

⁶⁸ Gayraud Wilmore, *Black Religion and Black Radicalism: An Interpretation of the Religious History of African Americans* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2005), 250-251.

neighborhoods and their overwhelmingly white and better schools,” warns Hakeem Jefferson, a political scientist at Stanford University. He continues, “They protest alongside them [blacks], but they don’t live alongside them.⁶⁹ Jefferson expresses the skepticism of other blacks who’ve seen this play out before. King and others warned of the historical “whitelash,” defined as the moment that White Christians tire of talking about race and bristle when Black pastors or congregants want to continue the conversation.⁷⁰ Indeed, there must be great intentionality beyond these fractured and frightening days in which we now live.

Conversely, Victor Anderson, a younger and vocal critic of Cone’s ontological blackness, offered critique of intra-cultural appropriation. Anderson questioned whether Cone was guilty of essentialism, the application of fixed, generic notions of identity that compromise individual black subjectivity. For Anderson, the experience of blackness, even among blacks, proved too nuanced to superimpose a universal consciousness on all black people. He criticized Cone’s failure to account for the “contemporary post-modern black existence,” which relegated blackness to a reified existence dependent on Western Enlightenment narrowness. Anderson writes, “To make suffering, rebellion, and survival essential marks of black existence, it seems to me, trivializes the nature of oppression many blacks genuinely experience by the absurdity that anyone who is black is oppressed.”⁷¹ While I appreciate Anderson’s challenge of Cone’s totalizing bent, I also

⁶⁹ Amy Harmon and Sabrina Tavernise, “One Big Difference about George Floyd Protests: Many White Faces,” *New York Times*, June 20, 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/06/12/us/george-floyd-white-protesters.html>.

⁷⁰ Martin Luther King, Jr., “Playboy Interview, in *A Testament of Hope, The Essential Writings of Martin Luther King, Jr.*, ed. James Melvin Washington (San Francisco: Harper and Row, Publishers, 1986), 340-377, 344-345.

⁷¹ Victor Anderson, “Ontological Blackness in Theology,” in *African American Religious Thought: An Anthology*, ed. Cornel West and Eddie S. Glaude, Jr., (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2003), 906. Anderson further explains his preference in the naming of the diverse black experience in *Beyond*

agree with Robert's acknowledgement of a uniquely, unifying existence among blacks due to historic oppression. Roberts insists, "The Black experience is the river from which all the tributaries of the Black experience flow."⁷² Regardless of how affluent or destitute, there are certain experiences to which all black Americans can relate because of a fundamental shared history of oppression in America. To be sure, the growing diversity in America, both culturally and intra-culturally makes Anderson's concern an important one; one that will be explored further in chapter 3 of this work.

Freedom and Liberation in Roberts

J. Deotis Roberts takes no such scenic route to an analysis of freedom and liberation; his assertion is more conventional and straightforward. He writes, "It is obvious that I could speak of 'freedom' instead of 'liberation.' Unfortunately, freedom has become so 'white-washed,' misapplied, delimited, and discriminating in usage in America that it has little meaning of importance for blacks."⁷³ Similarly jaded, James Evans writes, "The term 'liberty' has become associated with laissez-faire economic theory, individual political theory, normative ethical theory, and uncritical patriotism, to the extent that it has lost any symbolic power for those whose condition is more than theoretical."⁷⁴ In light of perpetual violence (ontological and actual) and racism against indigenous peoples and

Ontological Blackness: An Essay on African American Religious and Cultural Criticism (New York: Continuum, 1999), 11. He writes, "In contrast to ontological Blackness, I commend the racial discourse that bell hooks, a leading contemporary African American cultural critic, calls 'postmodern Blackness' . . . [which] recognizes that Black identities are continually being reconstituted as African Americans inhabit widely differentiated social spaces and communities of moral discourse . . . However, in many of the cultural studies that I examine, mostly philosophical and theological ones, 'race' is often regarded as a topic in metaphysical ontology. In metaphysical ontology, 'race' denotes essential properties (essences), such that to lack any one property renders one a member of a pseudo species." It is important to consider that Anderson, hooks, and others also enjoy a different historical perspective from the context of Cone, Wilmore, and Roberts.

⁷² J. Deotis Roberts, "Black Liberation Theism," *The Journal of Religious Thought* 33, no. 1 (1976): 25-35.

⁷³ Roberts, *Liberation and Reconciliation*, 8.

⁷⁴ Evans, *We Have Been Believers*, 15

blacks, America, in some ways, remains the land of the “unfree” and home stolen from the “brave.” Therefore, Roberts chooses to avoid the perennial misnomer. Instead, he writes, “Freedom sums up *what is*. 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. We believe that the Christian faith is avowedly revolutionary and, therefore, it may speak to this need with great force.”⁷⁵

Overall, in Roberts, liberation implies black freedom from the bondage of white racism which involves the “whole man.” He writes,

A doctrine of man in black theology should begin with the human condition and aim at liberation through wholeness. Wholeness is related to a total view of man as body, mind, soul, and spirit . . . We need an understanding of human nature that can bring to black people, under the conditions of their existence, sanity and wholeness.⁷⁶

The types of “bondage” to which Roberts refers are seen in the social, economic, and political hindrances to the fullest expression of black humanity. Therefore, in an oppressed America, liberation is tied to black self-determination, self-affirmation, and autonomy. However, because Roberts also agrees with King’s assessment that “racism is a cancerous growth eating away at the fiber of American society,” he insists that, “Not only blacks, but whites, as well, are in need of liberation from the desolation in human relations in this country based on skin color.”⁷⁷ As a result, he engages the “race problem” as a hermeneutical task, “an attempt on the part of people to understand one another and make themselves understood.” He writes, “It is my desire to speak to blacks

⁷⁵ Roberts, *Liberation and Reconciliation*, 27.

⁷⁶ Roberts, *A Black Political Theology* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1974), 92.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 78.

and whites *separately*, but in the long run it is hoped that real intercommunication between blacks and whites may result from this hermeneutical program.”⁷⁸ As Roberts looks toward reconciliation, he is cautious about any polarization that could become long term between blacks and whites, though separate work is demanded of each based on their experiences with racism. Whites and blacks serving in their own communities learn to embrace their own wholeness through liberation, then consequently, evolve into the reconciliation process.

Separate but Equal

Roberts is concerned that blacks experience freedom as the ability to inhabit their most authentic selves at all times and in all spaces. He writes, “Black theology is concerned for the liberation of the oppressed in the social setting where men must find authentic existence.”⁷⁹ Liberation demands that one’s “whole” authentic, unashamed being is present as reconciliation efforts begin to emerge between “equals.” In a rare criticism of King’s approach to race relations, Roberts laments the preacher’s dream as one in which “blacks would be admitted to white society with everything to receive, with little if anything to give.”⁸⁰ I think Roberts underestimates the sensitivity of King’s task in such a volatile period in American history. To demand equal treatment through integration did not suggest an impoverished black presence among whites. The benefit of the humane black presence in spaces of white inhumanity was assumed, if not stressed.

I am part of the first generation of blacks to live into the hard-won achievements of the civil rights movement of the 1960s. Indeed, my own college alma mater only

⁷⁸ Roberts, *Liberation and Reconciliation*, 5.

⁷⁹ Roberts, *Black Political Theology* 92.

⁸⁰ Roberts, *Liberation and Reconciliation*, 98.

permitted black matriculation a mere twenty years before my arrival. To Roberts' point, many of us, knowing that our presence was (en)forced, felt privileged to have been allowed into white spaces. As a result, we quickly learned the rules of the majority culture, and sought to blend in as much as reasonably possible. However, it soon became apparent that affluence, privilege, and power were no substitutes for good manners and basic human decency. Even as a bucolic, barely seventeen-year-old freshman with much to learn, I knew intuitively that my presence offered humane intangibles that were needed, even if unwelcomed.

Roberts' insistence on liberation, as authentic existence, is a corrective to both black and white Christians; blacks must learn to love themselves and whites must no longer ignore the "requirements of love, justice, and mercy." Genuine reconciliation emerges as both groups work *separately* in inhabiting authentic liberation. Roberts does not propose a sustained separatism but an intense focus on radical change and obedience in each people's sphere of influence. He writes, "I see the need for changes to be made within historical-institutional structures. But the changes are to be 'root and branch' on the order of surgery rather than the application of salves to wounds with deep internal causes."⁸¹ bell hooks, too, offers insight on the necessity of black liberation for revolution in relationships. She writes, "A fundamental task of black critical thinkers has been the struggle to . . . see ourselves oppositionally, to imagine, describe, and invent ourselves in ways that are liberatory. Without this, how can we challenge and invite non-black allies and friends to dare to look at us differently, to dare to break their colonizing gaze?"⁸²

Black Liberation

⁸¹ Ibid., 11.

⁸² bell hooks, *Black Looks: Race and Representation* (New York: Routledge, 2015) 2.

As a self-proclaimed “churchman and theologian,” Roberts looks to the “only institutional giant at our disposal,” for leadership in the task of liberation--the black church. Here, he challenges black theologians to seek a fresh, theological enterprise aimed at understanding the dynamic mission of the Black Church. He writes, “The very nature of the Black Church involves it in the mission of liberation. If the Black Church is not busy making life more human for black people, it denies its right to be.”⁸³ In some ways, by neglecting to nurture the meaning and specificity of a theology born in protest and suffering during slavery, the Black Church placed its very identity in jeopardy. Roberts asserts, “We left the ranks of the white Christians voluntarily or by the efforts of whites but we carried their theology and ritual away with us. The Black Church should have become a revolutionary power for liberation, but with few exceptions, it has become a dispenser of spiritual aspirins.”⁸⁴ As a result, black churches, in general, provided mostly emotional respite for a suffering people but very little in the way of radical and persistent social change.

As Cone, Roberts, and others sought to further develop the discipline of black theology, the black church was beginning to see significant decline in youth involvement. Informed by a myriad of psychological and sociological research, Lincoln and Mamiya suggest that the Black church’s failure to address the growing ambivalence of racial identity and generational poverty among black youth contributed to a significant decline in participation. They write, “Black youth, especially young children, became a kind of afterthought in the church’s schedule of significant ministry.”⁸⁵ Many young blacks, I

⁸³ J. Deotis Roberts, Sr., “A Black Ecclesiology of Involvement,” *The Journal of Religious Thought* 32, no.1 (1965): 36-46.

⁸⁴ Ibid.

⁸⁵ Lincoln and Mamiya, *The Black Church*, 316.

fear, still have a similar critique of the black church. It has been my own experience as a young adult, and now as a parent of young adults, that when many church-attending black youths leave home (college, work, military, etc.), finding a church home, per se, is not a priority. And though research shows that this trend continues with black youths between the ages of 18--22, their practice of faith disciplines such as private prayer and Bible reading continue.⁸⁶ These findings suggest hope for Christian dialogue guided by the foundational theological tenets familiar to both black and white Christians. Chapter 2 will explore the role of the black church and community in Roberts's reimagining of liberation and reconciliation in black and white relationships.

White Liberation

For whites, liberation is realized through the "humanizing and redirection of white power." To make this point, Roberts provides a helpful example. After guest preaching for an affluent, white congregation in a southern city, the pastor gave him a guided tour of the historic downtown area. Roberts was struck by the number of homeless people that dotted the quaint, bustling main street. As he gazed incredulously at the despairing sight, the pastor droned on about the church's involvements with the area's homeless. He boasted of the sacrifices of the men of the church who sometimes slept alongside the homeless "blacks" in the shelters. Suddenly, Roberts noticed that the church's beautiful edifice, also downtown, faced the capitol state building. He recalls,

⁸⁶Adelle M. Banks, "Survey: Black millennials skip church as early adults more than whites," Religion News Service, March 18, 2019, <https://religionnews.com/2019/03/18/survey-black-millennials-skip-church-as-early-adults-more-than-whites/>. The survey found that nearly 75 percent of black young adults said they stopped attending church regularly for at least a year between the ages of 18 and 22. By comparison, 65 percent of white young adults said they halted regular attendance during that period. The survey does show, however, that equal percentages of black and white young adults say they currently attend services regularly.

There was no mention of the responsibility of churches to speak truth to power. He did not speak about jobs, education, affordable housing, or programs of human uplift. There was no mention of the unequal distribution of wealth in the city. There was no address of the issue of how economic and political power could be exercised so as to make life more humane.⁸⁷

Liberation for whites amounts to using one's privilege to make life more human for those who live with the lingering effects of historical oppression. Therefore, white liberation must include "humaneness" that seeks expression beyond charitable missions that often leave the oppressed in the same condition that well-intentioned white Christians find them. Concrete responses to Robert's critique will be offered in chapter 2.

Summary

In Cone, one finds that the prevailing skepticism, and frustration expressed by many blacks is simply the God-ordained, hope and cry of one's long-denied freedom and humanity. Divine freedom is God's prerogative, exercised in creating a free humanity, and God's presence *with* and *for* oppressed humanity in the struggle to assert this freedom. Human freedom, as a derivative of divine freedom, is anchored in the human hope for life as God intended. As the image of God, freedom, then, is reflected in the emancipation from any force that hinders one from "mirroring" or responding to God's call to free humanity, the *imago dei*.

Roberts finds common ground with Cone in his understanding of the depth of racism and the existential toll taken upon black humanity (psychological and material). Therefore, Roberts seeks liberation as a means of restoring black dignity, self-worth, and "wholeness." Liberation, as authentic living, and "rapid revolutionary change" in

⁸⁷ J. Deotis Roberts, "Reconciliation with Justice," *Perspectives in Religious Studies* 29, no. 4 (2002).

personal and societal spaces, moves organically, and intentionally toward true Christian reconciliation.

We now turn to Cone's justification of rebellion as the *imago dei* seeks to fulfill the *missio dei* in the liberation struggle for humanity against the forces of inhumanity.

CHAPTER 2

Liberation and the Missio Dei - The “Divine Call to Human Action”

*“As bearers of liberation – of the realm of health in a sick society – the oppressed must therefore fight **against** the oppressors in order to fight **for** them.”¹*

This chapter will explore Cone’s appropriation of liberation in the political, religious, and social contexts of black and white race relations in America. In the previous chapter, we explored Cone’s understanding of the *imago dei* as God’s intended expression of freedom in all humanity. As such, he presents a convincing case of how its fullest expression has been continually denied blacks in America. Therefore, Cone engages a diversity of sources to construct a framework for liberation that begins with black rebellion against systemic and structural racism and finds ultimate fulfilment in the quest for liberation of all humanity. In this way, the *imago dei* becomes the *missio dei* in the fight *against* the forces of unfreedom and *for* the freedom of others, including one’s oppressors. American racism, the source of white inhumanity, is the sin from which whites, too, must be liberated. Cone searches Christian history for models of liberation that affirm rebellion, protest, and even violence on behalf of the oppressed and insists that human freedom, as an existential emphasis, has been largely ignored in the mission of the Church. In contrast, Roberts’ approach is one of priestly and prophetic reconciliation which involves the theologian’s challenge to speak separately to black and white Christians, respectively. In doing so, Roberts relies on the metaphor of “cross bearing” as a reminder of the “costly grace” demanded of reconciliation in a divided America. A contrast of Cone and Roberts find strong agreement on the embeddedness of racism in American culture and

¹ Cone, *God of the Oppressed*, 151.

churches, thereby justifying black rebellion and mistrust. However, Roberts provides a more structured and inclusive approach in employing interracial and intergenerational methods to fighting this perennial evil. Both perspectives provide views for a contemporary reimagining of liberation and reconciliation among Christians.

Liberation as Meaningful Protest

Liberation, as the struggle for freedom, also refers to the rebellious aspect inherent in the *imago dei*. Cone writes, “The biblical concept of image means that human beings are created in such a way that they cannot obey oppressive laws and still be man.”²

Therefore, protest, as the “language of the unheard,” is nothing new in black rebellion against racism and injustice. Beginning with Josiah Wedgwood in the late 1780s, British and American abolitionists distributed medallions with images of enslaved Africans with the motto, “Am I Not a Man and a Brother?” A similar insistence characterized Sojourner’s Truth’s rhetorical question, posed famously in 1851 at the Women’s Rights Convention in Akron, Ohio - “Ain’t I a woman?” Over a century later, civil rights demonstrators raised placards that declared, “I am a man!” and King lamented, “I’m tired of marching for something that should have been mine at birth.”³ And as recent as the summer of 2020, signs flooded crowded city streets with creation’s affirmation, “Made in the image of God.”

