

**GOD  
of the  
OPPRESSED**

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government officials. To be sure, they know that they must struggle to realize justice in this world. But their struggle for justice is directly related to the coming judgment of Jesus. His coming presence requires that we not make any historical struggle an end in itself. We struggle because it is a sign of Jesus' presence with us and of his coming presence to redeem all humanity. His future coming therefore is the key to the power of our struggle. Black people can struggle because they truly believe that one day they will be taken out of their misery. And they express it in song:

After 'while, after 'while,  
Some sweet day after 'while,  
I'm goin' up to see my Jesus,  
O some sweet day after 'while.

Pray on! Pray on!  
Some sweet day after 'while,  
Prayin' time will soon be over,  
O some sweet day after 'while.

### JESUS IS BLACK

It is only within the context of Jesus' past, present, and future as these aspects of his person are related to Scripture, tradition, and contemporary social existence that we are required to affirm the blackness of Jesus Christ. I realize that many white critics of Black Theology question "blackness" as a christological title, because it appears to be determined exclusively by the psychological and political needs of black people to relate theology to the emergence of black power in the later 1960s. That is only partly true. The phrase "**Black Christ**" refers to more than the subjective states and political expediency of black people at a given point in history. Rather, this title is derived primarily from Jesus' past identity, his present activity, and his future coming as each is dialectically related to the others. But unless black theologians can demonstrate that Jesus' blackness is not simply the psychological disposition of black people but arises from a faithful examination of Christology's sources (Scripture, tradition, and social existence) as these sources illuminate Jesus' past, present, and future, then we lay ourselves open to the white charge that the

Black Christ is an ideological distortion of the New Testament for political purposes.

Before moving to the substance of the Black Christ issue, it is necessary to unmask the subjective interests of white theologians themselves. When the past and contemporary history of white theology is evaluated, it is not difficult to see that much of the present negative reaction of white theologians to the Black Christ is due almost exclusively to their *whiteness*, a cultural fact that determines their theological inquiry, thereby making it almost impossible for them to relate positively to anything black. White theologians' attitude toward black people in particular and the oppressed generally is hardly different from that of oppressors in any society. It is particularly similar to the religious leaders' attitude toward Jesus in first-century Palestine when he freely associated with the poor and outcasts and declared that the Kingdom of God is for those called "sinners" and not for priests and theologians or any of the self-designated righteous people. The difficulty of white theologians in recognizing their racial interest in this issue can be understood only in the light of the social context of theological discourse. They cannot see the christological validity of Christ's blackness because their axiological grid blinds them to the truth of the biblical story. For example, the same white theologians who laughingly dismiss Albert Cleage's "Black Messiah" say almost nothing about the European (white) images of Christ plastered all over American homes and churches. I perhaps would respect the integrity of their objections to the Black Christ on scholarly grounds, if they applied the same vigorous logic to Christ's whiteness, especially in contexts where his blackness is not advocated.

For me, the substance of the Black Christ issue can be dealt with only on *theological* grounds, as defined by Christology's source (Scripture, tradition, and social existence) and content (Jesus' past, present, and future). I begin by asserting once more that *Jesus was a Jew*. It is on the basis of the soteriological meaning of the particularity of his Jewishness that theology must affirm the christological significance of Jesus' present blackness. He is black because he was a Jew. The affirmation of the Black Christ can be understood when the significance of his past Jewishness is related dialectically to the significance of his present blackness. On the one hand, the Jewishness of Jesus located him in the context of the Exodus, thereby

connecting his appearance in Palestine with God's liberation of oppressed Israelites from Egypt. Unless Jesus were truly from Jewish ancestry, it would make little theological sense to say that he is the fulfillment of God's covenant with Israel. But on the other hand, the blackness of Jesus brings out the soteriological meaning of his Jewishness for our contemporary situation when Jesus' person is understood in the context of the cross and resurrection. Without negating the divine election of Israel, the cross and resurrection are Yahweh's fulfillment of his original intention for Israel to be

a light to the nations,  
to open the eyes that are blind,  
to bring out the prisoners from the dungeon,  
from the prison those who sit in darkness.  
(Isaiah 42:6-7 RSV)

The cross of Jesus is God invading the human situation as the Elected One who takes Israel's place as the Suffering Servant and thus reveals the divine willingness to suffer in order that humanity might be fully liberated. The resurrection is God's conquest of oppression and injustice, disclosing that the divine freedom revealed in Israel's history is now available to all. The cross represents the particularity of divine suffering in Israel's place. The resurrection is the universality of divine freedom for all who "labor and are heavy laden." It is the actualization in history of Jesus' eschatological vision that the last shall be first and the first last. The resurrection means that God's identity with the poor in Jesus is not limited to the particularity of his Jewishness but is applicable to all who fight on behalf of the liberation of humanity in this world. And the Risen Lord's identification with the suffering poor today is just as real as was his presence with the outcasts in first-century Palestine. His presence with the poor today is not docetic; but like yesterday, today also he takes the pain of the poor upon himself and bears it for them.

