Black Liberation Theology in the United States: An Historical Survey

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BLACK LIBERATION THEOLOGY IN
THE UNITED STATES:
AN HISTORICAL SURVEY

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The Honors Program
College of St. Benedict/St. John’s University

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by
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Black Liberation Theology in the United States

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"And the brow of the young man grew dark, and his eyes burned with an expression that made his young wife tremble. 'Who made this man my master?...I have been kicked, and cuffed, and swore at, and at best only let alone; and what do I owe? I've paid for all my keeping a hundred times over. I won't bear it - no, I won't!'"

-George, *Uncle Tom's Cabin*
Section One: Liberation Theology: General Concepts

The passage on the preceding page from Uncle Tom's Cabin is a stirring reminder of where most black Americans have their roots. It is also a reminder of the injustice that was practiced by white society, then and now. Black liberation theology looks at the experiences of blacks, especially experiences of oppression, and draws on them to build a theology that expresses the relationship of these experiences to God and the call of the Gospel. In this way it is of the same fiber as other liberation theologies that are developing around the world, including those among women, Latin Americans, and other minorities. The focal point of each group is as individual as the situation that each faces, but all are seeking to be as authentic to the Gospel message as is possible.

In general, liberation theology is an awareness of the interrelatedness of the Christian’s mission to bring God’s Kingdom into the world and the necessity of being involved in correcting the injustices that are causing oppression and
poverty. This awareness goes beyond identification with the traditional poor, those without money and material goods, to those who are poor in power, respect, self-esteem and religious freedom. Liberation theology attempts to give authenticity to these people's expression of their humanity, whether it be through social action or religious worship.

Within this paper, I wish to deal with the search for liberation by blacks in the United States. Their struggle is not just one of theology; it is bound intimately within the context of the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s and 1970s. Their theological struggle includes a fight to be recognized as full participants in society—politically, socially, culturally, and personally. My belief is that, in order to be recognized as equals socially and theologically, blacks need to continue their re-claiming and re-evaluating of their history. This paper will provide a survey of what has been accomplished thus far. There has been great progress in the development of a black theology of liberation by such theologians as James Cone and Gayraud Wilmore. It is also important, however, that this theology become a source of pride and a solid foundation for all blacks, not just for intellectuals.

Before beginning to speak of black liberation theology specifically, a basic survey of the concepts of liberation theology is needed. In the words of Gustavo Gutierrez, a prominent Latin American theologian, "liberation theology
addresses how to speak about God (because theology is always a way to speak about God) from the suffering of the innocents, the suffering of poor persons.¹ Liberation theology seeks to attain a more just society, where the poor have basic needs met, whether those needs are material or spiritual. Because this type of theology cannot be contained within a church structure, it influences the political structure of the world as well. In Latin America this may mean challenging the political parties that are in power; in the United States it may mean blacks protesting the social-economic conditions that allow for ghettos. Liberation theology takes seriously the concept of building the Kingdom of God on earth, and one of the integral components of the Kingdom is justice.

In this context, social science cannot be separated from theology; it must be used as a tool by theologians to study the historical and cultural context out of which they are working. If one does not have a clear grasp of where one has been and is now, there can not be a definitive move into a better, more just future. In other words, if one did not know what had caused the present unjust situation, one would not know what to work toward remedying.

The social flavor of liberation theology is not drawn out of a void by activists trying to couch their movements

in religion. Justice is mentioned a great deal in both the Hebrew Scriptures and in the New Testament; in more recent decades it is dealt with in the Catholic Church by Vatican II, especially in the documents Decree on the Apostolate of Lay People (Apostolicam Actuositatem) and the Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World (Gaudium et Spes).

In the books of the Hebrew Scriptures, God is portrayed time and again as the Just One, the Liberator. God says, "I am the Lord, and I will bring you out from under the burdens of the Egyptians, and I will deliver you from their bondage, and I will redeem you with outstretched arm and with great acts of judgement."² This is an apt picture of God in liberation theology. God is not a distant, unbiased observer, who, after creating the world, simply lets it follow whatever course it happens upon. God is instead One who is outraged at the injustices being committed against the Chosen People, One who is involved, actively stretching out an arm to rescue and restore. This powerful God is not on the side of the rich and mighty, but chooses instead to be identified as the God of the poor who sees their historical situation and works within that situation to create a new order of society. Just as this was true over 3,000 years ago for the Hebrew people in Egypt, so also is

it true in the present for the oppressed wherever they may be.

The establishment of a just society is not, however, done only by God. It is not right to sit passively, taking the attitude that God will remedy the situation if it is needed—therefore if the situation is unjust or discriminatory, it is as God wills it to be. The establishment of justice is the duty of every person:

Thus says the Lord: Do justice and righteousness, and deliver from the hand of the oppressor the one who has been robbed. And do no wrong or violence to the alien, the fatherless, and the widow, nor shed innocent blood.  

To be a follower of God's plan requires involvement in correcting social evils, in standing up for those who cannot stand up for themselves. Liberation theology calls this commitment to the powerless the "preferential option for the poor." Gustavo Gutierrez stresses that the two most important words in that phrase are "preference" and "opt." "Preference," while not meaning exclusion, does mean to give more to the poor, simply because they are more marginalized and forgotten. "Opt" signifies a free decision to act, which each person must make individually. This preferential option is a challenge that is based on God's own actions, not on a romanticization of the poor.

The New Testament abounds with teachings on justice and

3Jeremiah 22:3.
on the poor. Jesus of Nazareth was a living model for relating to the poor and oppressed. Jesus chose to associate with fishermen, not scribes; he chose to eat with sinners and tax collectors rather than with teachers and rabbis. The Gospel of Luke is especially sensitive to the poor and to the unjust social situation that they face. Look, for example, at the story of the good Samaritan (Luke 10:30-37). At first glance the message seems obvious—one should give assistance wherever it is needed, without distinction because of race, class or religion. However, there is also a deeper commentary being made on the social structure that allows such an incident to take place. "The parable is not a pleasant tale about the traveler who did his good deed; it is a damning indictment of social, racial, and religious superiority."\(^4\) Liberation theology is also a "damning indictment" of society, but then moves beyond it to attempt to rectify that unjust order.