The perennial cry of blacks in America has been the dogged insistence that *Black Lives Matter*. Such is the cry of black blood that Cone insists America and white Christianity have refused to hear; cries that continue to wail loudly from the grounds of

² Cone, *A Black Theology of Liberation*, 164.

³ Martin Luther King, Jr., “I’m Tired of Marching,” July 26, 2020, YouTube video, 0:42, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yV8ECAHVvh0>.

oppression and injustice. Cone's task, in grounding freedom in the *imago dei*, is to prove God's divine intent for the liberation of the "oppressed of the land," and ultimately, the entire world. Therefore, black rebellion is nothing more than a God-ordained expression of black humanity in the fight for freedom. Cone insists,

If we are created for God, then any other allegiance is a denial of freedom, and we must struggle *against* those who attempt to enslave us. The image of God is not merely a personal relationship with God, but is also that constituent of humanity which makes all people struggle against human captivity. It is the ground of rebellion and revolution among the slaves.⁴

It is precisely Cone's explication of human *freedom from* which forces him to jettison his strong leanings on Barth and the Neo-Orthodox theologians. As an emblem of black revolution against white racist values, liberation must entail a more confrontational emphasis. He writes, "The Barthians were right on the personal aspects of freedom in the divine-human encounter, but they failed to place due emphasis on the role of liberation in an oppressive society."⁵ Elsewhere Cone adds, "Barth did not set forth the political and social implications of the divine-human encounter with sufficient clarity."⁶ Though Barth did not personally detach his theology from his political involvement, his early revival of Kierkegaard's "infinite qualitative difference" between God and man eclipsed his concrete political analysis and application. However, theology, as a political corrective to Christian apathy, is where one finds Cone's strongest correlation and distinction between

⁴ Cone, *God of the Oppressed*, 145.

⁵ Cone, *Black Liberation Theology*, 168.

⁶ Cone, *God of the Oppressed*, 145. Cone does not jettison his dependence entirely. Barth and Neo-Orthodoxy remained part of the foundational framework of Black Theology. However, Neo-orthodoxy could not serve as a frame of reference for the black experience. Cone asserted, "When we speak of Christianity in theological categories, using such terms as revelation, incarnation and reconciliation, we naturally turn to people like Barth, Tillich and Bultmann for guidance and direction. But these Europeans did not shape their ideas in the social context of white racism and thus could not help us out of our dilemma . . . We had to create a new theological movement, one that was derived from and thus accountable to our people's fight for justice." See James H. Cone, "Black Theology and the Black Church: Where Do We Go from Here?" *Cross Currents* 27, no. 2 (1977): 147-156.

the twin concepts that undergird black theology. He writes, “If the image of God includes freedom, as is definitely implied in the divine human encounter, then it must also include liberation.”⁷

The encounter between God and the oppressed produces the condition of liberation, without which communion with God is not possible. This encounter, too, is one of revelation, God’s choice to reveal Godself and His will. As with Israel, it is the oppressed who are liberated, and enabled by faith, to recognize God’s liberating activity in history. Faith, then, is the “existential recognition of a situation of oppression and a participation in God’s liberating activity . . . the [oppressed] community’s response to God’s liberation.”⁸ Faith, as an existential element in revelation, allows the liberated to see and discern God’s liberation in history. This encounter, and subsequent awareness, demands one’s whole being, allegiance, and obedience for the cause of liberation. Cone insists, “Black Power is the power to say No; it is the power of blacks to refuse to cooperate in their own dehumanization. If blacks can trust the message of Christ, if they can take him at his word, this power to say No to white power and domination is derived from him.”⁹ In fact, failure to destroy the powers that seek to enforce alien laws on the [black] community is sinful. The community’s meaning is established at its conception and any refusal to define the community in terms less, and other than liberation from oppression, is sinful.¹⁰

⁷ Ibid., 168.

⁸ Cone, *Black Theology of Liberation*, 95.

⁹ Cone, *Black Theology and Black Power*, 40. The terms Black Power and freedom are used interchangeably in Cone.

¹⁰ Cone, *Black Theology of Liberation*, 104.

Liberation, therefore, becomes the force, rebellion, and revolution to free oneself (and others) from anything or anybody that attempts to deny one's freedom for God. Simply put, freedom for God can only mean *freedom from* (and against) anything that serves to threaten one's availability for the ultimate purpose of God – liberation of all humanity (John 8:36; Gal 5:1). As covered in chapter 1, this thwarting of God's intended purpose is seen most clearly in the form of racism perpetrated by the structure of "whiteness" in America. Cone insists,

This country was founded for whites and everything that has happened in it has emerged from the white perspective. The Constitution is white, the Emancipation Proclamation is white, the government is white, business is white, the unions are white. What we need is the destruction of whiteness which is the source of human misery around the world . . . Sin, therefore is whiteness – "The desire for whites to play God in the realm of human affairs."¹¹

Unlike Cone, Roberts does not categorize "whiteness," per se, as sin. He writes, "Human beings are sinners. This includes black as well as white people."¹² And though he doesn't refer to Cone by name, his inference is undeniable, "There is a tendency among some black writers to see clearly the sins of whites, but to ignore or overlook the sins of blacks."¹³ Influenced by the Christian Realism of Reinhold Niebuhr, Roberts holds a more objective and introspective view regarding human nature and sin. In a fallen world where humanity is estranged from God, the autonomy of selfhood alone renders all people, especially collectives, capable of great sins. Niebuhr declares, "Human nature exhibits a universal impulse of self-concern, probably more pronounced in collective than in individual behavior."¹⁴

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Roberts, *Liberation and Reconciliation*, 56.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Reinhold Niebuhr, foreword to *The Religious Situation: 1968*, ed. Donald R. Cutler (Boston: Beacon Press, 1968), xiv.

Robert's objectivity does not mean, however, that he is naïve to the sins of racism perpetrated by white people. Instead, he focuses on the sin which is endemic to people who are white. He writes, "Racism is self-glorification of skin color and all the rights and privileges associated with it in a society in which 'white is right.'"¹⁵ Whites are implicated in the sin of racism in a "collective sense," as those who have need for repentance for "collective sins" and the "accompanying guilt of oppression of black people." In this implication, Roberts does not consider all whites guilty in a "personal sense," unless, of course, one considers the deeply ingrained, unconscious level of racism. All whites, then, may be guilty of sin in a categorical sense. However, when considering culpability for sins of omission and commission, Roberts reverts to his realist stance and insists, "At this point, blacks as well as whites have reason to enter into serious self-examination."¹⁶ Sin, then, is the situation of human bondage which inflicts both blacks and whites. Whites are in bondage to pride and worship of self; blacks struggle with the bondage of "race hate." Both need genuine deliverance that moves toward authentic reconciliation as equals. Additionally, it should be noted that Roberts' appeal to a "collective" responsibility over "personal" guilt indicts systems and structures, the institutionalization of racism. This focus provides incentive for whites to engage reconciliation efforts without a paralyzing personal guilt which fosters denial, defensiveness, and the death of meaningful attempts at reconciliation. Cone offers no such reprieve.

The Search for Existential Freedom in the Missio Dei

¹⁵ Roberts, *Liberation and Reconciliation*, 56.

¹⁶ Ibid. Generally, Roberts does not speak of racism as a sin in which both blacks and whites are guilty; this has to do largely with his definition of racism. "Racism is self-glorification of skin color and all the rights and privileges associated with it in a society in which 'white is right.'"

Where was the religious community's voice throughout the marginalization of oppressed peoples in history? Why was the mission of Jesus (Luke 4:18-19) so egregiously ignored by the custodians of Christianity in America? The proclamation of the "Good News" of freedom was not historically preached to the "poor;" nor were the "captives" and "oppressed" set free. Therefore, Cone's corpus is replete with indignation at the lack of attention given to the correlation between liberation, the *imago dei*, and the *missio dei* throughout Christian history. More specifically, he wonders why such an obvious divine right of creation has been all but dismissed in reference to the plight of the oppressed, especially people of color in America. Such apathy, Cone insists, is one of many reasons why non-Christians and black militants accuse the Christian faith of social and political irrelevancy and, even worse, hypocrisy. Regarding the failure to engage contextual issues of oppressed communities, Cone writes, "Theologians seem to have a way of making simple ideas obscure by the way they spend their energies debating fine points . . . While churches are debating whether a whale swallowed Jonah, the state is enacting inhuman laws against the oppressed."¹⁷ He continues, "It is little wonder that nonprofessionals think that theology is unrelated to man's ordinary involvement in the world."¹⁸ Such perceived irrelevancies still exists among black militants and organizations seeking social, political and economic justice.

In 2014, Christian reconciliation practitioner and college professor Brenda Salter-McNeil encountered the wrath of a "younger generation" long frustrated with apathetic church leadership in the fight against racism and injustice in America. Salter-McNeil and a diverse group of evangelical leaders traveled to Ferguson, Missouri in the wake of the

¹⁷ Cone, *Black Theology of Liberation*, 31.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

fatal, and controversial shooting of eighteen-year-old Michael Brown. Much like the summer of 2020, the country was ablaze with racial protests as it seemed a rash of killings of unarmed black men permeated the American landscape. Salter-McNeil and her contingency set up a meeting with a grassroots organization of young activists called Ferguson Action. There, the leaders looked forward to sharing their wisdom and experience with the passionate group of justice-seekers.

At the start of the meeting, the young leaders quickly began to berate their elders. One by one, they expressed collective disgust with the Church's apathy and absence in the perennial fight for social justice in America. Salter-McNeil writes, "They criticized the Church for its misogyny, its hypocrisy, its complacency, its inactivity, its silence in the face of injustice, and its lack of inclusivity. They believed that the Church worked harder to keep people out than to invite folks in, and they saw no need for the Church in the work they were doing."¹⁹ Salter-McNeil and the other leaders were stricken by the response. She, however, decided to accept this criticism as valid, instructive, and mostly, repairable. In response to such abject mistrust, one must be amenable to a different perspective; a perspective that lends itself to an invitation to the table of intergenerational dialogue on liberation and reconciliation.

Cone surveys the movements of Christendom, from patristic to postmodernity, in order to explore the ways in which the *imago dei* has been historically (mis)understood in the *missio dei*. In doing so, he finds wanton "Christian" negligence. He begins his exploration of the meaning and implications of the *imago dei* with Justin's declaration, standard among the patristic fathers. "In the beginning, He made the human race with

¹⁹ Brenda Salter McNeil, *Becoming Brave, Finding the Courage to Pursue Racial Justice Now* (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 20), 17.

power of thought and of choosing the truth and doing right, so that all men are without excuse before God; for they have been born rational and contemplative.”²⁰ Justin’s statement proves early, formal association of the image with rationality and freedom. Yet, though written during the era of Christian persecution, it does not address freedom’s resistance to captivity as a component of the *imago dei*. Cone writes, “It is significant that freedom and rational reflection go hand in hand, without any connection to the rebellion of the oppressed.”²¹ The patristic period inherited the rationalism of Greek thought followed by the “politically meaningless” gospel of the Constantinian era, neither of which grounded liberation, and therefore, reconciliation in the materiality of the oppressed community.

Medieval thought, too, ignored the existential freedom inherent in one’s human constitution. Instead, as mentioned in chapter 1, the image and likeness of God was interpreted in terms of *analogia entis*, the Thomistic middle ground between univocal and equivocal predication. Concerning Aquinas’ seeming ambivalence, systematic theologian John Betz writes “Evidently, he was trying to echo the Fourth Lateran Council’s definition: for between the Creator and the creature there can be noted no similarity so great that a greater similarity cannot be seen between them.”²² As noted earlier, this view would later be rejected by Neo-orthodoxy in favor of Bonhoeffer’s *analogia relationis*.

Cone applauds the Reformation’s reinterpretation of the image, particularly its acknowledgement of the divine-human encounter. In Luther, the *imago dei* means that

²⁰ Cone, *A Black Theology of Liberation*, 165. Cone quotes from H. Wheeler Robinson, *The Christian Doctrine of Man* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1958), 164.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 90.

²² John Betz, “After Barth: A New Introduction to Erich Przywara’s *Analogia Entis*” in *The Analogy of Being*, ed. by Thomas Joseph White, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2011), 46.

one's relationship to God is based on and dependent upon God's grace alone; humanity's "faithful and childlike response is simple trust and obedience." In fact, reason, in Luther, becomes likened to a "whore" that tempts one to deception and self-aggrandizement. But, as Luther failed to relate his conception of the *imago dei* to the plight of the oppressed, Cone is disappointed. He laments, "Luther's identification with the structures of power weakened his view of the image of God. The idea that man is free to challenge the state with force when it resorts to oppression is not present in his thinking."²³ So fixated is Cone on the plight of the politically oppressed that he gives little weight to Luther's bold castigation of the Catholic Church, precisely in the application of *freedom from*. Luther's revolutionary "challenge" of the priestly status quo would seem to embody Cone's explication of liberation perfectly. Luther's *freedom*, engaged for the liberation of the spiritually oppressed, revolutionized Christian freedom *to be* in personal relationship with God independent of manipulative, clerical mediation. Yet, it is in Luther's contempt for the rights of the German peasants, Cone insists, in which he fails to acknowledge the existential freedom in the *imago dei*.

Perhaps, it is appropriate here to acknowledge that Cone's passion for racial justice for blacks often gave him tunnel vision in the fight against oppression. In defense of Cone's seeming exclusivity, Cornel West's remarks are helpful, "He [Cone] said I'm going to start with black people, then I'm going to get to the other people."²⁴ Cone applied pressure to the point of greatest need in his context - American Christianity's neglect of the oppressed in her midst. Paradoxically, this perceived weakness is also the

²³ Cone, *Black Theology of Liberation*, 166.

²⁴ Cornel West. 2018. Foreword in Cone, *Said I Wasn't Gonna Tell Nobody: The Makings of a Black Theologian*, by James H. Cone (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 2018), x.

reason why Cone's voice remains essential regarding indifference to oppression in ecclesial and public spheres today. His intensity brought attention to (and criticism from) other neglected demographics in the fight for freedom which gave rise to other liberation theologies. Womanist theologians like Jacqueline Grant, however, felt Cone was guilty of his own type of exceptionalism - privileging black manhood over black womanhood. Grant wrote in 1979, "In examining black theology, it is necessary to make one of two assumptions: (1) either black women have no place in the enterprise, or (2) black men are capable of speaking for us. Both of these assumptions are false and need to be discarded."²⁵

White Christianity of the seventeenth, eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, most repulsive to Cone for its blatant complicity in human bondage, was not "enlightened" enough to set any captives free.²⁶ Conversely, the Christian faith stood condemned in the wake of an era that saw the savagery of Native American extermination, black enslavement, and European conquests of Africa and Asia. Hugo Grotius' question still condemns the era, "Can any nation . . . discover what belonged to someone else?"²⁷ During such hypocrisy, religionists later extolled the "goodness of man" and liberals maintained that the image of God in man was the "guarantee that the world was moving

²⁵ Jacqueline Grant, "Black Theology and the Black Woman," in Gayraud S. Wilmore and James Cone, eds., *Black Theology: A Documentary History, 1966-1979* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1979), 323-338, 325.

²⁶ Cone's survey mostly omits the contributions of white abolitionists of these centuries. This omission can be attributed to Cone's focus on manifestations of rebellion (*freedom from*) in the fight against black oppression. For instance, John Brown, the white insurrectionist is lauded by Cone. He writes, "There are places for the John Browns, men who hate evil and refuse to tolerate it anywhere." . . . Like John Brown who 'lived and breathed justice,' the man of the Spirit can only say 'Racism is evil, kill it!'" See Cone, *Black Theology and Black Liberation*, 151. Cone quotes from Lerone Bennett, Jr., *The Negro Mood and other Essays* (Chicago: Johnson Publishing Company, 1964), 155.

