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Introduction

Few factors have proven as detrimental to the witness of Protestant Christianity in America, especially in recent years, as the lack of deep, meaningful understanding of the Black struggle for equality and equity. For decades, the American Church has failed to progress far beyond the legacy of racial segregation and white supremacy that characterized its inception. It remains the most segregated institution in America, and recent events like the murder of George Floyd and the birth of the Black Lives Matter movement have shed light on the White Church's unwillingness to acknowledge its complicity in the systemic oppression that pervades the Black American experience. If the predominantly White evangelical Church is to correct its history of racial ignorance, White Americans must develop a deeper understanding of the Black struggle for liberation, which has been largely informed by liberation theology. This theological framework, often ignored or criticized in predominantly White Christian circles, has played a significant role in shaping social justice movements across the world, particularly in the United States and Latin America.

James H. Cone, known as the Founder of Black Liberation Theology, has published nearly a dozen works on this topic. No other Black theologian has written as comprehensively about liberation theology, and scholars recognize Cone as the predominant authority on its role in the African American experience. Cone began publishing his works in 1969 on the tail end of the Civil Rights Movement. For White readers unfamiliar with liberation theology and the Black experience, Cone's ideology has proven difficult to embrace. In the Fortieth anniversary postscript to *A Black Theology of Liberation,* James H. Cone reacts to the extensive criticism of his work, writing, "No one can understand this book apart from the social and political context in

which it was written."[1] The theology presented in Cone's works presents a number of thought-provoking ideas and questions, many of which challenge a traditional theology that does not take into account the experiences of historically oppressed people groups. Understanding liberation theology is vital to an understanding of African American religion and the Black American experience as a whole, but doing so is impossible without also understanding the context in which Black liberation theology developed. The history of liberation theology in America, its role in guiding the activists that led the Civil Rights Movement, and Cone's own life experiences all shed light on the meaning behind Cone's words, revealing that acceptance of liberation theology as integral to the Black American experience is key to making progress in the ongoing struggle for racial justice in America.

Later in the same postscript, Cone writes, "A few White theologians marched with King and supported the Civil Rights Movement, but the *theological* meaning of black freedom seemed to have escaped them."[2] Since the Civil Rights Movement, many white activists, leaders, and historians have maintained this pattern of seeking racial justice without truly seeking understanding. As Cone wrote in the context of the Civil Rights Movement, he often wrote about a racially divided America. While progress on this front has certainly been made in the years since Cone published his books, racial injustice continues to pervade nearly all aspects of American life. The only path to eradicating systemic racism in America involves pulling it up from its roots, and to do so requires a much deeper understanding of its history. Volumes could be written about the context of Cone's work and the development of Black liberation theology. I will focus not on providing a comprehensive history, but on showcasing the role of liberation theology in specific pieces of the Civil Rights Movement and individual activists' lives. I will

[1] Cone, James H. *A Black Theology of Liberation* (New York: Orbis Books, 1986), 153.
[2] Cone, *A Black Theology of Liberation,* 154. Emphasis in original.

begin by providing a brief introduction to liberation theology and a synopsis of its history, specifically focusing on the theology outlined by James Cone, before briefly tracing its development through the enslavement of African Americans and the birth of the African American church. I will then explore liberation theology's impact on the overall Civil Rights Movement of the 1950s and 1960s, focusing on the theological influences of leaders like Martin Luther King Jr., Fannie Lou Hamer, and Ella Baker. Lastly, I will discuss Cone's early life and formative personal experiences, analyzing his theology in light of its context.

Cone himself lays the groundwork for identifying liberation theology's context by identifying the main sources of Black theology. He contends that liberation theology stems from six main sources: Black experience, Black culture, Black history, revelation, Scripture, and tradition.[3] A complete understanding of Cone's theology can only be obtained through a thorough understanding of each of these sources; however, this analysis will focus primarily on Black history as a means for better understanding Black theology. Black experience and Black culture, though they are both woven into the fabric of Black history, can only be truly understood by those who identify as Black. When speaking about Black experience, Cone writes, "Whites do not understand it; they can only catch glimpses of it in sociological reports and historical studies."[4] This brief history will not speak to the Black experience, but seek to offer such glimpses of it by merely repeating and amplifying the voices of Black individuals who have already spoken about their experience. Liberation theology as a whole, in whatever form it takes, can only truly be determined by those living under oppression. Because the basic premise of all liberation theologies is deliverance from societal injustice, each version of liberation theology is uniquely shaped by the experiences of marginalized people groups. Latin American liberation