The beatitudes, found in both Matthew and Luke, are presented with a slight twist in Luke. In addition to the list of blessings, there is also a list of condemnations of the rich and complacent. This demonstrates in no uncertain terms the serious nature of living selfishly with no thought of economic and social justice. Those who suffer are likened to true prophets of God, who called attention to the

failure of society to obey God's will; the rich on the other hand are the false prophets, who support and promote the current inequalities in order to remain comfortable, ignorant of the demands of God.

The letter from James has an accurate summary of how faith in Jesus and obedience to his teachings relate to the need for Christians to be actively involved in social justice. "If a brother or sister is ill-clad and in lack of daily food, and one of you says 'Go in peace, be warmed and fed,' without giving them the things needed for the body, what does it profit?" To do so is pure hypocrisy.

During the middle of the twentieth century, Christianity was experiencing a changing mentality about the social role of the Church and its duties toward the poor. As an example, this paper will look at the reevaluation of the Catholic Church's position on the world which took place in Vatican II, specifically as it was expressed in the documents Decree on the Apostolate of the Laity (Apostolicam Actuositatem) and the Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World (Gaudium et Spes).

In the Decree on the Apostolate of the Laity, social involvement is emphasized as a duty of, indeed the calling of, lay persons.

The characteristic of the lay state being a life led in the midst of the world and of secular affairs, laity are called by God

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\(^5\)John 2:15-16.
to make of their apostolate, through the vigor of their Christian spirit, a leaven in the world.⁶

Being a leaven includes not only bringing the word of God to others, but also manifesting God's design for human, social activities. Proponents of liberation theology take the Gospels and revelations of God out of the realm of scholastic, "ivory tower" activity and put them into everyday activities. For these Christians, the call to justice and Christian social action are preeminent parts of being a leaven. This document emphasizes as well that one cannot separate one's faith life from one's public life:

"The lay person, at one and the same time a believer and a citizen of the world, has only a single conscience, a Christian conscience; it is by this that one must be guided continually in both domains."⁷ The role of a Christian conscience is difficult to overvalue. It is through a Christian conscience that just social decisions can be made, and because of it that one decides personally to make a preferential option for the poor as advocated by liberation theology.

While previously the Church would have encouraged spreading God's word as the Christian's duty in the world, that duty now includes reaching out to make available any


⁷Apostolicam Actuositatem, 2.
assistance, spiritual or material, that may be needed by any person, no matter what sex, age, faith or race.

The main theological basis for liberation theology to come out of Vatican II was the Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World (Gaudium et Spes). Here a new vision of the interconnectedness of the church and state was propounded. In the document on the laity, individual responsibility was emphasized; in this document, that vision is expanded. It is the responsibility of the Church as a whole to work for temporal justice. It is the duty of governments as a whole to begin addressing injustices that have been institutionalized within the system and to begin correcting them. Liberation theology holds up the Christian ideal as a blueprint for the radical and fundamental changes that must take place to return to people their humanity, their dignity, their basic human rights.

There is a growing awareness of the sublime dignity of the human person, who stands above all things and whose rights and duties are universal and inviolable. He ought, therefore, to have ready access to all that is necessary for living a genuinely human life.

Gaudium et Spes encouraged the hierarchical church to take a serious look at the task of bringing God’s Kingdom into reality. Because of this priests and bishops began to explore the social situations of their peoples. Soon a feeling of outrage and a desire to change the injustices

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Gaudium et Spes, 26, in Flannery, Vatican II: The Conciliar and Post Conciliar Documents.
facing their people forced some churchmen to take seriously the call to "spare no effort to banish every vestige of social and political slavery and to safeguard basic human rights under every political system."\textsuperscript{9}

In summary, liberation theology is an attempt to take religion out of the church and incorporate it into the world. It is being done by priests, theologians, but most importantly, by everyday people. These people see the conflict between what is and what should be, and actively work at changing the defective structures and institutions around them until they comply with the justice, equality, and dignity that is advocated by their faith. This involves real and sometimes violent conflict with those who have political and social power. Liberation theology seeks to return to the oppressed and marginalized their dignity and basic human rights, so that there is then the freedom to worship God in an authentic, healthy atmosphere.

\textsuperscript{9} \textit{Gaudium et Spes}, 29.
Section Two: The Civil Rights Movement as a Basis for Black Liberation Theology

One of the main forces behind black liberation theology in the United States was the Civil Rights movement of the 1960s and 1970s. This movement was focused on gaining social, economic and political equality, but far from remaining in the social arena, its exuberance and cries for justice overflowed into the black church. With leaders such as Malcolm X and Martin Luther King, Jr. religion was never separated from politics by more than a hair’s breadth.

In the book Civil Rights by Rhoda Blumberg, nine of the most pressing demands of the Civil Rights movement are listed. She describes them as follows:

1. Freedom from enslavement and destruction of family;
2. The right to earn a living: land, jobs;
3. Freedom from harassment, terror and violence;
4. Equal justice;
5. The right to vote;
6. Quality education;
7. Integration, or alternately, escape from oppression;
8. Recognition of the African cultural heritage; and
9. The right to self pride and an end to stereotyping. 10

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These demands deal not only with objectively equal
treatment, but reflect the subjective human need for dignity
and recognition of basic personal worth.

When the Civil Rights movement began, most of the
leaders believed that they could achieve their objectives by
working peacefully within the system. As time progressed and
the violence intensified this became less and less
believable. Despite this fact, leaders like Martin Luther
King, Jr. continued their work within the system. One clear
example of King's confrontation within the system occurred
in Selma, Alabama, before the Voting Rights Act was passed
in 1965. While maintaining his program of nonviolence, King
was able to organize protests, marches and demonstrations
that brought out the worst in extreme racists. This tactic
of precipitating racist violence in order to win media
coverage, and in turn, public support that could translate
into legislation, was very successful.