²⁷ Cited in Peter Linchaugh and Marcus Rediker, *The Many-Headed Hydra: Sailors, Slaves, Commoners, and the Hidden History of the Revolutionary Atlantic* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2000), 17.

in a desirable direction.” Yet, if existential freedom, as constitutive of the *imago dei* in all humans, had been given serious theological consideration, one wonders - Would the dehumanizing Dred Scott decision have survived Chief Justice Taney’s shameful ruling? Would white “Christian” men have determined their fellow image bearers worth only three-fifth of their own humanity? These are the conceptual musings of Cone as he searches the consciousness of Christianity throughout time. More specifically, he finds little evidence of sustained defense for oppressed red, black, and brown people in America.

Finding Freedom in the Missio Dei

Not surprisingly, Cone finds expressions of existential freedom and its inseparable defiance in the untutored narratives of slaves and freed blacks in America. In the depths of despair, these had encountered Jesus in faith and emerged as liberated beings. For example, Anthony Burns’ declares of his divine right, “God made me a man – not a slave, and gave me the same right to myself that he gave to the man stole me to himself.”²⁸ Burns realizes that the Creator is the grantor of both his birthright (freedom) and “his right to myself” (liberation for God and others). Therefore, any denial of freedom necessitates the struggle for liberation, a demonstration of one’s faithfulness to God. Similarly, free black preachers implored slaves to break the chains of bondage as obedience to their true master. The black activist, preacher, and editor, Henry Highland Garnett extolled,

Unless the *image of God* be obliterated from the soul, all men cherish the love of liberty. The nice discerning political economist does not regard the sacred right more than the untutored African who roams in the wilds of the Congo . . . in every man’s mind the good seeds of liberty are planted, and he who brings his fellow

²⁸ Cone, *God of the Oppressed*, 139.

down so low, as to make him contented with a condition of slavery commits the highest crime against God and man.²⁹

C. Eric Lincoln and Lawrence H. Mamiya also argue that, historically, “freedom for” God has always been synonymous with “freedom from” anything that inhibits black allegiance to God. They write,

From the very beginning of the black experience in America, one critical denotation of freedom has remained constant: freedom has always meant the absence of any restraint which might compromise one’s responsibility to God. The notion has persisted that if God calls you to discipleship, God calls you to freedom. And that God wants you free because God made you for himself and his image . . . it was a dictum securely anchored in the black man’s faith and indelibly engraved on his psyche.³⁰

Because of Cone’s insistence that liberation is an irrepressible gift, and consequently, a divine directive, he lauds the rebellion of courageous blacks throughout history who sought liberation *by any means necessary*. Nat Turner, Richard Allen, Frederick Douglass, Martin Luther King, Jr., Malcolm X, Black Lives Matter, and other grassroot organizations that have sought to “overturn the tables” of injustice share a lineage of freedom in the liberation struggle. Most importantly, these champions of liberation are aided in their “good works” (Eph 2:10) by Divine freedom, the *imago dei*; consequently, black freedom is denotative of the will of God to lead and execute true human emancipation, *the missio dei*.

²⁹ Henry Highland Garnet, “Let Your Motto Be Resistance, Henry Highland Garnet, 1843,” in *Let Nobody Turn Us Around: Voices of Resistance, Reform, and Renewal, An African American Anthology*, ed. Manning Marable and Leith Mullings (New York: Bowman and Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2000), 58-63, 60.

³⁰ C. Eric Lincoln and Lawrence H. Mamiya, *The Black Church in the African American Experience* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1990), 4.

Objective and Subjective Reconciliation

A few weeks into the George Floyd protests, I led a weekly Zoom call with twelve ministry interns. Our discussion on racial reconciliation revealed an almost palpable uneasiness, very uncommon for this diverse, and close-knit group. Perhaps, it was too soon or, maybe, it was too late. When I asked for thoughts on practical steps toward healing, Ken, a black male spoke up, “I’m not for nonviolence. If somebody hits me, I’m hitting back. That does not work for me!” I found it interesting that reconciliation conjured up images of physical confrontation for him. He continued, “White people need to reconcile with themselves, and their privilege, their history and what they are continuing to do by upholding racism.” I asked what he considered the role of blacks in the work of reconciliation. He retorted, “When there is a system of oppression, it is up to the oppressor to get it right.” Treading carefully in hopes of getting an answer to my question, I pressed, “What about forgiveness?” He responded, “Forgiveness can only take you so far. There has to be proof.” Perhaps, my young friend had been reading Cone; his sentiments bore striking similarity to that of the theologian’s. Cone writes, “When Black people emphasize their right to defend themselves against those who seek to destroy the black community, it never fails that so-called white Christians then ask, ‘What about the Biblical doctrine of reconciliation?’ ‘What about forgiveness?’ . . . White people who ask these questions should not be surprised if blacks turn and walk away in disgust. The

difficulty is not with the reconciliation-forgiveness question itself but with the people asking it.”³¹

Objective and subjective reconciliation are two appropriations of the same redemptive event, creating an indissoluble relationship between justification and sanctification. God delivered Israel (objective) and Israel dedicated her existence to God (subjective). Therefore, reconciliation is not only what God does to deliver the oppressed from captivity; it is also the responsibility of the oppressed to remain faithful to the gift of liberation. As it turns out, Cone never fully abandons his Barthian ways.³² Barth writes, “I will be your God” is the justification of humanity, and consequently, “You shall be my people,” is sanctification.³³ God’s decision to be *for us* privileges humanity to be *for God*. Because of Christ’s sacrifice, we are now God’s masterpieces created to manifest our original purpose in freedom. As demonstrated throughout Cone’s survey, an over-spiritualization of the vertical aspect of reconciliation neglected its horizontal application.

Cone’s view of objective reconciliation is largely synonymous with his understanding of liberation. God encounters one in the “very depth of his being-in-the-world” and releases him from principalities, demonic powers, and the spiritual wickedness found in one’s concrete, material existence. If liberation is a deliverance from unfreedom to freedom; objective reconciliation is the bestowal of that freedom and life

³¹ Cone, *God of the Oppressed*, 226.

³² Cone faced criticism from Gayraud Wilmore and other black theologians about his dependency on Euro-American theology. Cone’s brother (Cecil Cone) was among his critics in this area. C. Cone wrote, “For Cone... and others who are infatuated with the themes of liberation, freedom, and equality in social structures, this means that they must begin to realize that they are being influenced more by Euro-American conceptions of freedom than by the religious freedom of the black religious experience. Black Power, despite its positive affirmations of blackness and freedom, owes more in its origin to Europe than to Africa.” See Cecil Wayne Cone, *The Identity Crisis in Black Theology* (Nashville: African Methodist Episcopal Church, 1975), 142.

³³ Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, Vol. IV, Part 2, trans. G. W. Bromiley and Thomas Forsyth Torrance (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1958), 504.

with God which takes place on the basis of God's *liberating* deeds. Reconciliation means that sin, death, and Satan – objective realities holding people in bondage – have been decidedly defeated on the cross. We are now free to have fellowship with God.”³⁴ The Resurrection of Jesus means that all oppressed people become His people. This is the universal note implied in the gospel of Jesus - “all the oppressed become God's people.” The Resurrection event means that God's liberating work is not only for the house of Israel but all who are enslaved.

In its subjective form, reconciliation is delivered from white religious abstractness and grounded in the materiality of the oppressed context. “Reconciliation . . . is sanctification, the slaves' acceptance of their new life, their refusal to define existence in any other way than in freedom.”³⁵ The oppressed must now accept their freedom by joining God in the fight against injustice and oppression, as seen in the history of Jesus' life. This fight is against the demonic forces which seek to usurp God's role as Creator and Liberator. Subjective Reconciliation, as *sanctification*, is the slave's appropriation of her God-given freedom. It is total acceptance of the new life, the new creation, and the refusal to define existence in any way other than freedom.

A more expanded view of the political implications associated with subjective reconciliation exceed the scope of this project. Suffice it to say, such spiritual awareness of one's liberation always has political, economic, and social implications in a racialized society. As Erich Fromm notes regarding salvation, and hence, liberation, “This means that man's spiritual aims are inseparably connected with the transformation of society;

³⁴ Cone, *God of the Oppressed*, 232.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 233.

politics basically is not a realm that can be divorced from that of moral values and of man's self-realization."³⁶

The Paradox of Freedom and Love

All people are oppressed in a general sense; we all ultimately need liberation. However, the oppressor does not understand the dialectic of oppression and freedom in the struggle for liberation. Therefore, Cone's defense of the "oppressed" in his vast corpus is usually limited to those who are black, poor, marginalized, and mistreated. He writes,

While it is true that all are oppressed (and especially those who rule over others), only those whose existence (and thus consciousness) is defined by the liberation of people from social, economic, and political bondage can understand the dialectic of oppression and freedom in the practice of liberation . . . Therefore, when white theological rulers claim, 'We are all oppressed!' they are speaking the truth, although they do not understand the truth.³⁷

In Cone, love means that God rights the wrongs of humanity because they are inconsistent with his liberating purpose for humanity. Therefore, it is a loving act to fight against powers that oppress all men (black and white) if the white "neighbor" is to be delivered from what George Kelsey calls a "racist faith." Kelsey insists, "Racism as a faith is a form of idolatry, for it elevates a human factor to the level of the ultimate. The god of racism is the race, the ultimate center of value."³⁸ Cone agrees with Kelsey's characterization and insists that the work of Christ is one of "liberating men from alien loyalties." Conversely, an emphasis on loving the particularity of "blackness" is not considered a "racist faith" which holds one captive. Instead, love of blackness, also

³⁶ Erich Fromm, *Marx's Concept of Man* (New York: Frederick Ungar, 1980), 65. Cone also employs Jurgen Moltmann's Theology of Hope and a Marxist framework for an intense political and social praxis of liberation.

³⁷ Cone, *God of the Oppressed*, 148.

³⁸ George D. Kelsey, *Racism and the Christian Understanding of Man* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1965), 27.

synonymous with salvation, fosters self-acceptance necessary to counter historical negation and demoralization in America. To claim that love of blackness, even the passionate rhetoric of Black Nationalism, is a “racist faith” is generally a false equivalency. Therefore, Cone reasons, “To love the white man means that the black man confronts him as a Thou without any intentions of giving ground by becoming an it . . . this is when the conflict arises.”³⁹ Black liberation inevitably leads to the fight for universal liberation of all oppressed.

Existentialism, Liberation and the Missio Dei

Sartre’s dictum, “existence precedes essence,” resembled Black Theology in its focus on the lived experience over abstract conceptualizations. Cone enlists the existentialism of Paul Tillich, Albert Camus, and others in his appropriation of black expression of liberation. His task is to emphasize the inherent determination to defend one’s being from the threat of nonbeing in order to realize and remain faithful to one’s freedom. The intensity with which these thinkers focused on the oppressed, a concern largely absent in the thought of white, western Christian thought, appealed to Cone. Not only is the threat against black freedom a threat against black humanity, Cone considers it a rejection of the very existence of black bodies. Therefore, the incessant calls for black patience, in the face of blatant dehumanization, are attacks against the very being of black life.

Cone and Tillich

In explicating the irresistible need to assert one’s freedom, Cone borrows from Paul Tillich’s existential analysis of courage, the nature of being, and faith. According to Tillich, “The courage to be is the ethical act in which man affirms his own being in spite

³⁹ Cone, *Black Theology and Black Power*, 53.

of those elements of his existence which conflict with his essential affirmation.”⁴⁰ In Cone, “those elements” consist of state sanctioned denials of judicial rights, proper healthcare, safety and protection, educational opportunities, and a myriad of other institutional injustices against the oppressed in America.

Tillich weaves into his analysis the “neo-Stoicism” of Spinoza’s doctrine of self-affirmation, “an expression of the essential act of everything that participates in being.” In this way, one’s striving *to be*, to exist, is not a “contingent aspect of a thing, nor is it an element of being along with other elements; it is its *essentia actualis*. Striving toward self-preservation or self-affirmation makes a thing what it is.” In Spinoza, Tillich, and consequently Cone, such striving becomes a “virtue.” Summarizing Spinoza, Tillich adds, “Virtue is the power of acting exclusively according to one’s nature.”⁴¹ Here, one can see how Cone’s definition of freedom as “self-determination” and “self-identification” becomes virtues whereby the liberated, in choosing to resist, “can do no other.”

The dehumanizing structures of white racism threaten to turn the self-affirmation of black being into “non-being” or “nothingness.” Tillich writes, “He [who] is not capable of a powerful self-affirmation in spite of the anxiety of nonbeing is forced into a weak, reduced self-affirmation. He affirms something which is less than his essential or potential being.”⁴² Therefore, any forced and contrived inhibition of one’s fullest humanity is an assault on one’s being. For this reason, Cone considered the rebellion and protests in the cities during the riots of 1967 an “affirmation of being” and proved God’s

⁴⁰ Paul Tillich, *The Courage to Be* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1955), 3.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 19-23. Tillich quotes from *The Chief Works of Benedict de Spinoza*, trans. R.H. M. Elwes (London: George Bell and Sons, 1919).

⁴² Tillich, *Courage*, 66.

sanctioning of the emancipation of blacks. Cone writes, “Black rebellion is a manifestation of God himself actively involved in the present-day affairs of men for the purpose of liberating people. Through his work, black people now know that there is something more important than life itself.”⁴³ The assertion of freedom is a matter of life and death, existentially and literally. Therefore, Cone insists, “The black man prefers to die than to surrender to some other value.”⁴⁴ King’s words, representative of the commitment to social praxis over abject rebellion, also convey the sacrificial and existential mood of freedom, “If a man has not discovered something for which he is willing to die for, he is not fit to live.”⁴⁵ For both men, freedom from white supremacy and social injustice were worthy of one’s whole being. In this way, the “willingness to risk” one’s life reveals Cone’s appeal to Rollo May’s characterization of death as the “most mature form of distinctly human behavior.”⁴⁶ In King, freedom is demanded; in Cone, freedom is taken because “life devoid of freedom is not worth living.”

Roberts appreciates the existential emphasis on freedom. He writes, “It appears to me that the black theologian has much to learn from existentialism as she or he seeks to develop a helpful understanding of human nature.”⁴⁷ Tillich’s emphasis on responsibility and decision -- overcoming anxiety of the threat of non-being by choosing *to be* -- resonated with Roberts. However, it is Tillich’s emphasis on reunion (salvation from estrangement) and grace (the believer’s radical acceptance of God’s acceptance of the unacceptable) in which Roberts sees constructive possibilities for liberation and

⁴³ Ibid., 38.

⁴⁴ Ibid., 7.

⁴⁵ Martin Luther King, Jr. “But if Not,” January 9, 2014. YouTube video. 01:44, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HV0Zmxa4hvw>

⁴⁶ Rollo May, *Psychology and the Human Dilemma* (Princeton: Von Nostrand, 1967), 73.

⁴⁷ Roberts, *Liberation and Reconciliation*, 54.

reconciliation among the races. The Christian's existential posture to embrace Christian freedom as freedom for God, self, and others is unifying, and reflective of God's grace and mercy to all humanity. He writes, "Through this experience [grace as acceptance], one knows the freedom of the Christian person. Through the reunion of the separated – God and humanity, and person and person – health and wholeness come to individuals and communities. Hence, the liberated person is also the reconciled person."⁴⁸

Understanding the experience of separation, spiritually and literally, blacks have the opportunity to image the grace which they have experienced from God in the Christian mandate of reconciliation.

Cone and Camus

Cone's determination to legitimize rebellion as a natural response of one's freedom also engages the absurdism of French philosopher, Albert Camus. Camus' affirmation of the *common value* recognizable by all men and responsible for man's revolt against oppression, affirmed Cone's understanding of the constitution of the *imago dei*. Here, Cone finds the language of both absurdity and rebellion necessary to convey the intense, inner struggle of the oppressed. Camus writes, "Rebellion is born of the spectacle of irrationality, confronted with an unjust and incomprehensible condition . . . It protests, it demands, it insists that the outrage be brought to an end . . . It's preoccupation is to transform."⁴⁹ The absurdity to which Camus helps Cone call attention is the rude awakening of blacks "to the absolute contradiction between *what is* and *what ought to be* . . . the inconsistency between his view of himself as a man and America's description of

⁴⁸ Ibid., 55.

⁴⁹ Albert Camus, *The Rebel: An Essay on Man in Revolt* (New York: Vintage Books, 1956), 10.

him as a thing.” Cone calls this awakening in the life of blacks an “existential absurdity.” There is only one appropriate response – “fight it!”