[3] Cone, *A Black Theology of Liberation,* 24-34.
[4] Cone, *A Black Theology of Liberation,* 26.

theology is different from Black liberation theology, and both theologies are inseparable from the social contexts in which they developed. The task for readers, then, is not to critique the theology born out of any people group's experience, but merely to listen. It is only by listening to the voices and experiences of the oppressed that a path forward can be paved. As a White woman, I want to begin this analysis by acknowledging my inability to fully understand the Black experience. I am writing this history in an effort to pay more attention to Black historians, storytellers, and all those who have been oppressed, believing that their words and experiences will point to a path toward racial justice in America. My goal is simply to listen carefully to their perspectives and amplify their voices. I invite you, as readers, to embark with me on this journey of listening.

A Brief History of Liberation Theology

Liberation theology is, in part, a lens through which groups or individuals understand and interpret the Bible. There are a number of other popular theological lenses, including systematic theology, practical theology, and historical theology. Each one places a unique emphasis on certain themes throughout the Bible and seeks to interpret its meaning accordingly. Liberation theology focuses on themes of oppression and liberation throughout the Bible. When interpreting the Old Testament, liberation theologians focus on the story of God's chosen people, the Israelites, and their deliverance from slavery in Egypt. In their approach to the New Testament, they focus on Jesus's status as an oppressed Jew and God's ultimate act of deliverance in resurrecting Jesus from the grave. Although those who ascribe to the ideology of liberation theology focus on other parts of the Bible to varying degrees, these overarching narratives of God's deliverance make up the heart of the Gospel message. Oppressed people groups who

embrace a version of liberation theology interpret the Bible by identifying with the oppressed in the Biblical narrative. They draw hope from God's deliverance of the Israelites and resurrection of Jesus, looking toward a future day in which they too will be delivered from oppression.

In addition to providing a framework for interpreting the Bible, liberation theology presents itself as a framework for tangible change. Historically, two strategies for improving the situation of the poor have been primarily utilized: aid and reform.[5] Those with more power and resources in a society might provide charity to the poor in an attempt to help their material situation. More privileged individuals might engage in providing aid directly through volunteer work, or they might donate money or resources to start orphanages, soup kitchens, and other institutions that offer help to the poor. In addition to aid, the act of reform goes one step further by attempting to improve societal conditions for the poor, which can include implementing new laws and providing access to social services. While both of these approaches offer some positives, neither one actually puts power back in the hands of the poor. Neither approach dismantles the harmful systems that oppress marginalized people groups or seeks to reconstruct society in a way that upsets the current balance of power. Thus, "liberation" becomes necessary. Leonardo and Codovis Boff describe the strategy of liberation, writing, "In liberation, the oppressed come together, come to understand their situation through the process of conscientization, discover the causes of their oppression, organize themselves into movements, and act in a coordinated fashion."[6] Liberation differs from other strategies for helping the poor because it empowers the oppressed to oppose their own oppression, rather than forcing them to rely on the oppressors for help. This strategy, rooted in a theology that emphasizes themes of

[5] Boff et. al., 4.
[6] Boff et. al., 5.

deliverance throughout the Bible, has been implemented by various people groups throughout the last two centuries.

The history of liberation theology is not linear; rather, it is a thread woven through the histories of many different people groups. The widespread liberation theology movement originated in Latin America, but the ideology certainly has roots in Africa and other places around the world. A basic understanding of the premise of liberation theology helps to explain its origins. In 1986, two prominent liberation theologians, Leonardo and Codovis Boff, published *Intrdoducing Liberation Theology,* which provides a brief yet comprehensive summary of the theology in broad terms. The book was originally published in Brazil, so the roots of the specific theology presented by the authors are Latin American, but these scholars still provide one of the clearest explanations of liberation theology. In this book, they explain that every theology is born out of "a true meeting with God in history." Liberation theology, they write, "was born when faith confronted the injustice done to the poor."[7] The term "poor" is often used broadly when talking about people groups that liberation theology addresses, but it does not only refer to those who lack monetary resources or live in poverty. In the context of liberation theology, the term "poor" is closely linked to Karl Marx's concept of the proletariat. The "poor" refers to the "popular classes," or those who are not among the elite and privileged in a society. The poor, in this context, are those who have been oppressed or faced injustice on the basis of their race, class, or gender.[8] Liberation theology, then, is born directly out of the experiences of those who have faced oppression. Gustavo Gutierrez offers one of the clearest definitions of liberation theology:

[7] Boff, Leonardo and Boff, Clodovis. *Introducing Liberation Theology* (Great Britain: Burns & Oates/Search Press Ltd, 1986), 3.
[8] Boff et. al., 3.

> "The theology of liberation is an attempt to understand the faith from within the concrete historical, liberating, and subversive praxis of the poor of this world – the exploited classes, despised ethnic groups, and marginalized cultures. It is born of a disquieting, unsettling hope of liberation. It is born of the struggles, the failures, and the success of the oppressed themselves."[9]

Given this overarching definition, not all liberation theologies focus on race. There have been a number of female liberation theologians who present a womanist interpretation of the Bible. Because race and gender have historically been the primary factors associated with the oppression of people groups, most prominent liberation theologies have developed around these two factors. While there are many types of liberation theology, the most well-known liberation theologians have focused on African American and Latin American theology.

One of the most prominent liberation theologians is Gustavo Gutierrez, who was born and raised in Peru. Gutierrez moved to Europe, where he received his theological education, before returning to Lima to minister to working-class people there. Gutierrez has authored several books on liberation theology, including one of the most popular works on this topic: *A Theology of Liberation*, which has been described as the foundational work in the field.[10] Any discussion of liberation theology would be incomplete without mentioning Gutierrez's work. Although *A Theology of Liberation* was actually published after James H. Cone's first major work, *Black Theology and Black Power,* it is often regarded as the first book to popularize the study of liberation theology. Published in 1973, the work became significant in its time because it dared to mix religion and politics, asserting that Christianity could serve as a framework for radical social and political change. The book has attracted extensive criticism, but it has also contributed to a more widespread understanding of the liberation theology movement,

[9] Gutierrez, Gustavo. *The Power of the Poor in* History (New York: Orbis Books, 1983), 37.
[10] Gutierrez.

particularly in Latin America.[11] In the *Power of the Poor in History,* Gutierrez expands on his theology through eight essays, most of which deal with liberation theology in the context of Peru and other Latin American countries. In the first essay, however, Gutierrez discusses more broadly the source of liberation theology. He acknowledges the downfalls of most mainstream theological approaches, arguing that the Bible is not a theology book or catechism, but an ensemble of books that tells the history of a people. Liberation theology, he contends, is a more "radical" form of theology, but a necessary one. He writes, "We reinterpret the Bible, from the viewpoint of our own world – from our personal experience as human beings, as believers, and as church. This approach is more radical. It goes more to the roots of what the Bible actually is, more to the essence of God's revelation in history and of God's judgment on it."[12] Much like James Cone's approach to theology, Gutierrez emphasizes human experience and social context as integral to interpreting the Bible.

James H. Cone's Liberation Theology

While Gutierrez is perhaps the most well-known theologian associated with the liberation theology movement as a whole, James H. Cone is by far the most prominent theologian associated with American liberation theology, or Black liberation theology.[13] His works provide perhaps the most comprehensive picture of liberation theology as it has been understood and experienced by African Americans throughout the last century. The liberation theology presented by James H. Cone is incredibly complex, both in content and significance. His theology is similar to Gutierrez's and other liberation theologians', but just as Gutierrez's theology was

[11] Gutierrez, vi.
[12] Gutierrez, 4.
[13] For the purpose of this paper, "Black liberation theology" refers to Black American liberation theology.