To demonstrate the intensity of violence and injustice
that was needed to jar the system into action, one need only
review the events in Selma. Sheriff Jim Clark, acting in
the name of "the system," was the driving force behind the
violence. In October, 1963 he refused to allow over 350
blacks to register to vote, and arrested any who sought to
assist them in their struggle. In July, 1964 a state judge
"banned all marches and black meetings in Selma. With the
law behind them, Clark's deputies swung their nightsticks
more freely than ever before.\textsuperscript{11} During January, 1965, Clark beat and arrested over 250 blacks who attempted to register. In February, he arrested over 1,300, including Martin Luther King, Jr. His men also "arrested 165 protesting youths, then chased them out of town, lashing out with electric cattle prods as they drove alongside."\textsuperscript{12}

The final straw, however, came on "Bloody Sunday," March 7, 1965. Approximately 600 blacks began a march toward the state capital. They were met by state troopers who rushed forward clubbing, swinging bullwhips and rubber tubing wrapped in barbed wire, and exploding canisters of tear gas. When clips of this attack were shown on television the nation was outraged. Thousands who had previously been uninvolved left their homes to join the demonstrators in Alabama. In the legislature, it was undeniably this blatant disregard of human life, dignity and freedom of expression that put the final push behind the introduction and passage of the Voting Rights Act.

King's approach to social liberation is an example of one of two strands of thought that guided the Civil Rights movement. It is more conciliatory, more desirous of integration. This approach advocated that "African Americans, like other ethnic groups, had shared in the


\textsuperscript{12}Ibid., p.135.
building of the country, belonged here, and could and should become assimilated into the general culture."\textsuperscript{13} On the other hand, there were others within the Civil Rights movement that believed that there needed to be complete separation from whites since they showed no willingness to ever accept blacks on an equal basis. It is from this type of ideology that the Black Power movement began. One description of this ideology is as follows:

\begin{quote}
Black Power represented a nationalistic, seemingly more revolutionary ideology which rejected white American culture and paralleled the nationalist movements of formerly colonized peoples abroad.\textsuperscript{14}
\end{quote}

The emergence of the Black Power movement signaled a change in the attitude of blacks toward their situation in America. Although it put more emphasis on black pride, which is a great positive, there were also some reservations about its use of violence. Previously the Civil Rights movement tried to bind itself onto the white power structures, to become as much a part of that system as possible. This was not necessarily a denial of blackness, but their African heritage was not pushed to the forefront as a source of pride and uniqueness. It was instead a barrier to their struggle for freedom that needed to be overcome. One of the distinctive differences between mainline Civil Rights ideology and that of Black Power is

\begin{itemize}
\item[$\textsuperscript{13}$] Blumberg, p. 8.
\item[$\textsuperscript{14}$] Ibid., p. 9-10.
\end{itemize}
that "the Civil Rights groups had sought inclusion in the ongoing political and economic structures; the Black Power groups questioned these very structures." This questioning seems a logical reaction to one's relationship to a system that has oppressed one's ancestors for generations. Is there enough value to that system to merit the effort of remaining within it?

Another positive aspect of Black Power is its attitude towards black cultural heritage and the right to build socially upon it.

Jews, Poles and Italians were not questioned when they maintained separate clubs, schools, and associations; Blacks now asserted the validity of their own Afro-American culture and their right to create and develop their own institutions. This assertion is significant in its recognition of the equal value of black heritage when compared to that of other American minorities.

Malcolm X, one of the key Black Power leaders, commented on why Black Power was more capable of inciting those blacks not involved with the Civil Rights movement: "The greatest mistake of the movement was trying to organize a sleeping people around specific goals. You have to wake the people up first...to their humanity, to their own worth,  

\^15\textit{ibid.}, p.119.  
\^16\textit{ibid.}
to their heritage.17 It is only after the people are cognizant of their personal value that they will find it worthwhile to fight for equality. If they were to remain ignorant of their history, there would be no motivation to assert their equality and to refute the social attitudes facing them. As time went on and greater self-pride and self-direction developed among blacks, they relied less and less upon white participation in the movement, and depended on black leadership from within the group.

The aspect of Black Power that caused the greatest amount of controversy was the rejection of non-violence. Martin Luther King, Jr., the greatest advocate of non-violence, responded to the switch to Black Power with resigned sadness:

I should have known that in an atmosphere where false promises are daily realities, where deferred dreams are nightly facts, where acts of unpunished violence toward Negroes are a way of life, non-violence would eventually be seriously questioned.18

The justifiability of violence has been debated by many, but never with consistent results. During the Civil Rights movement, many young activists who became disillusioned with non-violence and working within the system saw violence as the only way to get the attention of whites. They were tired of seeing hundreds of innocent

17 Weisbrot, p.234.
18 Blumberg, p.118.
blacks maimed, injured and killed without resistance; it began to seem self-defeating to "turn the other cheek." For many the only way of expressing their anger and disgust for the racist system they were forced to live in was to physically strike out at the representatives of that system. On the other side, there were still those who advocated the non-violent stance. Violence was simply perpetuating the stereotype of the angry, unreasonable black who could think of no better way to respond to a situation than with violence. Violence against the system could also alienate those whites who wished to assist in the Civil Rights struggle either by being physically present or, perhaps more importantly for black organizations, economically supportive.

The debate on violence took place not only in the social sphere, but also within the black church, especially as there were parallel non-violent and Black Power movements within the ranks of black clergymen. Here it included the justifiability of violence as a part of the liberation theology movement. Black scholars who began to think along the lines of a black liberation theology spoke less about physical violence than about emotional violence, such as hatred. In James Cone's Black Theology and Black Power, written during the violence of the Civil Rights movement, hatred is a logical response to white society:

Why can [white people] not understand why black people, who have been deliberately
and systematically dehumanized or murdered by the structure of this [American] society, hate white people?  

Although black scholars and Civil Rights activists made their feelings and grievances known, what of the black church and black theologians?

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Section Three: The Black Church as a Basis for Black Liberation Theology

The role of the black church as a liberator of its people has varied greatly through the years. During the time of slavery, slave owners, in order to have as much control over their slaves as possible, forbid the use of their native languages, customs and religions. In the place of their native religious, the slaves were given Christianity, but a slightly twisted version. Slave owners, again to increase their control over the slaves, taught the "virtues" of meekness, humility and obedience, along with the ordination by God of a superior (i.e. white) and an inferior, subservient (i.e. black) race. For this they drew on biblical stories such as that of Ham, son of Noah. "Cursed be Canaan (son of Ham)! The lowest of slaves shall he be to his brothers."\(^2\)\(^0\) White slave owners also emphasized the other-worldliness of Christianity, placating the slaves with the vision of heaven where all the troubles of this world would be eased and all distinctions erased.