Black Theology . . . says that all acts which participate in the destruction of white racism are Christian, liberating deeds of God. All acts which impeded the struggle of black self-determination [and] Black Power are anti-Christian, the work of Satan. Therefore, Cone leans further into Camus’ extreme rhetoric of decision, defiance, and death.

The very moment the slave refuses to obey the humiliating orders of his master, he simultaneously rejects the condition of slavery. The act of rebellion carries him far beyond the point he had reached by simply refusing. He exceeds the bounds that he had fixed for his antagonist, and now demands *to be* treated as an equal. What was at first the man’s obstinate resistance now becomes the whole man, who is identified with and summed up in this resistance. That part of himself that he wanted *to be* respected he proceeds to place above everything else and proclaims it preferable to everything, even to life itself. Having up to now been willing to compromise, the slave suddenly adopts . . . an attitude of All or Nothing. With rebellion, awareness is born.⁵⁰

Roberts balks at the severe binaries cast by Camus and adopted by Cone. He insists, “The all-or-nothing, victory-or-death, approach to race relations appears to be more rhetoric than reality, even to those who hold it . . . In the long run, gray is more honest and realistic.”⁵¹ He does agree, however, that “awareness” evokes a consciousness that demands social, political, and economic atonement. Mostly, Roberts rejects the lack of nuance and hope characteristic of the conciliatory mandate of Christian relationships absent in Cone’s use of Camus. He insists, “A theologian of an ethical religion must consider the ethical concerns of religion as being within the scope of reflection . . . Black theologians cannot excuse themselves from the task of doing theological ethics by

⁵⁰ Ibid., 14-15.

⁵¹ Roberts, *Liberation and Reconciliation*, 1.

pointing out the moral hypocrisy of white Christians. Their neglect . . . has gotten us into the impasse we now face in race relations.”⁵² Cone’s affinity for Camus’ forceful rhetoric does not absolve Cone of the Christian responsibility of unity and brotherhood, his understandable detestation of “white” racism, notwithstanding. However, as mentioned earlier, Cone’s engages a definition of ethics (Spinoza and Tillich) that permits rebellion as “virtue,” and therefore doesn’t perceive resistance to unfreedom antithetical to Christian ethics.

Though I agree with Roberts’ more measured assessment, Cone’s reliance on Tillich’s analysis provides insight on the importance of authentic self-expression. James Baldwin, whose literary expressions enjoy an exalted place in Cone’s writings, attests to the recognition of Camus’ existential absurdity, particularly in the life of black children in 1965. Baldwin pens, “It comes as a great shock around the age of five or six or seven to discover that the flag to which you have pledged allegiance, along with everybody else, has not pledged allegiance to you.”⁵³ Both poetic and prophetic, Baldwin’s penetrating words resonate with the experience of many blacks, particularly those of a certain generation. By the mid 1970’s, integrated classrooms were commonplace in my rural southern community; generally, black students attended school with relative comfort. By this, I mean we were not escorted to class by federal marshals or greeted by seething mobs of angry classmates and parents. However, most of us sensed that our presence was mostly tolerated, and even (en)forced upon our white peers, teachers, and administrators. Therefore, Baldwin’s intimation of the ontological violence inherent in a

⁵² Ibid. 2.

⁵³ James Baldwin, *The Price of the Ticket, Collected Non-Fiction 1948-1985* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1985), 403-408, 404.

morning ritual meant, ironically, to encourage unity is apt. Daily recitation of the words, *one nation under God . . . and liberty and justice for all*, formed subconscious contradictions in our young minds as we overheard stories of injustice and racism from parents, church and community members. Most of us learned to ignore, or worst, normalize these internal contradictions. We assimilated into the majority culture, tolerated daily microaggressions, and worked hard to appear less different, less threatening, *less black*. No one should have to live with such unease, agita that easily leads to self-loathing. Roberts writes poignantly about such accommodations in the black experience. “In these instances blacks made the necessary psychological and religious adjustments necessary for survival . . . Every adult black living today can remember – not with pride, but as a fact – instances in which survival rather than freedom has been a choice . . . Black Power militants call us “Toms.”⁵⁴

The absurdity of this thought life, inherited generationally by most blacks in America, is articulated eloquently in Dubois’ *The Souls of Black Folks*. He writes,

It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one’s self through the eyes of others, of measuring one’s soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. One ever feels his twoness – an American, A Negro, two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings, two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder.⁵⁵

Margaret Burnham, director of the Civil Rights and Restorative Justice Project at Northeastern University School of Law, provides a more contemporary lens to the existential absurdity to which Cone draws attention. She helps explain how the lingering

⁵⁴ Roberts, *Liberation and Reconciliation*, 17.

⁵⁵ W.E.B. Dubois, *The Souls of Black Folks* (Greenwich: Fawcett Publications, 1961), 17.

threat to one's being lurks about in the psyche of many young blacks today in the realm of the justice system.

What is important to remember today is that African Americans are in a class of their own in a traumatized nation. I think it would be hard to name an African American family in the United States who has not had an experience with the justice system in which they felt their loved one got the short end of the stick. We have all been personally touched by this, and for those of us who are Black, we see not just the horror of that person [George Floyd] on the ground, crying out for his mother—he literally looks like and sounds like people we know and love. It is deeply, deeply, personal trauma.⁵⁶

Indeed, streets all across America were filled with defiant youth who marched for George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, Ahmaud Arbery, Michael Brown, and an endless list of unarmed black men and women met with unwarranted and untimely deaths by those sworn to “protect and serve.” In the struggle for liberation, young people identify with these victims as if they were one and the same. Intuitively, they sense that their freedom is inextricably bound with the fallen, in whom they see their own image. Liberation, as rebellion against threats to one's existential freedom, can be understood in the response of young blacks to various forms of institutionalized racism in America. Cone paints a compelling picture of its varied expressions [racism], especially in the distorted forms of “white” Christianity. Therefore, reconciliation can only be realized in relationships devoid of “whiteness” and black dehumanization. I have argued that Cone's elucidation of young black rebellion is an expression of the *imago dei*. We now turn to Robert's more inclusive, and methodical approach to interracial and intergenerational reconciliation, the *missio dei*.

⁵⁶ Rachel Schrottman, “How do Today's Black Lives Matter Protests compare to the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s?” *Women Who Empower*, June 5, 2020. <https://news.northeastern.edu/2020/06/04/how-do-todays-black-lives-matter-protests-compare-to-the-civil-rights-movement-of-the-1960s/>.

The Appropriation of Liberation toward Reconciliation

*What we want to attempt here is to express a view of reconciliation which requires soul-searching, repentance, and serious commitment to embrace a form of costly grace. In theological language, it will entail cross bearing for victim and victimizer.*⁵⁷

Roberts does not endorse Cone's existential appropriation of liberation as a type of holy rebellion. Instead, he calls for an execution of programs, plans, and an ideology that necessitates "radical changes" in black-white Christian relationships. Such changes are to be "root and branch on the order of surgery rather than the application of salves to wounds with deep internal causes."⁵⁸ Roberts also tires of any trite, "been there – done that," approach to race relations in America and insists, "Time has run out for game-playing, role-playing. 'Judgement begins at the house of the Lord.'"⁵⁹ As such, he does not minimize black ambivalence after almost 400 years of racial and social injustice; instead, he empathizes, "The fact is that blacks have tried all types of ideologies and programs of action against racial injustice, and the result has been a mere dent in the wall of discrimination . . . "It is not difficult to understand why so many have given up on whites and why there is such moral confusion on such questions as violence or nonviolence in black-white confrontation."⁶⁰

Roberts' reference to black frustration indicts many lackluster efforts in the fight against racial injustice. These include: the failure of the federal government to enforce the War on Poverty, the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965. Moreover, the election of Richard Nixon in 1968 signaled, in many ways, the end of the civil rights era. Nixon ran on promises to curb racial progress and mounting crime and

⁵⁷ Roberts, "Reconciliation with Justice."

⁵⁸ Roberts, *Liberation and Reconciliation*, 11.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 12.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 99.

violence - all dog whistles to those against or indifferent to racial justice. Astonishingly, George Wallace, an avowed segregationist, won almost 13 percent of America's vote as a third-party candidate. After a Republican sweep of the 1966 midterm elections, Marvin Watson, aide to Lyndon B. Johnson, summed up the prognostications of the upcoming presidential election, and likely new administration. "The single issues which appeared to be critical . . . was that of race rioting and the pace of Negro advances in our society . . . This is the one problem that will not go away, and which will cause even more difficult problems in the next two years."⁶¹

Fast forward fifty years and "race rioting" and the "pace of Negro advances" continue to threaten racial solidarity in a country that has yet to come to grips with the depths of its racist history and foundation. The "racism pandemic"⁶² graphically snatched the bandage off of the long festering, and ignored wound of systemic racism and political injustice in America. Black Christians continue to feel this alienation. In 2016, Donald Trump drew the support of 81% of the white evangelicals (and over 50% white Protestants), while 96% of Black Protestants supported Hillary Clinton.⁶³ Similar to Nixon, Trump enlisted a law-and-order campaign that, arguably, remained tone-deaf to long standing racial inequities in America. And though black and white Christians have historically voted along different party lines,⁶⁴ the election of Trump reinforced an

⁶¹ Jeremy D. Mayer, "Nixon Rides the Backlash to Victory: Racial Politics in the 1968 Presidential Campaign," *The Historian* 64, no. 2 (2002): 351-367.

⁶² Designation used by Sandra L. Shullman, Ph.D, president of the American Psychological Association, "We are Living in a Racist Pandemic," *American Psychological Association*, May 29, 2020. <https://www.apa.org/news/press/releases/2020/05/racism-pandemic>.

⁶³ There was an uptick in black support for Trump in the 2020 election. See Jason L. Riley, "Blacks and Latinos for Trump," *Wall Street Journal*, Nov 10 2020.

<https://www.proquest.com/docview/2459037462/F615D390FCB34DDAPQ/25?accountid=10598>

⁶⁴Besheer Mohamed, Kiana Cox, Jeff Diamont, and Claire Gecewicz, "Faith Among Black Americans," *Pew Research Center*, Feb 16, 2021 <https://www.pewforum.org/2021/02/16/religion-and-politics/>. Justin Nortey, "Most White Americans who Regularly Attend Worship Services Voted for Trump," August, 30,

alliance that overtly and unapologetically transcended Christian brotherhood – race and country. These divides continue to resist strong multi-ethnic Christian coalition.

Roberts develops a hermeneutic that focuses on the separate work of blacks and whites in their respective spheres of influence. Such separatism facilitates both political and personal strengthening. Writing the year before his assassination, King also reasoned, “What is necessary now is to see integration in political terms where there is sharing of power. When we see integration in political terms, then we recognize that there are times when we must see segregation as a temporary way-station to a truly integrated society.⁶⁵ “Token” integration, as “esthetic or romantic” posturing, cheapened the ultimate goal of integration of equals. White-led initiatives were not informed enough about the black experience to consider the unique needs and contributions of others to the integrative process. Therefore, separatism strengthened black communities by building them up from within.⁶⁶ Subsequently, shared power could be used as bargaining power in the attempt to work with white entities. This perspective, strengthening from within with the eventual goal of broader brotherhood, is also found in the thought of Howard Thurman. J. Anthony Lukas writes, “Howard Thurman understood the need of all living beings to proclaim the uniqueness of their own experience, to build protective walls around their community until they can feel secure in their identity. But, he warned, ‘that community cannot feed for long on itself; it can only flourish where always the boundaries are giving

2021. <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2021/08/30/most-white-americans-who-regularly-attend-worship-services-voted-for-trump-in-2020/>

⁶⁵ Martin Luther King, Jr., “Conversation with Martin Luther King,” *Conservative Judaism* 22, No. 3 (1968): 1-19.

King’s view of separatism was a strategy for the ultimate goal of true integration. See the Operation Breadbasket project for an example of how separatism works to strengthen black communities in preparation for integration. <https://kinginstitute.stanford.edu/encyclopedia/operation-breadbasket>

⁶⁶ Though Roberts champions “home rule” for the majority black DC area, he is not here suggesting a redrawing of district lines for communities, in general.

way to the coming of others from beyond them.”⁶⁷ This approach provides for knowing and affirming one’s most authentic self in order to give full expression of oneself in relationship with others.

Liberation that evolves into reconciliation, as the *missio dei* calls for the mutual sacrifices of radical obedience, radical love, and radical cross bearing. Such sacrificial approaches simultaneously embrace the God of Amos and the God of Hosea. Roberts asserts, “The God of Amos is an angry God . . . a prophet of social justice.” Conversely, “God is a gracious God to Hosea . . . there is repentance, there is forgiveness . . . The God of justice is also the God of love and mercy.”⁶⁸ In this way, Roberts appeals to the theological ethics of grace and truth to which Christians, of all races, are ultimately beholden.

Priestly and Prophetic Reconciliation

A Christian theologian is not an interpreter of the religion of Black Power. He or she, as black theologian, may be the interpreter of Afro-American Christianity. . . . She is attempting to understand the Christian faith in the light of his or her people’s experience. This task is not popular. One runs the risk of being misunderstood by black militants and moderates as well as by white radicals and liberals. . . . This theological task is a type of ministry to blacks and whites. It is a *priestly* ministry of blacks. As one speaks of deliverance, one can bring comfort and assurance to those who have been victimized by inhuman treatment much too long. But to many blacks, reconciliation will come as harsh judgment. The black theologian’s role is that of a *prophet* as well. His or her message will often be unwelcomed by blacks as well as whites. But insofar as one speaks the Christian message in the area of race, one will need to speak of reconciliation beyond confrontation and liberation, whatever the risk and whatever the personal cost.⁶⁹

Reconciliation and The Black Church

⁶⁷ J. Anthony Lukas. 1986. Foreword in, *The Search for Common Ground* by Howard Thurman (Richmond: Friends United Press, 1986), xi.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 97.

⁶⁹ Roberts, *Liberation and Reconciliation*, 6.

Roberts champions a fresh, theological enterprise which aims at understanding the indigenous Black Church as a “protest” institution. He writes, “The very nature of the Black Church involves it in the mission of liberation. If the Black Church is not busy making life more human for black people, it denies its right to be.”⁷⁰ In some ways, by neglecting to nurture the meaning and uniqueness of a theology born in protest and suffering, the post-Civil War Black Church placed its identity in jeopardy. Roberts asserts, “We left the ranks of the white Christians voluntarily or by the efforts of whites but we carried their theology and ritual away with us. The Black Church should have become a revolutionary power for liberation, but with few exceptions, it has become a dispenser of spiritual aspirins.” Cone agrees, “One of the constant dangers of oppressed people is the temptation to imitate their oppressors, even when the two groups remain socially separate.”⁷¹ As a result, the post-Civil War black churches, in general, provided mostly emotional respite for a suffering people but very little in the way of real social activism. Therefore, Roberts understands the wariness of black militants and actually invites their activism (with conditions). He writes, “I am constantly urging black militants: first, to know the Christian faith and its ethics, and second, if need be, to radicalize the church from the inside rather than to criticize it from the outside.”⁷²

Writing in 1985, Roberts lays blame for the weaknesses of the modern-day Black Church at the feet of black theologians and clergyman trained in the twentieth century but lured into the acquisitiveness of the American value system. These neglected to insist

⁷⁰ J. Deotis Roberts, Sr., “A Black Ecclesiology of Involvement,” *The Journal of Religious Thought* 32, no.1 (1965): 36-46.

⁷¹ James H. Cone, “Black Ecumenism and the Liberation Struggle,” *The Journal of the Interdenominational Theological Center* 7, no. 1 (1979): 1-10.