It is in the light of the cross and the resurrection of Jesus in relation to his Jewishness that Black Theology asserts that "Jesus is black." If we assume that the Risen Lord is truly present with us as defined by his past history and witnessed by Scripture and tradition, what then does his presence mean in the social context of white racism? If

Jesus' presence is real and not docetic, is it not true that Christ *must* be black in order to remain faithful to the divine promise to bear the suffering of the poor? Of course, I realize that "blackness" as a christological title may not be appropriate in the distant future or even in every human context in our present. This was no less true of the New Testament titles, such as "Son of God" and "Son of David," and of various descriptions of Jesus throughout the Christian tradition. But the validity of any christological title in any period of history is not decided by its universality but by this: whether in the particularity of its time it points to God's universal will to liberate particular oppressed people from inhumanity. This is exactly what blackness does in the contemporary social existence of America. If we Americans, blacks and whites, are to understand who Jesus is for us today, we must view his presence as continuous with his past and future coming which is best seen through his present blackness.

Christ's blackness is both literal and symbolic. His blackness is literal in the sense that he truly becomes One with the oppressed blacks, taking their suffering as his suffering and revealing that he is found in the history of our struggle, the story of our pain, and the rhythm of our bodies. Jesus is found in the sociological context that gave birth to Aretha Franklin singing "Spirit in the Dark" and Roberta Flack proclaiming that "I told Jesus that it will be all right if he changed my name." Christ's blackness is the American expression of the truth of his parable about the Last Judgment: "Truly, I say to you, as you did it not to one of the least of these, you did it not to me" (Matt. 25:45). The least in America are literally and symbolically present in black people. To say that Christ is black means that black people are God's poor people whom Christ has come to liberate. And thus no gospel of Jesus Christ is possible in America without coming to terms with the history and culture of that people who struggled to bear witness to his name in extreme circumstances. To say that Christ is black means that God, in his infinite wisdom and mercy, not only takes color seriously, he also takes it upon himself and discloses his will to make us whole—new creatures born in the spirit of divine blackness and redeemed through the blood of the Black Christ. Christ is black, therefore, not because of some cultural or psychological need of black people, but because and only because Christ *really* enters into our world where the poor, the despised, and the black are, disclosing that he is with them, enduring their humiliation and pain

and transforming oppressed slaves into liberated servants. Indeed, if Christ is not *truly* black, then the historical Jesus lied. God did not anoint him "to preach good news to the poor" and neither did God send him "to proclaim release to the captives and recovering the sight to the blind, to set at liberty those who are oppressed" (Luke 4:18f. RSV). If Christ is not black, the gospel is not good news to the oppressed, and Marx's observation is right: "Religion is the sign of the oppressed creature, the heart of a heartless world . . . the spirit of a spiritless situation. It is the opium of the people."<sup>24</sup>

I realize that my theological limitations and my close identity with the social conditions of black people could blind me to the *truth* of the gospel. And maybe our white theologians are right when they insist that I have overlooked the *universal* significance of Jesus' message. But I contend that there is no universalism that is not particular. Indeed their insistence upon the universal note of the gospel arises out of their own particular political and social interests. As long as they can be sure that the gospel is *for everybody*, ignoring that God liberated a *particular* people from Egypt, came in a particular man called Jesus, and for the particular purpose of liberating the oppressed, then they can continue to talk in theological abstractions, failing to recognize that such talk is not the gospel unless it is related to the concrete freedom of the little ones. My point is that God came, and continues to come, to those who are poor and helpless, for the purpose of setting them free. And since the people of color are his elected poor in America, any interpretation of God that ignores black oppression cannot be Christian theology. The "blackness of Christ," therefore, is not simply a statement about skin color, but rather, the transcendent affirmation that God has not ever, no not ever, left the oppressed alone in struggle. He was with them in Pharaoh's Egypt, is with them in America, Africa and Latin America, and will come in the end of time to consummate fully their human freedom.

## CHAPTER 7

### The Meaning of Liberation

If Jesus Christ, in his past, present and future, reveals that the God of Scripture and tradition is the God whose will is disclosed in the liberation of oppressed people from bondage, what then is the meaning of liberation? In answering the question we begin by examining the theological presupposition upon which that meaning is based.

#### JESUS CHRIST AS THE GROUND OF HUMAN LIBERATION

Because human liberation is God's work of salvation in Jesus Christ, its source and meaning cannot be separated from Christology's sources (Scripture, tradition, and social existence) and content (Jesus in his past, present, and future). Jesus Christ, therefore, in his humanity and divinity, is the point of departure for a black theologian's analysis of the meaning of liberation. There is no liberation independent of Jesus' past, present, and future coming. He is the ground of our present freedom to struggle and the source of our hope that the vision disclosed in our historical fight against oppression will be fully realized in God's future. In this sense, liberation is not a human possession but a divine gift of freedom to those who struggle in faith against violence and oppression. Liberation is not an object but the *project* of freedom wherein the oppressed realize that their fight for freedom is a divine right of creation. This is what Anthony Burns, an ex-slave, meant by saying that "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."<sup>1</sup> A similar point was made by David Walker when he urged black slaves to remember that freedom is not a gift from white slave masters but a natural right of divine creation.