\(^{20}\text{Genesis 9:25.}\)
Despite this, black churchmen did not accept the white interpretations of Christianity that were given to them, which suggested that the Gospel "was concerned with freedom of the soul and not the body."\textsuperscript{21} The black church became a place where blacks could meet without white influence and so a place to announce freedom and equality. At times, members of the black church even called for open rebellion. In 1848 the Reverend Highland Garnet "taught that the spirit of liberty is a gift from God and God thus endows the slave with the zeal to break the chains of slavery."\textsuperscript{22} Members of the black church realized that, despite the teachings of the white owners, the black experience of God, as formed by the Bible and personal faith, was completely incompatible with the practice of slavery. Often, in order to control these beliefs, blacks were "allowed" to worship in the same church as their white owners.

After the Civil War, great numbers of black churches sprang up. Blacks who had previously worshiped in white churches with their owners were no longer welcome. Slavery was replaced with racism. At this point in time, black churches became a "place of retreat from the dehumanizing forces of white power. It was the one place in which the blacks were 'safe' from the new racist structures that

\textsuperscript{21}\textit{One, Black Theology and Black Power}, p.93.
\textsuperscript{22}\textit{Ibid.}, p.96.
replaced slavery. In order to remain "safe" black churches began to be less inflammatory and more accommodating toward whites. Preachers began to speak of the need to obey docilely all of the rules of white society. Their sermons dealt with the evils of drinking rather than with the evils of the racist society they were forced to live in. Fear of the violence that groups like the Ku Klux Klan could do and the consequences of a biased legal system were great deterrents for any attempt at opposing the system, through the church or otherwise. Eventually, the black church became more of an instrument of escape than an instrument of protest.

In addition to the physical threat that black churches attempted to avoid, there was also the economic threat that angering whites had. The role that white generosity played in black church economic survival is undeniable. It was largely because of white "charity" that black churches were able to obtain land for their church buildings and to maintain the property that they did have. Angering whites often meant losing financial support and so a slimmer chance for financial survival. Because of this "there was the temptation to let economics, rather than religion, determine [the black church's] actions." This tendency is as present now as it was then, in any church, no matter what

\[^{23}\] Ibid., p.104.

\[^{24}\] Ibid., p.78.
racial identity.

As the Civil Rights period began, the black church, although it produced most of the great leaders of the movement, was far from leading the fight. In fact, James Cone stated that "the NAACP and the Urban League (and later CORE, SCLC, and SNCC) were created because of the failure of the black church to plead the cause of black people in white society."25 At this point, black churches were still too dependent on approval from white churches to make much of a move toward liberation. This was even more true for blacks in white parishes. Here especially whites had control over finances and so what those finances would be used for. A more subtle form of control occurred when whites promoted their trusted black executives within the church. Then when blacks fought for changes they had to fight against other blacks rather than against whites.

Why did blacks continue going back to the church even if it was not providing an outward movement toward liberation? It is interesting to note that despite the black church's lack of activism, it always held an important role as a home base for black Civil Rights workers. The cause of this is not to be found in the formal, institutional workings of the church. It is the community that gives vitality and strength to the institution, and in the black community, vitality and strength were their main

25 Ibid., p.106.
possessions, developed through a history of oppression.

One of the main characteristics of black worship is its joyful praise of God for the simple blessings of life; in light of the black experience, the ability to still find things worth praising is a tribute to the strength of the black church community. But praising is not just a manifestation of that strength; it is also a sustenance, a way of finding enough joy to survive an otherwise joyless life. Henry H. Mitchell described the nourishing character of black praise in this way:

> The very survival of blacks is a tribute to its sustaining ways. And nobody need be liberated who has not survived. The positive world view, of which this praise is the expression, is the very heart of black faith and mass culture.26

At a certain point in the late 1960s, the black church began to take a critical look at itself, in order to become a more effective part of the black struggle for liberation and justice that was taking place in the United States. They began to see the disparity between the call of the Gospel, the real life situation of black people, and their action, or rather non-action, in answering the call to justice. In September, 1967, at the National Council of Churches Conference on the Church and Urban Tensions, black churchmen issued a declaration on their position as well as on their desires for the future. They confessed to giving

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in to white pressure by not celebrating, preserving and enhancing the black heritage. As a result of this, they stated:

[We] have allowed the truth, meaningfulness and authenticity of the Black Church to be defamed by our easy acceptance of its [white society's] goals, objectives and criteria for success. Therefore, the Black Church has unwittingly become a tool for our oppression, providing an easy vehicle for escape from the harsh realities of our own existence.27

By being a "tool for oppression" the black church has been failing in its response to the liberating call of the Gospel.

After defining their "sins of omission," the assembly then advocated a remedy, calling the Black Church to commit to the following five proposals:

1. To the establishment of freedom schools to offset the degradation and omission of a white-dominated public school system.
2. To workshops fostering Black family solidarity.
3. To training lay leadership in community organizations and other relevant skills.
4. To massive efforts to support financially Black groups for self-determination.
5. To the removal of all images which suggest that God is white.28

These proposals sought to align the Black church once again with the struggle of the Black people and to begin reclaiming and reaffirming their black heritage and history.


28 ibid.
And so it was that a new, Black theology began to develop, by churchmen with "the Bible in one hand and the newspaper in the other."\textsuperscript{29}

A black theology of liberation did not, however, develop into a perfectly authentic expression of black values over night, or even within a few years. If blacks— theologians, churchmen, and scholars—knew that the white system and religious structures were oppressive rather than supportive of black realization of humanity, why did black liberation theology develop as slowly as it did? The answer can be narrowed down to four main points.

1. Reaction \textit{vs} Action. The developers of this theology spent a great amount of time and energy reacting to white actions. It would have been better served by acting in black interests. One of the disadvantages of reaction rather than action is that there is no creative development of new ideas. In this context black thinkers produced many documents pointing out injustices, protesting inequalities and addressing situations; however, there was little in these documents suggesting what should be done to affirm the equality of the history and culture of blacks in America.

A second negative is the fact that, because of working from a negative reaction to whites, there was no chance to create black liberation theology out of a positive reaction.

to black history and culture. Cone described this phenomenon as follows: "It was as if the sole basis for black theology were racism among whites. But if so, and if racism were eliminated, then there would be no need for a theology based on the history and culture of blacks." 30

Obviously this is untrue—as long as there are black people, there will be a need for them to express themselves authentically through their religion. There will never be an acceptable time to ignore or deny a race's history and its legitimate influence of their religious expression.