⁷² Roberts, *Liberation and Reconciliation*, 94.

upon a curation of theological artifacts, and riches indigenous to the Black Church in her spiritual formation as “free” in an “unfree” America. Though more affluent than the pre-Civil War church, the mid-twentieth century church had become lax in her struggle for greater liberation. More resources were needed to continue the fight for freedom of the black church and the black community. In many ways, the historical works of Benjamin Mays and Carter G. Woodson, written by laymen and not theologians, were too dated. Others were purely sociological, and emerging historical-theological offerings were scant at best, and at times, sat “too loosely to history.”⁷³

Cone refers to the post-Civil War black church as the “Book T. Washington in the area of religion,”⁷⁴ a metaphor indicting the accommodationist philosophy of Washington. The Black church lost its zeal to struggle for freedom, ironically, once a pseudo-freedom had been granted by the Emancipation Proclamation. The end of Reconstruction meant the end of black political influence, the rise of Jim Crow, and the convict-leasing program which all culminated into a perfect storm of assimilation and despair. Such sapped all the strength, fight, and will power from the “would-be rebel” Black Church. Concerning the dehumanizing and draining effects on the black psyche, Cone writes, “The structures of evil are camouflaged, the enemy is elusive, and the victim is trained to accept the values of the oppressor.”⁷⁵

The Example of Olivet Baptist Church

One of the “few exceptions,” however, to the criticism of both Roberts’ and Cone’s was the Olivet Baptist Church in Chicago, Illinois, under the leadership of the Reverend

⁷³ Roberts, *A Black Ecclesiology*. In reference to Cone, Roberts writes, “Cone presents his own theological perspective and at times sits rather loose to history.”

⁷⁴ Cone, *Black Theology and Black Power*, 105.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 104-105.

Lacey Kirk Williams. Historian August Meier declared the Great Migration “the greatest watershed in American Negro history,” only after the emancipation of slaves. The mass movement brought hundreds of thousands of blacks to Northern cities looking for freedom and opportunities.⁷⁶ To accommodate this astronomical growth, Olivet Baptist took a systemic approach and employed two social workers to attend to the social, religious, and economic needs of their growing congregation. Wallace Best writes, “Beginning in 1918, the two women conducted eight months of research and more than five thousand interviews with southern migrants, the results of which reshaped the very focus of Olivet Church. Their method of approach seemed typical of any social-scientific survey and tended to cover all the bases.”⁷⁷ The social workers engaged mostly migrant women and taught skills to provide the “best Christian homes,” which included learning domestic arts like sewing, cooking, and cleaning. The women were also guided in spiritual devotions and “practical discussions on home economics, child training, education in the home, laws of health,” and “care of children.”

In a Chicago Tribune editorial, Williams wrote of the necessity of such care by Black Churches, “Along with concerns for prayer and preaching, city churches must implement programs that consider the ‘religious psychology’ of black southern migrants, as well as the material needs of this ‘struggling humanity.’ African American urban churches must be, ‘passionately human, but no less divine.’⁷⁸ By this, Williams meant that black churches needed to attend to the holistic (mind, body, and soul) needs of its

⁷⁶ August Meier, *Negro Thought in America: 1880– 1915* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1966), 170.

⁷⁷ Wallace Best, *Passionately Human, No Less Divine: Religion and Culture in Black Chicago 1915-1952* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005), 76.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 76.

populace. Racism in America had already sought to tear down black humanity; the Black Church had an opportunity, indeed an obligation, to build it back up.

Roberts sets out to prove that an interpretative study of representative images in the Black Church could lead naturally to further liberation for oppressed black people. He writes, “My real concern here is to show that the very nature of the Black Church, conceived theologically, leads to acts of liberation from oppression on the part of black people.”⁷⁹ As a result of the particularity of black experience, Roberts focuses on three images that represent special meaning in the black sacred cosmos⁸⁰ to understand the *nature* and *mission* of the Black Church and lead to greater liberation – *Chosen People*, *Family*, and *Body*.

Chosen People

Roberts advises caution against the rashness in which any group takes on the moniker “God’s Chosen people.” He points to the religious-political abuses by the Germans and Japanese in World War II as evidence of such exploitation. For blacks, a proper interpretation must balance the delicate line of exalting the “riches of our spiritual past,” while simultaneously, living in the “promise of a better day.” To fully understand the role of a suffering servant is to have a new, even laser like focus on one’s mission in the world. Individuals and groups must be able to transmute suffering into victory through entering into a deeper understanding of how one (or a people) has been “purged and purified” by unmerited suffering. In this way, the sufferer becomes a “saving minority”

⁷⁹ Roberts, *A Black Ecclesiology*.”

⁸⁰ According to Lincoln and Mamiya, the *black sacred cosmos* or the religious worldview of African Americans is related both to their African heritage, which envisaged the whole universe as sacred, and to their conversion to Christianity during slavery and its aftermath. See Lincoln and Mamiya, *The Black Church*, 2.

and stewards of God's salvific purpose for humanity. This perspective neutralizes the temptation to exalt or disdain one's lot as "Chosen People. Conversely, Roberts is quick to admonish blacks to resist the presumption of all suffering as "redemptive" or an "act of God." Much of it has simply resulted from "man's inhumanity to man," and should be named as such (Ezek 17:9). Overall, Roberts suggests a reframing of the black past in the matrix of new possibilities that move from liberation to reconciliation.

Family

The family, though torn apart by the ravages of slavery, has great potential for providing a means of liberation to black people. As a social institution, the Black Church has served as an "extended family" for many blacks looking for physical, social, economic, and religious meaning. During and after slavery, blacks often took in biological family members of slaves (fictive kin) who had been sold off or moved to other areas. This practice of taking in others is still practiced in black families today. "Aunts," and "uncles" are not necessarily the biological siblings of one's parents but often distant relatives or family friends who have stepped up to provide support. Certainly, Jesus sanctioned this concept of family and taught his disciples to embrace their relationship in the new creation. Indeed, to the beloved disciple, Jesus would entrust His own mother. Upon entering into the body of Christ, one's status is changed in relation to other Christians; we are "beloved" brothers and sisters because we do the will of our father in heaven (Mark 3:35, Philemon 16).

Body

In Roberts, Paul's metaphor of the "body of Christ" can serve as a summons for greater unity and diversity in the Black Church. Roberts writes, "The image of the body is

suggestive of unity-in-diversity (not uniformity which stifles, individuality). The image of “body” describes the dependent-independent character of persons-in-community of all human relationships.⁸¹ Robert’s vision welcomes a celebration of independent thought and expression subjugated to the common mission of the black church, and the social, spiritual, and emotional flourishing of all members. Such inclusivity in the body calls for a flattening of hierarchal roles that acknowledges the contributions of all – children, adults, and elderly. The common practice of elevating preachers and pastors is yielded to the granting of “mutual respect, and appreciation for all gifts and talents” in the body. Cone, too, supports a refocusing by the black church that puts liberation of self and others at the center of its mission. He writes, “Many black people view the church as a hindrance to black liberation, because black preachers and church members appear to be more concerned about their own institutional survival than the freedom of poor people in their communities.”⁸² As the black church is strengthened through these representative models of chosen people, family, and body, greater liberation is realized in the lives of black Christians. Such realization facilitates authentic reconciliation with white Christians.

Reconciliation in White Spheres of Influence

“The cross, the task, for whites is not taming black power – it is humanizing white power. The white Christian’s cross-bearing will be in the suburbs and not in the black ghetto.”⁸³

Roberts believes true reconciliation only takes place as the races acknowledge and embrace their equality. Because of the history of white oppression, whites “have a greater

⁸¹ Roberts, *A Black Ecclesiology*. ”

⁸² James H. Cone, “Black Theology and the Black Church: Where Do We Go from Here?” *Cross Currents* 27, no.2 (1977): 147-156.

⁸³ Roberts, *A Black Political Theology*, 135.

responsibility in bringing about reconciliation.” Therefore, Roberts appeals to the work of Robert W. Terry which focuses on “a new white consciousness,” an awareness of whiteness and its role in race relations. This awareness reminds whites of what needs to be done to reconstruct a different understanding of whiteness in a racialized America. It also engages ways of dismantling racism in their own cultural spheres of influence. Robert’s efforts validate King’s chastisement of white apathy in the work of reconciliation. King writes, “Whites, it must frankly be said, are not putting in . . . effort to re-educate themselves out of their racial ignorance. It is an aspect of their sense of superiority that the white people of America believe that they have so little to learn.”⁸⁴ Interestingly, King and a post-Mecca Malcolm X find agreement on the need for white self-education. Malcolm X asserts,

Where the really sincere white people have got to do their proving of themselves is not among the black victims, but out on the battle lines of where America's racism really is—and that's in their own home communities; America's racism is among their own fellow whites. That's where the sincere whites who really mean to accomplish something have got to work.⁸⁵

The task for those with the new white consciousness carries with it a new life style. Terry proposes the following program, to which Roberts affirms.

Whites should (1) become conscious agents of change; (2) Seek ethical clarity; (3) Identify the many forms and expressions of white racism; (4) Develop social strategies for change to eliminate and move beyond racism; (5) discern the appropriate tactics – access their power to change; and (6) experiment, test, and refine personal lifestyles consistent with these newly formed values.⁸⁶

⁸⁴ Martin Luther King, Jr., *Where Do We Go from Here: Chaos or Community?* (New York: Harper and Row, 1967), 9.

⁸⁵ Malcolm X, *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* (New York: Ballentine Books, 1973), 376.

⁸⁶ Roberts, *A Black Political Theology*, 210. Roberts quotes from Robert W. Terry, *For Whites Only* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1970), 17-20.

Additionally, Roberts suggests that whites, informed by Terry's "new white consciousness," need to become "intentionally political" by redirecting white power and attacking racism in white-dominated structures.

Bethesda's Project Church Shelter

Most of the components of Terry's model (particularly number 4) are meaningfully demonstrated by the Bethesda's Project Church Shelter Program in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. Case manager, Andrew Huff cites national statistics that point to glaring disproportionalities. In America, "Nearly half of the homeless population is Black and . . . nearly two-thirds of people studying to be social workers are white."⁸⁷ The reality of these statistics necessitate cultural empathy and competence to understand the historical plight of marginalized blacks in America. With rare sensitivity, Huff is aware of the historical symbolism of his presence to black men living a vulnerable and precarious existence in America. He writes, "In historical context, I am yet another white man with power over black men who have been disempowered."⁸⁸ Huff is cognizant of the perception, and reality of his power over these men. This sensitivity alone speaks to his awareness of systems imbued with lingering realities of inherent structural racism. He doesn't challenge or disbelieve it; rather, he assumes it. Huff continues,

You could say that a white man controlling Black men's bodies, property, and access to resources — and a power structure that legitimizes this control — is slavery by another name, Black Code Laws by another name, Jim Crow laws by another name, "Red-lining" by another name, Mass Incarceration by another name, and "Stop-and-Frisk" by another name. You could say it is institutionalized racism by another name. You could say it is the story of America by another name. You could say it is the story of the Western world by another name.⁸⁹

⁸⁷ Andrew Huff, "Working Toward Racial Justice in Emergency Shelter," *Generosity*, September 4, 2019, <https://generosity.org/philly/2019/09/04/working-toward-racial-justice-in-emergency-shelter/>.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*

Guests (homeless) and the Church Shelter Program staff (white church) manage the program in partnership. They share power in the decision-making process about shelter rules, resource management, housekeeping, and disciplinary actions. The shelter's discipline program is grounded in restorative justice principles and decisions about consequences are made in consultation with guests impacted by the offenses. Other accountability measures have been instituted (for and by guests and staff) to insure the shelter's focus remains anti-racist, and dedicated to the flourishing of all parties. The shelter believes *any* organization operating within a racist society cannot escape the influence of racism on its structures and practices — unless it proactively names and dismantles it.⁹⁰

What the Church Shelter Program demonstrates is a willingness, on the part of a predominantly white community, to hear the blood of their oppressed brothers crying out. By acknowledging, learning, and leaning into the plight of black Americans, they humanize their clients; this type of partnership works to liberate, and reconcile both parties simultaneously. The guests are valued as contributing members of the community and the staff learn from those often dismissed as less than fellow image bearers.

Together, Roberts and Cone present balancing ideologies in confronting historical racism and the resulting division between black and white Christians. By framing rebellion as a natural response of the *imago dei*, Cone makes intelligible the perennial mistrust of generations of blacks in America. The historical failure of European and white Christians to value black freedom (*imago dei*) as importantly as their own is Cone's

⁹⁰ Ibid.

dogged insistence. Therefore, God's act of reconciliation emancipates the oppressed to embrace blackness with power and authority (objective reconciliation) in order to struggle for the liberation of all humanity (subjective reconciliation). Roberts' focus is to impress upon black and white Christians the responsibility of reconciliation as a mandate which summons the entire body of Christ to image-bearing through reconciling acts of love, forgiveness and repentance. Additionally, he provides a revolutionary approach in his call for temporary separation with the goal of building up communities from within (liberation) in order to forge authentic relationships between equals from without (reconciliation). We now turn to exploring how the perspectives of these theologians translate into contemporary opportunities and expressions of liberation and reconciliation, both intergenerationally and interracially.

Chapter 3

A Contemporary Reimagination of Liberation and Reconciliation

First, this chapter will examine my own reimagined view of liberation (*imago dei*) and reconciliation (*missio dei*) after prolonged engagement with the works of Cone, Roberts, and other liberation theologians. As a result, an analysis of the contemporary application of these twin concepts will be examined in light of historical intergenerational and interracial division among black and white Christians in America. Second, Cone's road to reconciliation through "blackness" provides helpful and relevant steps for conscientious whites willing to engage in authentic, contextual reconciliation efforts as a "costly grace." However, since scripturally grounded (Mark 8:34), these steps will be shown to provide guidance for *all* Christians toward a reimagined existence as liberated and reconciled disciples of Christ. This chapter aims to prove the thesis that Cone's unrelenting demand for black liberation and Robert's inclusive approach toward Christian reconciliation among equals provide a needed corrective to black and White Christians of all generations who seek to image reconciliation in a divided America.

How My Mind Has Changed

This is the question which individuals and groups who live in our land always under the threat of profound social and psychological displacement face: Why is it that Christianity seems impotent to deal radically, and therefore effectively, with the issues of discrimination and injustice on the basis of race, religion, and national origin? Is this betrayal due to a betrayal of the genius of religion, or is it due to a basic weakness in the religion itself? The question is searching, for the dramatic demonstration of the impotency of Christianity in dealing with the issue is underscored by its apparent inability to cope with it within its own fellowship.¹

¹ Howard Thurman, *Jesus and the Disinherited*, 7.

Reconciliation, I reasoned, was a completed task, an accomplished gift and inheritance of accepting *whosevers* throughout historical existence. I argued that as believers we are already reconciled to God and one another. As such, reconciliation is at once a vertical and horizontal reality with provision and direction to revolutionize the culture. I agreed with James Massey, “Because believers are reconciled to God, they are also related to each other. A new set of criteria obtains now for human relations in the church. In church life social distance must no longer be the order, and a sense of oneness and equality must prevail when previously-honored differences seek to intrude themselves.”² More succinctly, I reasoned, *Unity is not just the philosophy for which we strive; it is the position from which we strive*. The presence of the Holy Spirit in the life of the believer, the local congregation and, ultimately, the universal body of Christ make reconciliation an expression of God in the redeemed.

Though an accomplished fact (designation), reconciliation is a work in progress (destination); we are at once *being* and *becoming*. According to Richard Lischer, reconciliation “already indwells those who seek it.”³ Therefore, I argued that Paul’s exhortation, *Be ye reconciled* (2 Corinthians 6:1), is but an exhortation to the Corinthian church to *Be what you are* -- Spirit-empowered followers bequeathed the ministry of reconciliation. Yet, history proves such to be a work in which we Christians seem to perpetually get in our own way, thereby, hindering meaningful witness-bearing in a divided world. Though decades of diversity and reconciliation initiatives coupled with the slow but steady growth of multi-ethnic churches often provided images of promise and

² James Earl Massey, “Reconciliation: The Biblical Imperative and Practical Implications,” *Wesleyan Theological Journal* 37, no. 1 (2002): 7-24.