shaped by the Latin American experience, Cone's is uniquely shaped by the Black American experience. Cone authored over ten books on this topic, each of them approaching it from a different angle, and several of them drawing on experiences from his own life. His theology throughout these works could be described as fluid; as the political and social context around him changed, along with his own thoughts and feelings, so did his theology. However, several overarching themes can be drawn from some of Cone's most popular books, giving readers a glimpse into his beliefs about religious liberation. There can be no complete understanding of his theology without examining each of the works themselves and understanding the context in which they were written, but a loose understanding of the theology is necessary before turning to its context. Born in the South in 1938, Cone lived during the heart of the Jim Crow era and witnessed the development of the Civil Rights Movement of the 1950s and 1960s. His theology was shaped not only by his own personal experiences with injustice but by the history and culture of the Black community he grew up in. His first book, *Black Theology and Black Power,* showcases Cone's beliefs about the African American community as a whole. Cone's theology is mostly clearly laid out, however, in two of his subsequent works, *A Black Theology of Liberation* (1970), and *God of the Oppressed* (1975). These are the works that most fully outline the various aspects of Cone's theology and worldview. In these works, Cone develops a liberation theology that can best be understood by examining three areas: his theology of God, his theology of humanity, and his theology of Jesus Christ. By understanding Cone's basic beliefs related to these three doctrines, readers can gain a well-rounded understanding of his theology.

James Cone's theology of God represents one of the most controversial aspects of liberation theology in evangelical circles. In *Liberating Black Theology,* Anthony Bradley summarizes a few of Cone's most prominent doctrines. The first doctrine Bradley draws out is

that the Christian's understanding of God comes from revelation.[14] In the Bible, God reveals himself as the deliverer of the oppressed Israelites and completes this revelation in the incarnation of Christ. Cone builds upon this doctrine in his works by explaining that when Jesus Christ became human, he himself became oppressed. In the redemptive narrative of the Bible, God himself became oppressed so that he could liberate oppressed peoples. Therefore, Cone ultimately concludes, God himself is Black, because God took on an oppressed condition, which is the Black condition. This doctrine of God is foundational to Cone's theology. He writes,

> "The Blackness of God, and everything implied by it in a racist society, is the heart of the Black theology doctrine of God. There is no place in black theology for a colorless God in a society where human beings suffer precisely because of their color. The Black theologian must reject any conception of God which stifles black self-determination by picturing God as a God of all peoples. Either God is identified with the oppressed to the point that their experience becomes God's experience, or God is a God of racism."[15]

The rest of Cone's liberation theology is built upon this idea that God wholly identifies with the Black experience, making God himself Black. The foundation of his theology, then, is that God uniquely identifies with the Black experience, and this informs Christians' perception of who God is.

According to Cone, Black theology uses the reality of human suffering as its starting point for exploring the theology of humanity. Human existence, as defined by Black theology, is "being in freedom." Therefore, to find meaning in one's humanity is to actively fight for one's own freedom from oppression. Cone presents what he calls the "paradox of human existence": Freedom and oppression are opposites, but only the oppressed are truly free. He explains this paradox by stating that humanity must involve two things: being totally against evil and suffering, and acknowledging the ongoing battle with evil and suffering. He writes that "No one

[14] Bradley, Anthony B. *Liberating Black Theology: The Bible and the Black Experience in America* (Illinois: Crossway Books, 2010), 56.
[15] Cone, *A Black Theology of Liberation,* 67.

is free until all are free," stating that to be truly human is to stand against oppression and to identify with those who are victims of it. To be human, in Cone's worldview, is to be oppressed with the oppressed.[16] Thus, Cone's very definition of humanity includes the suffering of the oppressed as its foundation, and recognizes the ongoing struggle against this suffering. If the goal of white supremacy is to dehumanize Black people, Cone's definition of humanity seeks to flip white supremacy on its head by essentially claiming that *only* those who are oppressed are fully human and capable of experiencing true freedom. Only those who are oppressed can fully identify with the oppressed, putting them in a unique position to engage in the fight against human suffering and oppression. In *A Black Theology of Liberation,* Cone builds an ideological bridge between his theology of humanity and his theology of Jesus Christ. Cone acknowledges that Black theology's definition of humanity is not the same universal definition proposed by White theology. White Christians, he says, love to embrace "humanity" but do not know how to love individual Black people because they do not understand the nature of their humanity, which is not in fact universal. His basis for this claim is that God did not become a "universal human being;" he became an oppressed Jew. Thus, God's embrace of humanity embraced a version of humanity that is defined by oppression and victory over that oppression. This aspect of Cone's theology emphasizes the uniqueness of the Black experience, which White people cannot claim to fully understand or embrace. Black theology as presented by Cone is just that: theology that applies specifically to Black people in a specific historical context of oppression, not theology that seeks to include or speak to the experience of all peoples.