2. Largely Academic Involvement. For a time, the black liberation theology movement was concentrated in the academic circle. It became a mental exercise for the educated rather than a movement of all black people toward liberation. In any movement, be it political, social or religious, it is necessary to involve the masses, or be resigned to failure. It is the involvement of people from all walks of life that gives a movement its continuing vitality and inspiration. During the early 1970s, black theology became an academic discipline, and...debates about black theology took place among black scholars. The issues involved the relationship between liberation and reconciliation, black religion and black theology, and the problem of theodicy. 31

Certainly, these topics have relevance in developing a

30bid., p. 87.

complete theology; but what, practically, does their discussion accomplish? Black theology is developed not to be the subject of publications and debates, but to be a liberating force for all black people to help them to gain for themselves an authentic representation of their religious beliefs. This re-formation of beliefs must take place at the grass roots level, or it is merely a "head game" for the elite.

3. Unreasonableness of Racist Structures. Blacks underestimated the pervasiveness of racism within the church and social structures. Too much reliance was placed on the belief that once whites were informed, everything would change. After being so dependent in the past on the approval of white institutions, perhaps it was only natural for blacks to have some hope that these "parent" figures would not turn a completely deaf ear to their "children's" plea for equality. "Although [black clergy] knew that whites were white first and Christian second, they believed that the order could be reversed, provided that whites were presented with the radical claims of the Gospel." 32

Unfortunately, an oppressed people has never received their rights on a silver platter from their oppressors. Racism is so much a part of the white Christian institution that logic and pointing out the obvious call for justice of the Gospel will not extricate it. A new and independent theology can

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32 ibid., p.46.
not rely on the support and approval of the one it is breaking away from.

4. White Training of Black Theologians. Black churchmen, theologians and scholars were educated and trained in white institutions. This is one of the greatest weaknesses of black theology. Black theologians (and here are included churchmen and scholars) were trained in white institutions, were taught from the context of European theology and history, and were indoctrinated with the white interpretation of God and sacred scripture. What had previously passed as simply "general" theology was really white theology, and more specifically,

white theology from an English perspective, or from a German perspective, etc., formed in the feudal period of medieval Europe, or in the liberal period of the Enlightenment, or in the more pessimistic period following the First World War. 33

To bring out more clearly how alienating this was for blacks, imagine, as a white person, that you are a part of the minority. You have been trained by Africans, in an African society, have used African theology and history as your point of reference, and have been taught that God and Jesus are African. Your pale skin, straight hair and light colored eyes are in no way part of the divine image. In a situation such as this, can there be pride in one's own history? Can there be an opportunity to develop an

authentic vision of God? Can there be positive reinforcement of an honest cultural expression of spirituality? Such were the obstacles black theologians faced.

Because of this, black theologians struggled to define the problems facing them independently, rather than simply accepting the problem as defined by white theologians. By doing so, they risked losing the air of legitimacy that came with being approved of by the white institution. This was both a personal and a professional dilemma. James Cone spoke for them all:

We had internalized too much of the theological values of the whites whom we were attacking. Therefore, even when we attacked them for their racism, we could not separate ourselves from them, because we wanted to become like them, teaching at their schools and writing books to prove that we could think as well as they.34

Soon, however, black theologians began to realize the futility of trying to compete with whites, of trying to prove that they could be as "white," and so as equal, as the whites were. At that point blacks began to realize the richness of their own background, history, and cultural identity. It was from this that a basis for black theology was made; to use any other would be self defeating. And so black liberation theology continued its development.

34Cone, For My People, p. 114.
Section Four: Key Developments Within Black Liberation Theology

Although the new developments within black liberation theology are numerous, there are three that are considered central: 1. the development of a black christology; 2. the redefinition of church; and 3. the reinterpretation of Christian ethics.

Christology, the study of Jesus Christ and the meaning of the incarnation and resurrection, is obviously central to all of Christian theology. For blacks, however, this began to pose a problem, not because of Jesus Christ’s portrayal in the New Testament, but because of his portrayal in white theology. Somehow, this Semitic Jew through the ages became a light skinned, blue eyed person. In addition to this historical distortion, this portrayal of Jesus began to be a symbolic distortion of what he had stood for in his own time as well as what he stands for now.

Why did this happen? If historically Jesus was dark skinned rather than light, what was the artists’ motivation for changing it? One analysis described this occurrence as
a reaction to contact with other, darker skinned races by Europeans, who considered them less civilized:

The progressive Aryanization of Christ...did not start, however, until Christianity came into close contact with the other races—with the African race in particular. Christian artists began to avoid the darker tints in depicting Christ in order to remove as much as possible of their evil suggestion.\(^{35}\)

As time went on, the distinction between light and dark skin became symbolic of secular values as well; "whiteness of skin came to symbolize material, scientific and technological success while blackness of skin came to be equated with a prescientific mentality, with economic poverty and with ignorance."\(^{36}\)

It is easy to see how these color symbolisms came together, turning Jesus Christ into one who apparently sided with the elite rather than the oppressed. When blacks began to create a theology for themselves, it was imperative to re-create the symbolism and meaning of Jesus's incarnation and resurrection. When God became flesh in Jesus of Nazareth, it was not an identification with the powerful and rich. Jesus was a poor, working class Jew, a member of the oppressed (under Roman rule) of that time period. His life was spent among the poor and lowly, the sick and oppressed; his message was one of hope, equality and justice. The same


\(^{36}\) Ibid., p.11.
is true now. If Jesus were to return to earth today, identifying as before with the poor and oppressed, he would have to be incarnated (in America) as a black. Otherwise, he would be a member of the oppressing class, and so totally opposite to God's original message. It is by identifying himself as the Suffering Servant, rather than as the King of Kings, that Jesus Christ is accessible to the oppressed.