³ Richard Lischer, *The End of Words: The Language of Reconciliation in a Culture of Violence* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 2005), 165.

progress, cultural catalytic moments continue to unmask the fragility of these relationships.⁴

My perplexity persisted -- *Why aren't black and white Christians bearing fruit of the new creation, the Spirit's dwelling?* More specifically, why wasn't this accomplished truth being realized more convincingly in our "Christian" nation? The 65% of Americans who identify as Christians,⁵ I reasoned, must overwhelmingly consist of babes still suckling the breasts of spiritual immaturity. How else had the Church failed to become a greater force toward healing race relations in America? My philosophy mirrored that of a young King, the seminarian who wrote circa 1949,

Each Christian should believe that he is a member of a larger family of which God is Father. Jesus expresses the view throughout the Gospels that we are members of one family, meant to live as brothers and to express our brotherhood in helpfulness. A failure to realize this truth is a failure to realize one of the main tenets of the Christian religion. The Fatherhood of God and the Brotherhood of man is a starting point of the Christian Ethic.⁶

It seemed as simple as a faithful acceptance of the words of Jesus recorded in the gospel of Mark (3:35), "Whoever does the will of God is my brother and sister and mother." Indeed, such became my mantra. King mentor, Benjamin Mays, agreed with this familial, universal appropriation of the fatherhood of God. In an address given at the Second Assembly of the

⁴ For additional information, see Korie Little Edwards, *The Elusive Dream: The Power of Race in Interracial Churches* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008). See also <https://www.christianitytoday.com/news/2021/april/racial-division-church-multiracial-diverse-study.html> ; "Black Christians See Limits to Multiracial Churches," *Christianity Today*, April 29, 2021. Edwards writes, "A recent study reveals that in 2019, multiracial churches made up about 16 percent of all congregations in the US, compared to 6 percent in 1998. While Catholics have consistently had the largest percentage of multiracial churches—17 percent in 1998 and 23 percent in 2019—evangelical churches showed the greatest increase, moving from 7 percent in 1998 to 22 percent in 2019."

⁵David Masci, Besheer Mohamed, and Gregory A. Smith, et.al, "Measuring Religion in Pew Research Center's American Trends Panel," Pew Research Center. January 14, 2021. <https://www.pewforum.org/2021/01/14/measuring-religion-in-pew-research-centers-american-trends-panel/>

⁶Martin Luther King, Jr., "What a Christian Should Believe About Himself," <https://kinginstitute.stanford.edu/king-papers/documents/six-talks-based-beliefs-matter-william-adams-brown>

World Council of Churches in Evanston, Illinois in 1954, Mays affirmed the Council's position,

Jesus proclaimed a religion that was supra-racial, supra-national, supra-cultural, and supra-class. His doctrine of God as Father embraces the human race and makes us all children of the same God. . . To deny the universalism in the teachings of Christ is to deny the very genius of Christianity.⁷

The exhortations of King and Mays are not false; indeed, one is cautioned against an anachronistic insensitivity to the liberation and reconciliation approaches of these Christian exemplars. In the early twentieth century, they and countless others braved the degradations of racism with dignity and grace; their efforts created hopeful possibilities for their posterity. Forced to address immediate sources of black distress, black leaders often voiced a universalistic perspective over and against a rhetoric of hate and indifference that refused to acknowledge the shared humanity of all people. However, the trajectory of their work aimed at greater freedoms beyond isolated campaigns. This vision is conveyed by King in 1965, "This movement [is] about winning citizenship for black people in America, not about having a march in Selma."⁸ And even this measured stance, for some non-empathetic white Christians, was deemed "unwise and untimely." King and Mays provided adaptive leadership that paved the way for more exacting voices that followed in their sacrificial footsteps.⁹ According to Ronald Heifetz, "His [King] interventions had to take into account the level of distress the larger system could withstand."¹⁰ Adaptive leadership, in this way, is "choreographed," like a "modern

⁷ Benjamin E. Mays, "The Church Amidst Ethnic and Racial Tensions," in *Disturbed About Man* (Richmond: John Knox Press, 1969), 131-143, 133. Regarding this address given to world leaders in 1954, Mays writes in 1969, "I received more vilifying letters as a result of this speech than from any other speech I have delivered in my forty years in public life." See page 131.

⁸ Ronald A. Heifetz, *Leadership without Easy Answers* (Cambridge: The Belknap Press, 1994), 219.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 209.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 219.

ballet” with precision and grace. Such movement requires humility and patience, but never cowardice, from its leaders. Roberts writes concerning such sacrifice despite the denigration of young black critics,

Every adult black living today can remember – not with pride, but as a fact – instances in which survival rather than freedom has been a choice. In such cases, meaning for existence in spite of oppression rather than freedom as an alternative to oppression has been accepted. Black Power militants call us “Toms. They say that they blame us and the religion that led us to make the wrong choice.”¹¹

King and Mays chose to focus on a universal starting point with hopes that white Christian brotherhood (and decency) would embrace and engage the particularity of the oppressed context. Indeed, King’s reliance on a Kantian moral philosophy—a philosophy that drew from an assumed universal reason and rationality in its appeal to the nation to end segregation and establish equality under the law for Black America, initially anticipated widespread Christian acceptance. When not received as such, this approach seems a passive leap over historical racial trauma and racism in America. While Cone considered King perhaps the “most important theologian in American history,” he accused him of not taking “white violence in America seriously.”¹² I disagree. Arguably, King experienced the impact of “white violence” more than any other black leader in American history, before and at his death. Therefore, I do not believe “white violence” was ever underestimated by King and his associates. Instead, the push for black freedom had to be negotiated and legislated in conjunction with white fragility; often, the indifferent sources of political and economic power. Such recalcitrance always necessitates choosing one’s battles carefully.

¹¹ Roberts, *Liberation and Reconciliation*, 17

¹² Cone, *God of the Oppressed*, 221.

Though the confidence with which I viewed the appropriation of reconciliation was grounded in the sufficiency of Christ alone, I now realize that I oversimplified the difficult work involved in living authentically into the Christian's new reality; an oversimplification akin to the ubiquitous Nike slogan, "just do it." By spiritualizing theological rhetoric, I failed to insist upon the reordering of political realities that evidence true Christian liberation and reconciliation. Therefore, in the cross-racial spaces in which I moved, I sought "peace" over political and economic equity. However, my approach was not the calculated, adaptive approach of King and Mays, one that Cone argued was "based too much upon moral suasion and too little upon the tools of social analysis."¹³ Instead, Cone would question whether my denial of the fullest expression of my freedom, the *imago dei*, was a passive impediment to my obedience to God's intention for my freedom, the *missio dei*. In the pursuit of "reconciliation" in white spaces, even ecclesial, I regularly echoed the well-intentioned, yet superficial, lament of another King, "Can we all get along?" Religiously, such pleading seemed appropriate, even pious; indeed, the scriptures implore peaceful coexistence (Rom 12:18). However, personally such striving proved taxing and was almost always unreciprocated in these circles. Hindsight reveals that I, too, needed the *liberation* of which Cone insists in order to engage in authentic *reconciliation between equals*, of which Roberts insists.

By situating the movement of God squarely within a particular sociocultural context, Cone guards against a one-size-fits-all, universal, understanding of the Christian faith. Liberation theology's "preferential option for the oppressed" provides universal understanding of God's particular activity in being, word, and deed that is consistent with

¹³ James H. Cone, *For My People* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1984), 88.

Scripture. Such re-ordering from traditional theology's universal appropriation provides an "epistemological break" which challenges an insipid abstraction of Christianity that omits the plight of the marginalized and poor. Rufus Burrows writes,

It [Cone's point of departure] means that the fundamental emphasis or starting point in the theological enterprise is not on purely rational discussion and the production of abstract manuscripts that have little to do with the elimination of human misery that result from oppressive societal structures. Rather, the starting point is solidarity with the oppressed and commitment actions geared toward enhancing all persons.¹⁴

This plea for reordering is also found in the liberation theology of Cone contemporary Frederick Herzog, "Only if we change ourselves in view of these 'invisible' people [African and Native Americans in the United States], will we become aware of the 'invisible God.' Here anchors our theological future."¹⁵ Cone, with rare affirmation of white theologians, acknowledged Herzog as "the only white theologian who has attempted to reorder theological priorities in the light of the oppression of black people."¹⁶ More importantly, this "epistemological break" provides a lens from "below" more in line with the character of the incarnation. God, in Jesus, met people in the particularity of their marginalized existence, which largely mirrored his own. As such, Jesus commended the persistent faith of a Syrophenician mother (Mark 7:24-29), the gratitude of a helpless leper (Luke 17: 15-16), and honored the request of a blind beggar (Mark 10:46-52). This is why Cone could insist that "Theology is not Christian Theology

¹⁴ Rufus Burrow, Jr., *James H. Cone and Black Liberation Theology* (Jefferson: McFarland & Company, Inc., Publishers, 1994), 35

¹⁵ Frederick Herzog, "New Birth of Conscience," in Rieger, *Liberating the Future: God, Mammon, and Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1998), 148.

¹⁶ Cone, *God of the Oppressed*, 5.

unless it emerges out of the community of the oppressed, thereby identifying itself with the oppressed and their condition.”¹⁷

The Road to Reconciliation (Blackness)

Denying Whiteness

At the end of *Black Theology Black Power*, Cone draws on the three marks to faithful discipleship according to Jesus (Mark 8:35). Here, he insists that “Reconciliation to God means that white people are prepared to deny themselves (whiteness), take up the cross (blackness), and follow Christ (black ghetto).”¹⁸ Though aimed at whites, especially those seeking allyship with blacks in the fight against racism, I argue that Cone’s path to “blackness” is applicable to all who desire to fight against the evils of racism and its assault against the humanity of all people.

Denying “whiteness” begins, ironically, with the task of acknowledging “whiteness.”

To give up the privilege that whiteness affords is first to agree that whiteness actually exists as an enemy of freedom, the *imago dei*. This admission is difficult because, as Cone notes, “Oppressors are . . . rendered incapable of knowing their own condition.”¹⁹ Reformers referred to this problem of human sin and fallenness as the *homo incurvatus in se*, the human being caught up in itself.²⁰ Like David’s jarring blindness when confronted by Nathan, it is often difficult for humans to acknowledge their own sin, even ones which are blatantly obvious to others. Another reason whites may resist acknowledging

¹⁷ Cone and Hordern, “Dialogue on Black Theology.”

¹⁸ Cone, *Black Theology and Black Power*, 150.

¹⁹ Cone, *Black Theology of Liberation*, 108.

²⁰ Joerg Rieger, “Engaging Whiteness (More) Constructively: Conversations with James Cone and Frederick Herzog on the future of race and class in theology,” *Review and Expositor* 117, no.1 (2020): 58-71.

“whiteness” is because racist predilections are not solely articulated as prejudice; often, they are held as culturally sanctioned beliefs. The dress, hairstyle, speech, and cultural expressions of the “Other” are viewed through the normative lens of whiteness. As such, denying whiteness involves an ethical interrogation of one’s own epistemological framework. Even absent Cone’s litany of systemic racism in European and American Christianity, the facts of history bear out the reality of its rootedness in America and her churches. To this obvious truth, black and white Christians must agree. C.S. Lewis once said, “The man who agrees with us that some question, little regarded by others, is of great importance can be our friend. He need not agree with us about some answer.”²¹ “Whiteness” is a threat to authentic reconciliation efforts between black and white Christians, a reality which enlightened theologians can no longer ignore.

Identifying “whiteness” is necessary in order to understand racism as the institutional evil that spreads from generation to generation, seemingly imperceptible but always present in its marginalizing effects. George Lipsitz says whiteness is “the unmarked category against which difference is constructed, whiteness never . . . has to acknowledge its role as an organizing principle in social and cultural relations.”²² The pervasive subtlety of whiteness is also expressed by Elaine Robinson as “normalized and normative as that which is ‘fully human,’ and one either abides its construction of reality or becomes marked as ‘other,’ ‘outsider,’ and ‘problematic.’” Whiteness, then, becomes the default way of *being*; the standard to be desired and judged against. This paradox of whiteness -- invisibility and visibility -- is also heard in the assessment of Willie James

²¹ C.S. Lewis, *The Four Loves* (San Diego: Harcourt, Brace, 1960), 97.

²² George Lipsitz, *The Possessive Investment in Whiteness: How White People Profit from Identity Politics* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2006), 1.

Jennings, Jr., “There is a sense in which whiteness is invisible, not because it cannot be seen but because the point was never to see it. The point was to perform life toward it. Only when you resist that performance can you actually start to see it.”²³ Indeed, resistance is crucial if whiteness, with its varied gradations of racial inequality, is to be addressed. Sincere agreement, beginning here, can help Christians of all races and generations engage toward more authentic reconciliation among equals. As such, I agree with Robinson’s call for consensus among Christians in the naming of whiteness as sin. She writes, “It [whiteness] must be characterized as sin—that which diminishes the fullness and flourishing of life which is central to the gospel—and has real and perpetually present power.”²⁴

It is important, I think, to differentiate “whiteness” from white people. Arguably, most white people are beneficiaries of “whiteness,” through physical appearance alone. For instance, the proverbial “benefit-of-the-doubt” given to whites is seen in the labeling of peaceful Black Lives Matter protesters as “thugs” and capitol-storming insurrectionists “great patriots who have been badly and unfairly treated for so long.”²⁵ It is also important to remember that “blackness” in Cone, though antithetical to whiteness, assumes a soteriological identity beyond black skin.²⁶ If the goal is authentic liberation

²³ Willie James Jennings, Jr. “Whiteness isn’t Progress,” *Christian Century* 135, no.23 (2018): 28-31.

²⁴ Elaine A. Robinson, “Toward a Method for Liberating Whiteness: The Significance of James Cone’s Theology for White Theologians and Churches,” *Methodist Review* 12 (2020): 85–101.

²⁵ Tommy Beer, “Trump Called BLM Protesters ‘Thugs’ but Capitol Storming Supporters ‘Very Special,’” January 6, 2021. <https://www.forbes.com/sites/tommybeer/2021/01/06/trump-called-blm-protesters-thugs-but-capitol-storming-supporters-very-special/?sh=747c25963465>, While most perceptions may not be as stark as Trump’s, history proves that blacks are often not given the benefit of the doubt during collective protests.

²⁶ In Cone, “blackness” also has literal connotations since black-skinned people are oppressed because of their black skin.

and reconciliation for all humanity, embracing a definition of whiteness in America based on historical accuracy is essential. In Cone,

“Whiteness symbolizes the activity of deranged men intrigued by their own image of themselves, and thus unable to see that they are what is wrong with the world. Black Theology seeks to analyze the satanic nature of whiteness and by doing so to prepare all nonwhites for revolutionary action.”²⁷

Cone’s definition offers an imprecise call to action (“revolutionary action”) and provides little nuance. Additionally, Cone’s use of whiteness is sometimes confusing due to an inconsistent conflation of the literal and symbolic appropriations; a fluctuant for which Cone is unapologetic.

I do not apologize for the apparently vague use of the terms. Rather I insist that the ambiguity is indispensable. In this regard, I contend that theological language must be paradoxical because of the necessity of affirming two dimensions of reality which appear to be contradictory. For example, my experience of being black-skinned means that I cannot de-emphasize the *literal* significance of blackness. My people were enslaved, lynched, and ghettoized in the name of God and country because of their color . . . Through my particular experience of blackness, I encounter the *symbolic* significance of black existence and how that existence is related to God's revelation in Jesus Christ. In the divine-human encounter, the particular experience of oppression and liberation, as disclosed in black-skinned people, is affirmed as God's own experience; and through that divine affirmation, I encounter the universal meaning of oppression and liberation that is not limited by skin color. The same is true for the literal and symbolic meaning of whiteness, which has the opposite meaning of blackness.²⁸

Additionally, Cone’s rhetorical style sometimes prevents oppressors from hearing essential truths about their own complicity.²⁹ Though Cone’s exasperation is

²⁷ Cone, *Black Theology of Liberation*, 29.

²⁸ Cone and Hordern, “Dialogue.”

²⁹ Cone contemporary Glenn R. Bucher once wrote, “However, the theological productivity generated by the discussion over black theology and ethics would be enhanced greatly if Cone’s approach to theological conversation were more collegial and less brittle, if he were to deal publicly with contrary arguments more on their merit (as he seems to do in the isolation of his study) and less *ad hominem* . . . Cone rightly demands that white theologians not try to define his identity. There is no reason why they should allow him to define theirs.” See Glen R. Bucher, “Review of God of the Oppressed,” *Theology Today* 33, no. 1 (1976): 116-119.

understandable, reconciling ministry in a divisive culture aims for the articulation of truths that can be heard, understood, accepted, and ultimately appropriated. Therefore, I prefer Elaine Robinson's more comprehensive and consistent rendering of the term.