A further proof of Jesus' present blackness is extrapolated from the theological concept of Jesus making holy all that he assumed; by becoming human all humanity became sinless and holy, members of the divine. Because of dying on a shameful cross between two thieves, the cross became for Christians a holy symbol of Jesus' triumph over death. As the black Christ, Jesus makes blackness holy. Theologically, it is expressed as follows:

[Jesus' blackness is] a symbol of God's presence in history on behalf of the oppressed. Where there is... blackness, there is Christ who has taken on blackness so that what is evil in men's eyes might become good.\textsuperscript{37}

It must be understood that Jesus Christ was, literally, neither black nor white. But it is the task of theologians to take the historical reality and to make it existentially relevant. For blacks this relevance must come in the context of their oppressed condition. "Since the black community is an oppressed community because, and only because, of its blackness, the Christological importance of

\textsuperscript{37} Cone, \textit{Black Theology and Black Power}, p. 69.
Jesus Christ must be found in his blackness. By identifying with the black community so totally, Jesus becomes again a liberating force against established practices and discriminating realities.

Redefining church flows naturally out of this new view of Christology. Black theologians call the "true" church "God's suffering people" or the "continuation of the Incarnation," and label the white institution with such names as "the mother of racial patterns," "purveyor of arrant sedatives" and "teacher of immoral moralities." Thus there is a need to develop a new way of looking at the Church, a new way for it to relate to society, and a new way for it to act on behalf of its members.

Various theologians have come to different levels of acceptance about their and their people's heritage from white Christianity. Some feel that sufficient change will arise from simply refocusing attention on black heritage and incorporating it into the symbols used in liturgy, or from becoming a more ardent supporter of social justice efforts. Allan Aubrey Boesak in Farewell to Innocence is one who feels that the inherent message of Christianity is valid and applicable, although at present the institutions have failed to adhere to it. He states:

Even though the institutional church has failed, its message and mission have provided the

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ferment for the new struggle for humanity which has produced signs and anticipations of the Kingdom in the revolutions of our time.39

Boesak also agrees with James Cone and others who question the historical role of the Christian church. Through the ages it has consistently aligned itself with the power structures of the time, seeming to intentionally ignore the biblical acts of Jesus who continually aligned himself with the poor. The true Church is one that "proclaims and lives by the liberating gospel of Jesus Christ....Liberation theology seeks a church that ministers to the poor not merely with a sense of compassion but with a sense of justice."40 This dual sensitivity is necessary because poverty and oppression are only one side of the coin. The Church needs to see that the cause of this is affluence and exploitation; the only way to change that is to change the system.

Other theologians reject a great deal of their heritage from white Christianity, for example, Albert B. Cleage. His beliefs in the need for a separate black nation and in Black Power strongly evidence themselves in his theological stance. For him, the black church needs to be rebuilt into the foundation of the new black nation. To do so it must, along with its members, "be cleansed of the white, slave,

40bid., p.147.
salvation Gospel."\(^{41}\) In the church of which he is pastor, Cleage has redone the symbolism of the liturgy in order to further this cause.

When initiates undergo Baptism at the Shrine of the Black Madonna [Cleage's parish], they accept Baptism into the 'hub' of the black nation. Likewise, Communion signifies each person's and the collective unit's willingness to shed its blood and sacrifice its body for the rebuilding of the nation.\(^{42}\)

Cleage rejects the classical doctrines of Baptism and Eucharist as remnants of the white, slave theology that had been forced on the slaves as a form of control.

The third development that this paper will cover is the reinterpretation of Christian ethics in light of the struggle of black liberation theology. Central to this is the idea of the use of power. The Black Power statement by the National Committee of Negro Churchmen summed up the situation in one sentence. "We are faced now with a situation where conscienceless power meets powerless conscience, threatening the very foundation of our nation."\(^{43}\)

Ethics can perhaps most simply be defined as how one answers the question "what ought I to do." The answer is


\(^{42}\)Ibid.

influenced, consciously or not, by such factors as ethnic background, religion, role models, economic and social status, and education. If this is taken as true, it is a logical conclusion that black Americans would have a different ethical stance than white Americans; it is also logical that any ethical stance proscribed by white Americans would, at the very least, have the potential of being inconsistent with that of the black situation. Major J. Jones writes "Christian ethics or moral philosophy written from a white perspective would, in some sense, be different from Christian ethics or moral philosophy written from a black frame of reference."44

The ethical development in Major Jones's book Christian Ethics for Black Theology stays fairly close to the traditional Christian stance. He believes that attempting to create a theology of revolution, such as that suggested by more radical followers of Black Power, is ethically problematic for three reasons. First, one can never be certain that even the most carefully controlled revolutionary actions will not lead to violence and killing. Secondly, if one believes in the sanctity of life, there is a moral obligation to care for all human life without exception. And finally, one should strive for a middle ground where violence can be avoided while still fighting

A critique of Jones and other ethical writers can be found in *Farewell to Innocence*. In this critique, Jones is criticized most strongly by the author, Allan A. Boesak. He states that Jones's main interest is smooth integration into white society, thus the reason for Jones's endorsement of mainline, non-violent ethics. Boesak rejects this attitude. "At present, any integration within any black/white context...means becoming white. This must be rejected. The ultimate goal for black people is liberation."\(^{45}\) Jones's "political pietism" overlooks the very real threats faced by blacks in their struggle for equality and freedom.

Of the other three ethical writers mentioned and critiqued by Boesak, he appears to agree most with J. Deotis Roberts. His ethical viewpoint allows room for revolution, where, although non-violent means are preferable, Roberts acknowledges that there are situations where violence may be unavoidable. Boesak concurs with Roberts's distinction between the violence that is a product of hatred, either of blacks or whites, and which is destructive to both hater and hated, and the violence that is a legitimate last resort to an intolerable situation, as a means to an ethical redistribution of power.

A second main point that Roberts includes in his ethical stance is the Christian ethic of forgiveness.

\(^{45}\)Boesak, p.136.
Forgiveness and reconciliation cannot take place between oppressor and oppressed; it is pointless for blacks to continually forgive white society for its actions without attempting to correct that society, for the benefit of both whites and blacks. It is only when the two are equals that there can be authentic Christian reconciliation. After this reconciliation takes place, society will be realigned with the will of God.

One of the main hopes of the Christian tradition is that of peace and equality on earth, in other words, realizing the Kingdom of God in this world. Black ethicists point out that as long as there is an abuse of power by whites peace and equality are unattainable. While this is a very valid observation, it must not be used as justification for swinging the pendulum to the opposite end of the spectrum. An unequal distribution of power in favor of black Americans, or any other nationality, would also result in the abuse of power and lack of equality that black liberation theology is attempting to remedy. Because J. Deotis Roberts sees this danger, his emphasis on reconciliation between equals is a viewpoint that blacks in the liberation movement would do well to develop.
Section Five: Major Formative Documents of Black Liberation Theology

Before concluding this section on mainline black theology, it would be wise to look at several of the many formative documents that came out of the black liberation theology movement during its beginning years. Three of these will serve as indicative of the currents within the movement. Chronologically, these are Black Power, a statement by the National Committee of Negro Churchmen issued July 31, 1966; The Black Manifesto, presented by James Forman in April of 1969; and Black Theology, also by the National Committee of Negro Churchmen, issued on June 13, 1969. The movement over this period of time is from a radical claiming of black strength, its use in the social realm, to the development of a theological outlook on the black situation.

The document Black Power is divided into four sections, each addressing a group of people about the meaning and intentions of Black Power. The committee begins with a description of how power has been "distorted" in the past
and the ramifications of this distortion on the present social situation. Once again, the statement "We are faced now with a situation where conscienceless power meets powerless conscience, threatening the very foundations of our nation"\textsuperscript{46} aptly describes the state of affairs. By confronting this problem, the NCNC hoped to enlighten the consciences of those they addressed.

The first section, titled "To the Leaders of America: Power and Freedom," states that the riots and Civil Rights struggles are not the problems facing the nation, but rather are symptoms.

> We deplore the overt violence of riots, but we believe it is more important to focus on the real source of the eruptions...the failure of American leaders to use American power to create equal opportunity \textit{in life} as well as \textit{in law}--this is the real problem...\textsuperscript{47}

Unless the leaders of America begin to work toward these goals, the cry of Black Power will continue, and so, by extension, will the struggle between whites and blacks.

The second section, "To White Churchmen: Power and Love," focuses on white "emotional" outcries against the term Black Power. White churchmen continually advocate integration as the Christian response to Civil Rights; the NCNC states that integration is only an option if it is an honest interaction of equals rather than a simple balance of

\textsuperscript{46}Black Power statement by National Committee of Negro Churchmen, p. 24.

\textsuperscript{47}ibid.
numbers. For this authentic integration to occur, it is precisely a readjustment of power that is needed.

The NCNC addresses the third and longest section "To Negro Citizens: Power and Justice." It focuses on a call to recognize and use the power already within their grasp, whether it be through personal contacts, the black church, professional associations, or social groups. There is a purpose behind claiming this power.

[If power is sought merely as an end in itself, it tends to turn upon those who seek it. Negroes need power in order to participate more effectively at all levels of the life of our nation.]^48

The committee also warns that energy must not be wasted on "spastic or ill-tempered explosions without meaningful goals."^49 In this way the NCNC showed its solidarity with the sentiments behind acts of black violence, while not condoning the actions themselves.

The final section of Black Power is a brief note "To the Mass Media: Power and Truth." In it the NCNC recognizes the ability of the media to sway the opinion of the general public, and calls on them to relay the truth to the American people. Because it is easy to distort that type of controversial situation, "nothing is more important than that you [the members of the media] look for a variety of sources of truth in order that the limited perspective of

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^48bid., p.27.

^49bid., p.28.
all of us might be corrected.\textsuperscript{50}

This document defined the mainline black theological opinion on the use of Black Power. It was signed by 48 Protestant clergymen, six of whom were bishops, from across the United States. It was originally published in the \textit{New York Times}.

The second document, \textit{The Black Manifesto}, was presented by James Forman to the National Black Economic Development Conference in Detroit, Michigan in April of 1969. The mood of this statement is very different from that of the NCNC Black Power statement. It is neither an explanation nor an apology. It is a strident, legal request demanding reparation for the discriminatory and violent practices of the United States used against blacks. Forman focuses his attack on white Christian churches and Jewish synagogues. He does so for two main reasons: 1. Christians "have been involved in the exploitation and rape of black people since the country was founded."\textsuperscript{51} White Christian churches and synagogues have justified and assisted in discrimination against blacks throughout American history. 2. The Jewish and Christian theologies advocate restitution as a part of penitence. In other words, it is not enough to apologize for stealing someone's coat. One must also give the coat

\textsuperscript{50}bid.

back. Forman's *Black Manifesto* calls for Christians and Jews to prove that they live by the standards that they preach.

Specifically, Forman demanded reparations of $500,000,000, averaging $15 per black person. He then went on to list ten specific areas that needed to be worked on, as well as the amount of reparation money to be used for each. They included the establishment of black banks, publishing houses, television networks, research and training centers, and the organization of a National Black Labor Strike and Defence Fund. In order to support and implement these demands, Forman proposed three main categories of action. First of all, blacks must organize so as to inform all Americans of the demands of the *Black Manifesto*. Secondly, blacks must begin a disruptive campaign focusing on intruding on white church and community activities. Finally, there is to be the creation of a Steering Committee out of which strong leaders willing to fight for black rights will come. This Steering Committee will also create a Black Anti-Defamation League "to fight the defamation of our African image wherever it rears its ugly head."52

Gayraud S. Wilmore, a well known black theologian, responded to the *Black Manifesto*; this response is indicative of the general feelings of black churchmen at the

52 *bid.*, p. 87.
time. Wilmore begins by recognizing that James Forman's actions were a true demonstration of repressed black feelings. The main focus of Wilmore's response, however, is seeing Forman's statement and accusations as God's judgement for the Church. He writes:

The theological meaning of the present crisis of race relations in the United States is that Black Power, the legal concept of reparations, and the appearance of James Forman as a stringent and arrogant critic of the American religious establishment may be seen through the eyes of faith, to be redemptive.53

The word Wilmore uses to describe Forman is "prophetic;" he can be compared to the prophets of the Hebrew Scriptures who proclaim God's judgements, much to the dismay of the comfortable and well off. Forman's criticism produced much the same effect as did the pronouncements of ancient Israel's prophets. Wilmore goes on to say "By the witness of men like James Forman...the church as an institution is called to be renewed, to become the revolutionary vanguard of God's inbreaking Kingdom."54 Whether or not the Church answers that call is another question, one with serious repercussions.