Based on Cone's Black Theology and her personal conversations with the theologian, she writes,

Whiteness is first and foremost a social, cultural, epistemological, and theological construct indicative of systemic oppression and dehumanization, rather than a biological, physical, or ontological indicator. While white skin (including "passing" as white) provides access, "whiteness" signifies an existential condition of access to power and privileges accrued through the dehumanization of those systematically excluded from the structures of whiteness. Persons of color can also be drawn into whiteness by means of "internalized oppression," which ultimately serves to further dehumanize under the auspices of being good citizens of a community shaped and controlled by whiteness.³⁰

There is evidence that the discomfort of talking about "whiteness" and America's racial history remains a sensitive conundrum among black and white Christians. Jennings writes, "Whiteness is being questioned like never before and it feels terrible to many people . . . Those who are uncomfortable with the questioning of whiteness also feel as though we have become obsessed with matters of identity and have lost a sense of common purpose."³¹ Those committed to authentic reconciliation between blacks and whites must press on amid the discomfort. The Holy Spirit empowers Christians with the spiritual accoutrements necessary to dialogue and organize toward reconciliation in this liminal space in which we continually find ourselves. There are two resources that I find helpful in teaching Christians, indeed all people, about the harrowing effects of whiteness in the history of black and white relations in America.

³⁰ Robinson, "Liberating Whiteness." Robinson's definition is based on Cone's broadest definition of "whiteness" that potentially indicts people of all races.

³¹ Jennings, Jr. "Whiteness."

The Equal Justice Initiative

Even in 2021, there remains wide racial, and partisan gaps in opinions about the importance of discussing the history of racism, privilege and slavery in America. Among Black adults, 75% say heightened public attention to this topic is a good thing, while only 56% of whites agree. Politically, the gap is even greater: 78% of Democrats favor highlighting slavery and racism, versus just 25% of Republicans.³² Though many whites agree that racism puts blacks at a disadvantage, many will not admit that, consequently, they are given an advantage.³³ Finding agreement on things that should be axiomatic, even among Christians, is not an easy task. I agree with the assessment of Bryan Stevenson, founder and Executive Director of the Equal Justice Initiative (EJI), a human rights organization in Montgomery, Alabama,

The big problem we have in the United States is that we don't actually know our history. We don't know about the centuries of racial injustice. We don't know about the native genocide. You say 'native genocide' and people have no idea what you're talking about. They think you're saying something radical . . . If you've done something wrong to someone else and you genuinely don't know what you've done wrong, you're not going to be able to fully reconcile with that person. You're not going to be able to adequately apologize. You're not going to be able to say the things you need to say to create a path toward recovery. You have to know what you did. And once you understand what you did, you can then begin to calibrate all the things that have to happen for you to try to make peace. For you to recover. To create fellowship again.³⁴

Denying whiteness demands truth-telling about America's racist past, one that can be understood as viscerally as possible. The EJI houses the Legacy Museum, a narrative

³² Carroll Doherty, Jocelyn Kiley, Baxter Oliphant, et.al, "Deep Divisions in Americans' Views of Nation's Racial History – and How to Address It," Pew Research Center, August 12, 2021 <https://www.pewresearch.org/politics/2021/08/12/deep-divisions-in-americans-views-of-nations-racial-history-and-how-to-address-it/>.

³³ Juliana Menasce, Anna Brown, and Kian Cox, "Race in America," Pew Research Center, April 9, 2019, <https://www.pewresearch.org/social-trends/2019/04/09/race-in-america-2019/>.

³⁴ Bryan Stevenson and Ezra Klein, "Bryan Stevenson on How America Can Heal: A Conversation about Truth and Justice in the US," *Vox*, July 20, 2020. <https://www.vox.com/21327742/bryan-stevenson-the-ezra-klein-show-america-slavery-healing-racism-george-floyd-protests>,

journey that offers an immersion into the many intersections of the suppression of freedom to blacks and other oppressed in America. Situated in Montgomery, Alabama on a site where black slaves were once forced to work, the Museum uses interactive media, sculpture, videography, and exhibits to immerse visitors in the sights and sounds of the slave trade, racial terrorism, the Jim Crow South, and the world's largest prison system. Compelling visuals, narratives, and data-rich exhibits provide a one-of-a-kind opportunity to investigate America's history of racial injustice and its legacy — to draw dynamic connections across generations of Americans impacted by the tragic history of racial inequality.³⁵

The EJI also boasts the first and only national memorial dedicated to the victims of lynchings in America, The National Memorial for Peace and Justice (NMPJ). Much like Cone's cries for validation of black humanity, the memorial provides a sacred space for truth-telling about the atrocities heaped upon black bodies and often sanctioned by distortions of Christianity in America. Through the Community Remembrance Project, the soil from the "black blood" Cone insists "still cries out from the ground," is collected by community coalitions from documented lynching sites. These soil collections are displayed in an exhibit at the NMPJ and serve to acknowledge the injustices perpetrated upon the victims. Additionally, the coalitions include diverse community members who erect markers in the lynching locations in their communities. In this way, the markers evoke dialogue that works to reshape the cultural and physical landscape toward more honest narratives about the community's shared history. Other initiatives through EJI also

³⁵ Equal Justice Initiative website, The Legacy Museum: From Enslavement to Mass Incarceration. <https://museumandmemorial.eji.org/>

provide resources to work toward healthy race relations among blacks and whites in America of all generations.

Double Wokeness

Disrupting whiteness, as the efforts of the “double woke” theologian, offers a path to sustainable reconciliation efforts among black and White Christians. According to Robinson, “The ‘woke’³⁶ person claims, ‘I once was blind but now I see.’ The ‘double woke’ person admits, ‘I see that I am not yet fully free,’ which leads to asking, ‘What must I do to be saved?’”³⁷ In appealing to the “double woke” theologian, Robinson calls Christian leaders to a process of reforming one’s epistemological construct based on Cone’s Black Theology. Like the blind man whose initial healing yielded only partial and distorted vision, a second touch from Jesus is often needed to give further elucidation and empathy in the gift of salvation (Mark 8:22-26). This approach does not vehemently reject one’s Christianity; it challenges one’s lucidity, humility, and willingness to grow. Then, similar to Robert’s hermeneutic of leading within one’s own cultural sphere of influence, Robinson implores “double woke” white theologians to a disruption of whiteness, “The task for white theologians is to address whiteness and white people, while being held accountable by and to blackness without expecting or demanding the participation or appreciation of those dehumanized by whiteness.”³⁸ By calling forth white engagement and leadership concerning the realities of racial inequality, Robinson is hearkening the advice personally given her by Cone, “Whites need to do their own work.”

³⁶ According to Merriam Webster, “woke” is chiefly a US slang meaning aware of and actively attentive to important facts and issues (especially issues of racial and social justice).

³⁷ Robinson, “Liberating Whiteness.”

³⁸ Ibid.

Double wokeness, as an approach to disrupting whiteness, doesn't mean that black leaders cannot, and should not teach about the abuses of whiteness. Again, if Cone's and Robinson's definitions are to be understood in their broadest application, blacks, as well as whites, can be guilty of benefitting from whiteness at the expense of the oppressed. She writes, "Although white skin is neither the mark of nor the fullness of whiteness, all physically 'white' theologians—no matter their conscientization—participate in its destructive character."³⁹

J. Deotis Roberts, however, sees a more pressing need for black theologians. He asserts, "Black seminarians need to learn political science, economics, and law, as well as human relations and theology . . . As leaders of the black church, they would then be able to bring massive pressure to bear upon racist institutions."⁴⁰ Robinson's approach reminds us that, as a result of centuries of epistemological formation into whiteness, we cannot simply "reason" our way to "blackness." Those seeking to deny "whiteness" must make it a priority to engage with the contextual experience of blackness. Therefore, to deny whiteness is to disrupt whiteness by "*taking up blackness.*"

Taking Up Blackness

Cone's hermeneutic of suspicion fosters healthy skepticism about lingering improprieties in racist systems and structures in America. Therefore, to take up blackness is to invest politically, emotionally, and socially in the particular context of the oppressed. In this way, one agrees to deny the privileges associated with whiteness. One of the most relevant areas in which "taking up blackness" can be appropriated is in black/white relationships with law enforcement. If the *imago dei* means freedom and expresses an

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ Roberts, *Liberation and Reconciliation*, 106.

irrepressible desire to live as God intended, it becomes understandable how the history of sanctioned abuse against blacks at the hands of law enforcement in America yields little trust for this institution. If liberation demands a decision for *being* over the threat of *non-being*, the “courage to be” necessitates a choice - choosing *to be*. King insists that blacks in America are continually “plagued with inner fears and outer resentments; when you are forever fighting a degenerating sense of “nobodiness” then you will understand why we find it difficult to wait.”⁴¹ Cone has provided a compelling case for why young militants “find it difficult to wait” in the face of degrees of the same injustices and assaults on black freedom experienced by their fore-parents. Rebellion becomes a necessary reaction against the threat of unfreedom; indeed, it is a very human and *free* response.

Two years ago, my conversation with a radical, justice-seeking young Christian led to his accusation of America’s policing system as a hold-over from the slave patrols of the antebellum South. He indicted law enforcement, past and present, as comprised not simply of an occasional bad apple but a corrupt “basket of deplorables.” I chuckled rather derisively and chastised him for repeating such accusatory and ill-founded rhetoric. Belligerently, he insisted that it was I who had imbibed an “ill-founded rhetoric,” hook, line, and sinker. Since I had already begun researching Dr. King’s relationship with young black militants, it seemed prudent to peruse his writings for insights on my friend’s claim. In a 1964 report on the state of the civil rights struggle in America, King noted,

⁴¹ Martin Luther King, Jr., “Letter from Birmingham Jail,” in *A Testament of Hope: The Essential Writings of Martin Luther King, Jr.*, ed., James M. Washington, (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1986), 289-302, 293.

The most tragic and widespread violations occur in the areas of police brutality and the enforcement against the Negro of obviously illegal state statutes . . . The Civil Rights Commission, after a detailed scholarly and objective study, declared it to be one of the worst manifestations of the Negro's oppression . . . In a 1964 report on the state of the civil rights struggle in America, King noted, "Police brutality, with community support or at best indifference, is a daily experience for Negroes in all too many areas of the South." Then he added, "They [African Americans] live in a police state which, paradoxically, maintains itself within a democratic republic."⁴²

While King conveys the depth of corruption in the law enforcement of his era, his words here do not reveal a direct linkage to the canine-led, river-crossing reigns of domestic terrorism that harassed black freedom in the ante-bellum South. My search continued and soon led to more recent findings by former Harvard Law professor Sally E. Hadden. She writes,

The history of police work in the South grows out of this early fascination, by white patrollers, with what African American slaves were doing. Most law enforcement was, by definition, white patrolmen watching, catching, or beating black slaves. . . Although slave patrols officially ceased to operate at the close of the Civil War, their functions were assumed by other Southern institutions. Their law enforcing aspects – checking suspicious persons, limiting nighttime movement – became the duties of Southern police forces, while their lawless, violent aspects were taken up by vigilante groups like the Ku Klux Klan.⁴³

Hadden's studies prove the conflation of slave patrols, hate groups, and law enforcement in America's oppressive south. However, even more recent proof that "slave patrolling" was the womb that birthed and nurtured racist southern police practices is found in a 2015 Department of Justice Report on the Ferguson, Missouri Police Department (DOJRFMPD). Amid other abuses, the report identified one eerily familiar practice which breached black residents' constitutional rights, targeted use of police canine units

⁴² Martin Luther King, Jr., "Hammer on Civil Rights" in *A Testament of Hope: The Essential Writings of Martin Luther King, Jr.*, ed., James M. Washington, (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1986), 169-175, 172-173.

⁴³ Sally E. Hadden, *Slave Patrols: Law and Violence in Virginia and the Carolinas* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2001), 4.

historically known as “packs of negro dogs.” The report cites, “Ferguson Police Department engages in a practice of deploying canines to bite individuals when the articulated facts do not justify this significant use of force . . . leaving significant puncture wounds to non-violent offenders, some of them children.”⁴⁴ Though the DOJRFMPD’s report is not intended to indict all southern policing efforts, it provides evidence of the persistence of once legally (and socially) acceptable abuses against blacks.

Northern cities are also implicated in historical discriminatory policing practices. Khalil Muhammad, the Ford Foundation Professor of History, Race, and Public Policy at Harvard Kennedy School, has researched the history of black criminality (the labeling of criminal whether guilty or not) in America. Sadly, Muhammad notes, “The notion of criminality in the broadest sense has to do with slave rebellions and uprisings, the effort of black people to challenge their oppression in the context of slavery.”⁴⁵ Black insistence on freedom *by any means necessary* became labeled as criminal. After the Great Migration to northern US cities, “black criminality” took on other forms as blacks were viewed a “dangerous race,” a moniker that evolved from census data showing higher incarceration rates among blacks in the south. According to Muhammad, the data became part of a national assumption about blacks wherever they went. He adds, “Once we have the consolidation of the fact that crime statistics prove nationally, everywhere, that black people have a crime problem, the arguments for diminishing their equal citizenship rights are national. They’re not just Southern any longer. And they’re at every level of society -

⁴⁴ Larry H. Spruill, “Slave Patrols, Packs of Negro Dogs and Policing Black Communities,” *Phylon* 53, no. 1 (2016): 42-66. See Spruill for a century (1914 – 2013) of studies on historical racism in the south’s law enforcement culture by authors Howell Henry, Seldon Bacon, Richard Wade, Harrison Trexler, Stanley Campbell, Samuel Walker, Hubert Williams and Patrick Murphy, Sally E. Hadden, and Philip Reichel.

⁴⁵ Anna North, “How Racist Policing took over American Cities, Explained by an Historian,” *Vox*, June 6, 2020. <https://www.vox.com/2020/6/6/21280643/police-brutality-violence-protests-racism-khalil-muhammad>

local, state, federal.”⁴⁶ Additionally, racist propaganda like *The Birth of a Nation*, endorsed by a White House screening, provided more cultural animus in accusing blacks of criminality. Though more blatant in the Jim Crow south, perceptions of blacks as delinquents began to justify segregation and shape the “maldistribution of public goods” to black people: access to neighborhoods, schools, entertainment venues, hospitals, etc. Of course, failure of blacks to strictly adhere to any of these curtailments invited arbitrary enforcement by all too willing police departments. In the early twentieth century, blacks had little recourse to defend their freedom.

Muhammad’s research is commensurate with Cone’s perennial suspicion of American law enforcement. He insists, “The problem is the way policing was built and what it’s empowered to do, . . .”⁴⁷ Mounting evidence proves the system was built to hunt, incriminate, and even, kill blacks. In this way, black bodies are a threat, whether armed or not. It is the embedded perception of “blackness” as criminal, non-human, different, and therefore, expendable that still pervades policing in America. Today, historians like Emory University professor George Walters-Sleyon consider police brutality a “post-modern black lynching.” Such deep historical sanctioning of black brutality is why Roberts insists that radical changes must be made within historical-institutional structures and must be “root and branch” not simply” salves to wounds with deep internal causes.”⁴⁸

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ Ibid. See also Khalil Gibran Muhammad, *The Condemnation of Blackness: Race, Crime, and the Making of Modern Urban America* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2019). Muhammad provides thorough accounts of the pervasiveness of corrupt policing throughout northern cities. This treatise also includes statistical reporting from commissions and studies that informed urban development and social policies. Additionally, Muhammad provides an abundance of evidence for racial disparities in incarcerations, arrests, and punishment.

⁴⁸ Roberts, *Liberation and Reconciliation*, 11.

What began as a grassroots murmur has now developed into a full-throated shout, *Defund the Police!* Supporters of this movement call for the major reform or abolition of police forces. Supporters of divestment want to redirect some, but not all, funds away from police departments and insist that first responders should be victim advocates, mental health providers, social workers, and leaders familiar with the marginalized areas in need of service. Those seeking to disband police departments altogether consider defunding an initial step toward creating an entirely different model of community-led public safety. The concept exists on a spectrum; the two aren't dichotomous but interconnected. Both interpretations center on reimagining what public safety should look like -- shifting resources away from law enforcement toward community resources. However, the movement's confusing moniker has produced lackluster support among large swaths of the public, black and white alike. Ironically, the city of Minneapolis was one of the first to consider a major revamping of current policing practices. The Yes 4 Minneapolis initiative called for an elimination of required officers ("peace officers") per capita and replacement with various types of social workers and other mental health professionals. Critics cite politics, and an ill-defined program as reasons why the measure failed recently.