The third document that this paper will deal with is Black Theology, a statement by the National Committee of Black (previously Negro) Churchmen, released in June of


54Ibid., p.99.
1969, two months after the Black Manifesto. Although the document itself is brief, it contains several concise, pithy statements about the nature of the newly created black theology.

The first issue addressed by the NCBC is the necessity of having black theology. Their ideas are summed up aptly in these words:

All theologies arise out of communal experience with God. At this moment in time, the black community seeks to express its theology in language that speaks to the contemporary mood of black people.55

The black church was no longer considering itself subordinate to the white church. The experience of its members was more than adequate foundation for a new, more applicable theological stance. This stance is one of liberation, one that affirms black human dignity and confronts the issues of white racism and black oppression.

Although it is not mentioned by name, the NCBC also comments on the Black Manifesto. Its idea of reparation is applied again to the white church as an essential part of its official teaching. They state: "The Church which calls itself the servant church must, like its Lord, be willing to strip itself of possessions in order to build and restore that which has been destroyed...."56 Although, they

55 Black Theology statement by the Nation Committee of Negro Churchmen, as found in Cone and Wilmore, Black Theology: A Documentary History 1966-1979, p.101.

56 Ibid.
acknowledge, money will not solve racial problems, it is at least a positive step toward that final goal.
Section Six: **Black Women in Black Liberation Theology**

Until this point, this paper has dealt with the mainline black liberation theology movement: specifically black men writing from a Protestant background. It would be untrue, however, to say that this represented the complete picture. Within it is another group that has given its own important contributions, namely black women. It is not enough, however, to treat black women's contributions as footnotes to what black men have done; their theologizing is perhaps better looked at as another step in the total effort to gain liberation for all people. It is in its early stages, but its content is prophetic and given time will develop into another strong force in the effort to bring God's Kingdom into reality.

The development of a liberation theology by black women is a subject that, in order to be covered adequately, needs a paper of its own. Although that is not this paper's purpose, the topic is important enough to be included, however briefly. It is one way that the liberation theology
movement is growing beyond its previous boundaries, into the future, and deserves to be looked at as such.

To begin with, black women are not faced by only racial discrimination; the reality out of which they create feminist theology is much more complicated.

Black feminism grows out of Black women's tri-dimensional reality of race/sex/class. It holds that full human liberation cannot be achieved simply by the elimination of any one form of oppression.

The key word in this sentence is "human." The feminist movement, with a few individual exceptions, has a more wholistic approach to liberation than most theologies developed by men. This can perhaps be attributed to the fact that black women have experienced all forms of oppression and know its dehumanizing effects, no matter what the reason for that oppression is. Because of this different emphasis, versus a simple contribution to male theological writings, the black feminist movement is perhaps better named a parallel development with, rather than a subgroup within, the black (male) liberation movement.

In developing their theology, black feminists, often called womanists to distinguish them from the members of the largely white, middle class feminist movement, face obstacles from nearly every other social-economic and racial

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group. Because of their race and gender, black women are more likely to be poor, putting them at odds with the middle and upper class. Because of their gender, they are at odds with men. Unfortunately, this includes men of their own race, who may believe that the "women's movement is a diversionary tactic to deflect attention from the more urgent struggle for black [male] liberation." Because of their race, black women are often at odds with white women, who, throughout the history of the feminist movement, have continually discriminated against them. In fact, "the racist activity of white feminists has been prevalent enough to discourage many Afro-American women from participating in the feminist movement." It is also difficult for black women to see white women's struggle for liberation as as necessary as theirs simply because they belong to the oppressing class.

Jacqueline Grant gives a synopsis of the four basic tenants of womanist theology. First, as mentioned before, it seeks a wholistic approach, aiming at the liberation of humanity rather than at the liberation of a specific group. Secondly, it calls for the removal of social and sexual dualisms, where one group is dominant and the other

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subordinant. A third goal is to change the traditional negative images of women to new and positive ones. Lastly, womanist theology seeks to reevaluate the doctrines and understandings of Christian faith since these have been developed by men. This does not mean that they will be rejected; however, if the structure which created these understandings is challenged, then the understandings must be challenged as well.

Black women have made tremendous advances throughout history due to their great inner strength and sense of justice. Their role in the family as nurturer, home maker, and often bread winner, has shaped their historical consciousness. This in turn reflects in their theologizing, their view of God, their sense of social justice, their vision for the future. It is their experiences as black women that allow them to identify with all oppressed people and their experiences of past accomplishment that allow them to develop a theology of hope for the future. In the years to come, black liberation theology would gain a great deal from the insights of womanist theologians, especially in ridding the movement of any discriminatory practices it may have. The womanist movement will act for the black liberation theology movement in the same way as the black liberation theology movement acted for the white church—as a prophetic conscience.

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60 Grant, p. 198.
Conclusion

Liberation theology is a new theological development in the Christian church, only having developed during the last thirty years. It is one that has made itself felt at all levels—churchmen, scholars, theologians, and laity. Perhaps it is this last group’s influence that has made this movement so unique among theological movements in general. In the past, the lay person was at the passive end of theology, simply receiving doctrines passed down from the hierarchical church. In contrast, liberation theology takes the life and experiences of the lay person as both its starting and ending points. It is up to the intellectuals to articulate what the people have already experienced as true, even if the people are unable to put that knowledge into specific theological doctrine.

Because of this reliance on the experience of the laity, liberation theology influences not only those involved in the Church, but also those involved in secular society. As the historical development of black liberation
theology has shown, that influence takes many forms, some of which are more drastic than others. There are those who are willing to follow the radical call of the Gospel and Jesus' example of non-violence even if it means losing their own lives. There are those who are not strong enough to sacrifice so much and who stand on the sidelines, cheering the progress while not risking anything in the process. And then there are those who are impatient for change, who believe that being right justifies the use of violence, that the end justifies the means.

All of these have been present in the black theology movement in the United States. But no matter what the present atmosphere may be, there is always the underlying current of a sincere people looking for a way to claim their heritage and to use it to worship God and obey God's call for discipleship. This call to discipleship can only be answered if these people are allowed to develop a sense of historical worth and wholeness.

Historically, black Americans fought long and hard for what sometimes seemed like small gains. But there is an enduring vitality in their communities, a continued strength to carry on the struggle that was begun by their ancestors. Perhaps this is the surest sign that God is with them in their efforts.
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