With racism historically woven into the American policing system, what is one to make of the presence of black cops? Are these cops complicit in a system that has historically devalued black humanity? According to Bureau of Justice Statistics data, blacks account for 11.4% of local police forces, compared to around 13% of the

population, a drop from 11.9% in 2013.⁴⁹ In the wake of mounting deaths of unarmed black men, it is not unusual to see black police chiefs flanked by black officers at press conferences in which they plead with black communities for patience and calm.

Telegenic images betray a more complex truth and invite the question, or assumption - Can a police force be racist if it employs black officers, particularly chiefs and heads of departments? Doesn't this black presence provide instant credibility and accountability? Bree Newsome, whom we first met scaling the SC capitol flag pole in chapter one, is convinced that focusing on the race of officers in a historically racist system is simply a dog whistle. She insists,

If the solution to racism were simply a matter of a few select Black people gaining entry to anti-Black institutions, we would see different outcomes than what we're witnessing now. But the idea that we can resolve racism by integrating what is perhaps the most fundamentally anti-Black institution in the U.S. — its policing and prison industry — is the most absurd notion of all.⁵⁰

Newsome's basic argument is two-fold: racism is so thoroughly embedded in US policing so that the corrective work is too complex and entrenched in its current form. Therefore, the integration of police forces does little to fundamentally alter a system built on a racist foundation. Those within may not even understand the extent of this problem. She adds, "This same pattern extends throughout the carceral state. Roughly a quarter of all bailiffs, correctional officers, and jailers are black, yet there's no indication that diversifying the

⁴⁹ Bureau of Justice Statistics, "Law Enforcement Management and Administrative Statistics (LEMAS)," 2016 <https://bjs.ojp.gov/data-collection/law-enforcement-management-and-administrative-statistics>. Whites accounted for 71.5% of the 701,000 sworn local police officers in the United States in 2016,

⁵⁰Bree Newsome Bass, "Putting a Black Face on Police Agendas," *Level*, Oct. 20, 2020. <https://level.medium.com/black-cops-dont-make-policing-any-less-anti-black-4baf78c2ab29>

staff of a racist institution results in less violence and death for those who are held within it.”⁵¹

In April of 1948, eight black officers were sworn in as Atlanta’s first “Negro” policemen. Though technically integrated, the new officers were relegated to a YMCA basement that served as a precinct away from their fellow white officers. Additionally, these new black officers were not permitted to “drive squad cars, patrol white neighborhoods, or wear their uniforms to or from work, and they absolutely could not arrest white people.”⁵² Histories like this prove how police forces could become “integrated” and remain upholders of racist ideologies and practices. Newsome’s words are a sobering reminder that dismantling racism is a Gordian Knot resistant to simplistic solutions. Elaine Robinson agrees, “The original sin of white supremacy is a complex, multi-headed hydra whose power lies in the ways in which white supremacy links racism to economic, political, intellectual, and legal advantages, in ever-changing manifestations.”⁵³

Though many blacks express frustration over racism in policing, attitudes toward the *Defund the Police* initiative defy simple explanation.⁵⁴ According to Newsome, there is a wide chasm between those blacks who represent affluence and the majority who inhabit the realities of disproportionate unemployment, lack of healthcare, and displacement due to gentrification in urban locations. She argues that blacks who benefit

⁵¹ Bass, “*Putting a Black Face on.*”

⁵² Thomas Mullen, “Black in Blue: Atlanta’s first African American Police Officers Were Vanguard of the Civil Rights Movement,” *Atlanta*, September 21, 2016. <https://www.atlantamagazine.com/great-reads/black-blue-atlantas-first-african-american-police-officers-vanguards-civil-rights-movement/>

⁵³ Robinson, “Liberating Whiteness.”

⁵⁴ Aaron Ross Coleman, “How Black People Really Feel About the Police, Explained,” *Vox*, June 17, 2020. <https://www.vox.com/2020/6/17/21292046/black-people-abolish-defund-dismantle-police-george-floyd-breonna-taylor-black-lives-matter-protest>.

from “tokenized positions of power” have much to lose if the foundation of the “white supremacist system” of policing was fully exposed. Newsome’s words invoke Victor’s Anderson’s critique of Cone’s blackness as “essentialism,” a fixed notion of black reality and identity which ignores the diversity within the black community. More and more, responses to racism and other cultural issues are growing more varied within the black community. While I agree with Cone’s insistence that most blacks are subjected to some degree of racism, growing intersectionalities among all Americans prove that responses to racism and inequality are often as varied as the cross-sections of people who experience them.

Following Jesus

Though Cone works to deconstruct racism in ecclesial and public spheres, he does not provide consistent restructuring plans for mobilization and organizational efforts.

Roberts, however, understands the need for a reconstruction beyond dismantlement; one that is sustainable and inclusive. He insists, “Our problem is serious; our ethics must be carefully pondered. The Christian faith has never, under any circumstances, sanctioned ‘any means’ as an ethical program.”⁵⁵ An organization that captures the moral concerns of King, revolutionary thrust of Cone, and inclusive agenda of Roberts is Repairers of the Breach (ROB). The organization’s main objective is a revolution of values as it seeks the political, economic, and social liberation of a broad range of oppressed people.

We challenge the position that the preeminent moral issues are prayer in public schools, abortion, and property rights. Instead, we declare that the moral public concerns of our faith traditions are how our society treats the poor, women, LGBTQ people, children, workers, immigrants, communities of color, and the sick. Our deepest moral traditions point to equal protection

⁵⁵ Roberts, *Liberation and Reconciliation*, 104-105.

under the law, the desire for peace within and among nations, the dignity of all people, and the responsibility to care for our common home.⁵⁶

In this excerpt from the organization's mission statement, it is obvious that ROB looks to move the moral conversation beyond traditional, conservative talking points of school prayer, abortion, and property. Instead, they look to affirm the humanity of all people through a contextualized assessment of the assaults against one's humanity. This approach doesn't suggest that traditional issues are unimportant. Instead, beginning in the particularity of the oppressed context confronts one's humanity head-on over an abstract projection prejudiced by one's limited "axiological grid." Such guards against a pharisaical appropriation of the "letter of the law" over the intended "spirit of the law." Additionally, ROB boasts a diverse leadership team whose mission and purpose is clear, "To repair the breach caused by centuries of systemic oppression and injustice in our country, we must organize, train, and work together with this diverse school of prophets and moral activists who represent every state and the District of Columbia."⁵⁷

Repairers of the Breach is an example of a contemporary organization that denies "whiteness," "takes up blackness," and ultimately "follows Jesus." The group's leader, Rev. William Barber, sees their movement as a revival of King's most radical initiative, the "Poor People's Campaign." It is comprised largely of intergenerational and interracial leaders who embrace a diverse agenda for the marginalized. The organization uses many means towards the end of racial equality and justice. By partnering with organizations such as the Institute for Policy Studies (IPS) and the Urban Institute (UI), ROB is able to

⁵⁶ Repairers of the Breach, "About Us," <https://www.breachrepairers.org/mission>.

⁵⁷ Ibid.

produce groundbreaking research that speaks to contemporary issues with accuracy and relevancy. Dr. Barber insists, “One of the worst things we can do in a movement is to be loud and wrong.”⁵⁸ A thorough investigation of public policy charts the organization’s direction as they seek to challenge others for the most vulnerable in America. ROB is planning an in-person *Mass Poor People’s and Low-Wage Workers’ Assembly and Moral March on Washington* in Washington, DC, on June 18, 2022.

The Kairos Center

The Kairos Center, housed at Cone’s beloved Union Theological Seminary in New York, develops leaders among poorer and oppressed citizens in order that they may take ownership of the issues that affect them most. The organization draws on the power of “religion and human rights,” and boasts a network comprised of diverse initiatives and targets,

We come together through organizing campaigns, mobilizations, convenings, educational programs, faith gatherings, arts and culture, research and scholarship, and more; we come together across historic lines of division like race, religion, age, and geography, in order to build up the unity and organization of the poor in this country.⁵⁹

Rev. Dr. Liz Theo-Harris, a white millennial activist and professor, is the organization’s founder. Theo-Harris leads and mobilizes a diverse staff of black, white, Latino, and Asian Christians and non-Christians of all generations who work at the intersection of religion and social transformation. Among them is Willie Baptist, a formerly homeless father and black revolutionary who came out of the Watts Uprising⁶⁰ and the Black

⁵⁸ Repairers of the Breach, Reports and Research, <https://www.breachrepairers.org/reports-and-research>.

⁵⁹ Kairos Center, “About Us,” <https://kairoscenter.org/about-us/>.

⁶⁰ The Watts Uprising (or Watts Riots) was a series of riots that broke out in August of 1965 in the predominately Black neighborhood of Watts. The riots resulted after the arrest of a young black man by a white California policeman leading to violent confrontations between Los Angeles police and black residents. Lasting 6 days, the Uprising resulted in 34 deaths, 1032 injuries and 4,000 arrests. Additionally,

Student Movement. Baptist boasts over 50 years of organizing experience among the marginalized and dispossessed in the communities in which he has served. He is currently Co-Coordinator of Poverty Scholarship and Leadership Development with the Kairos Center. Baptist attests to his life-long acquaintance with the intersections of inequality and poverty,

“Inequality is inhumane. I’ve been poor all my life. . . In Kensington, Philadelphia, poverty didn’t discriminate. It had one-third poor blacks, one-third poor Latinos, and one-third poor whites . . . It’s insane in light of the tremendous productive capacity and tremendous wealth that this country has. The problems of inequality of every dimension -- gender inequality, racial inequality, economic inequality has to be solved together.”⁶¹

Conclusion

I agree that whiteness speaks to the automatic privileging of certain people based on an initial biological reality – white skin. Such privileging has become embedded in systems, structures, and organizations in America due to the sinful foundation upon which they were founded. Even as social structures have become more integrated, foundational restructuring based on America’s and white Christianity’s early sanctioning of racism has not been the guiding principle. There has been no proverbial “wiping the slate clean,” if even possible. The case of the Atlanta policemen is a microcosm of integrated systems in America that became more diverse while retaining racist practices and ideologies. Without a thorough uprooting or even an admission of the depths of racism in America’s systems, it is reasonable to concede that remnants of these inequities persists today to complicate equitable treatment of all people.

34,000 people were involved and 1,000 buildings destroyed totaling around \$40 million dollars in damages to the city and surrounding areas.

⁶¹Willie Baptist, “Willie Baptist on Inequality and Poverty,” March 1, 2016, YouTube videos, 01:29, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dPyoQZgpVYI>.

The task of *denying whiteness* is the mandate of all Christians - black, white, and other -to acknowledge the reality of a system of oppression in America that privileges some and oppresses others. As such, it assumes the commitment to expose this ideology through intentional disruption of systems and institutions that deny one's freedom, the *imago dei*. To *take up blackness* is, then, to reimagine equity as identified in the particularity of the oppressed context. The cultural fields are ripe with issues that address gross inequities in our country.

Following Jesus is to carry the cross of fighting injustice, joining our Savior in the *missio dei* of reconciling freedom. Such involves personal and collective risks; a "costly grace" which demands disruption of racist systems that prevent human flourishing as God intended. Our task of living authentically into and toward interracial and intergenerational reconciliation is summed up by Roberts, "The kingdom claims us now in obedience. In radical obedience, love of God is entwined with love of neighbor. Such radical obedience is needed in the field of race."⁶²

Epilogue

James H. Cone's passionate rhetoric of revolution and J. Deotis Robert's pastoral engagement across racial lines provide necessary insight to contemporary issues surrounding racial division in America. As young blacks express their existential freedom through frustration, mistrust, and rebellion, Cone sacralizes these responses as expressions of the *imago dei*. I argue that Cone's theology of liberation still provides a sense of "somebodiness" that validates the insistence for authentic self-expression in the

⁶² Roberts, *Liberation and Reconciliation*, 5.

face of oppression. American churches are wise to hear and learn from the cries for (and of) freedom that begin in the particularity of the oppressed context. In doing so, one meets God where He is already at work -- liberating and reconciling all humanity, the *missio dei*.

Cone provides lucid understanding of the paradoxical expressions of young black protest and pain; black humanity that resists black dehumanization. Therefore, liberation, in Cone, is a needed antidote against internalized racism, self-rejection, and social abdication of one's God intended blackness. By focusing on the person and presence of Jesus in the context of the oppressed, the historical narrative of black inferiority in America is upended. Without the theological and social disruptions of Cone, and other liberation theologians, attempts at dismantling systemic racism remain superficial and mostly insignificant. Revolution is not simply rhetoric, in the face of racial injustice, it is the reality and responsibility of all Christians.

Roberts concurs with much of Cone's lament; racism in America has been mostly perpetrated and pardoned by white Christianity. Therefore, black liberation is necessary if reconciliation is to be lived out among equals. Indeed, true *reconciliation* requires true *liberation*. In working to build bridges of equality, Roberts insists on appealing to the shared faith of black and white Christians; such provides the mandate, and Holy Spirit's equipping for the difficulty of this work. Robert's separate, yet ultimately inclusive, approach lends itself to an organic development of reconciliation among equals. Here, one finds creative opportunities for specific plans of actions, as well as organized mass movements led by a diversity of leaders.

As a black pastor of a white, suburban congregation in South Carolina, the teachings of Cone and Roberts impact me greatly; I am challenged to live with great intentionality toward my liberation and reconciliation in Christ. Sometimes, this effort feels akin to the Dubosian “double consciousness;” an exhausting and amorphous habitation that can frustrates one’s sense of wholeness as a black American. Such cultural negotiations, however, are native to most blacks. Often, it seems the issues of race and freedom that burden my heart (and face our nation) are far removed from the concerns of those I serve. For now, I have found that teaching on the detrimental effects of “whiteness” is done most effectively by living truthfully and unapologetically in my blackness. This intentionality, coupled with teaching and preaching from the particularity of the oppressed context, allows the Holy Spirit to meet willing responders right where they are. As I serve, I strive to develop authentic relationships that can withstand truthful and healthy dialogue about race, racism, and consequently, reconciliation. This approach is a form of Heifetz’s adaptive leadership.

According to Marcia McFee, “liminality, taken from the root, ‘limen, means *threshold*; liminality is a state of ‘betwixt and between.’ We are not in the same relationship or identity as before. And we are not yet in a newly defined relationship and identity.”⁶³ Indeed, the “already and not yet” of reconciliation is a liminal space; one of uncertainty and needed vulnerability. I suggest that Christians embrace these spaces with great intentionality and humility. True liberation will lead to moments of misspeaking, misinterpretations, and misunderstandings. Ironically, these mis-steps are the seeds to the

⁶³ Marcia McFee, “Ritual Formation: Liturgical Practices and the Practice of Peacebuilding” in *Conflict and Communion, Reconciliation and Restorative Justice at Christ’s Table*, ed. Thomas Porter (Nashville: Upper Room, 2006), 67-77, 69.

new creation, our life together as redeemed brothers and sisters. The Holy Spirit provides grace to remain in spaces otherwise unbearable and unsustainable. Essentially, we are graced with holy resources for a new way of *being* and *being together* even though “we do not yet see the new thing.” Such describes the mutual habitation I share with those I lead and serve.

Navigating liminal spaces is never easy; indeed, such maneuvering is often a messy ordeal. Cone acknowledges the dialogical impediments regarding race even among Christians, “A multi-racial dialogue is not easy to navigate, because each group has experienced white supremacy in different ways and thus has developed different ways to cope with and resist it.”⁶⁴ As we engage our liberation (*imago dei*) in the work of reconciliation (*missio dei*), God’s Word guides as lamp and light in the uncomfortable, but necessary, threshold.

Though Cone and Roberts differed greatly in tone and style, the theologians respected the sincere commitment that each brought to a much-needed dialogue. The richness of their differences both enlighten and challenge Christians of all ethnicities and generations to live in and toward an authentic reimagination of liberation and reconciliation.

⁶⁴ James H. Cone, “The Challenge of Race: A Theological Reflection,” in *Ethics That Matter: African, Caribbean and African American Sources*, ed. Marcia Y. Riggs and James Samuel Logan (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2012), 77-91, 88.

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