Cone's theology of Jesus Christ is perhaps the most important part of the larger framework he builds. From the Black theological perspective, the incarnation of Jesus is the

[16] Cone, *A Black Theology of Liberation,* 93.

culmination of the Biblical liberation narrative. God revealed himself as a Liberator in the Old Testament, and he fulfills that role in the incarnation of Jesus as an oppressed human. Cone ultimately claims that whatever is said about Jesus's words, actions, resurrection, and future coming, "it must serve to illuminate Jesus' sole reason for existence: to bind the wounds of the afflicted and to liberate those who are in prison."[17] Cone explains why a theology of Jesus that acknowledges this as his purpose is so important; he writes that oppressed people today cannot recognize their work toward liberation as a continuation of Jesus's own work without first realizing that Jesus's essential purpose was to liberate himself and the rest of humanity from such oppression. The African American community's unique identification with this Oppressed Jesus leads directly to Cone's stance on black empowerment. He writes,

> "The black Christ is he who threatens the structure of evil as seen in white society, rebelling against it, thereby becoming the embodiment of what the black community knows that it must become. Because he has become black as we are, we now know what black empowerment is. It is black determining the way they are going to behave in the world. It is refusing to allow white society to place strictures on black existence."[18]

In the framework of liberation theology, social justice is motivated by the belief that Jesus's life embodied justice and victory against oppression. Most Christians would agree that they are called to follow the example of Jesus, and because Cone emphasizes the Blackness of Jesus, he is able to craft a framework for activism that flows directly out of the Christian duty to follow him.

In addition to the basic tenants of his theology, the methods Cone uses to communicate this theology are unique and speak to the Black experience. Cone tends to write in absolute, at times even extreme, terms. For example, Cone writes that the description of Jesus as the Black Messiah is "the most meaningful christological statement in our time. Any other statement about

[17] Cone, *A Black Theology of Liberation,* 119.
[18] Cone, *A Black Theology of Liberation,* 128.

Jesus Christ is at best irrelevant and at worst blasphemous."[19] Some readers have accused him of using hyperbole, while others have labeled his theology as outright sacreligious. What Cone intends to accomplish by employing such strong language remains to be seen after exploring the context in which he wrote, but to take his words at face value is to understand that Cone's theology is bold and clear-cut. Cone also seems to place people into categories with his language, most notably "oppressors" versus "the oppressed" and "Black" versus "White." He does not explicitly define the parameters for each of these categories, but in some ways gives the impression that all White people are considered oppressors. This, too, should be taken at face value as Cone writes not about individual people, but overarching historical phenomena and oppressive systems which are controlled by White people. To understand the distinctions he makes between groups, White readers must realize that Cone speaks about ideological Whiteness as well as literal Whiteness, a condition which is largely associated with the oppression of non-White people. As will be explored later, readers of Cone's theology should bear in mind that Cone is not writing directly to White people, but writing honestly about the Black experience and his interpretation of the Bible in light of this experience. This, however, does not absolve White readers of their complicity in the oppressive systems Cone writes about. Cone's theology does not seek to speak directly to every person's individual life, but to explain overarching truths about the Bible, human existence, and their relationship to each other. Readers simply have a responsibility to consider their own role in these overarching truths. The only way to truly understand the implications of James Cone's theology is to gain a deeper understanding of its context, a piece of the puzzle which is often ignored by critics of his work.

[19] Cone, *A Black Theology of Liberation,* 132.

The Roots of Black Liberation Theology: Slavery

The history of African American liberation theology as it existed in the Civil Rights Movement of the 1950s and 1960s, the context in which James Cone wrote, has roots in America's engagement in the transatlantic slave trade during the colonial era. As people were cruelly torn away from their homes, cultures, and families in Africa and forced to endure horrific conditions, they brought with them to America pieces of their rich and diverse culture. African Americans carried these African religious traditions with them as they developed a new, unique culture, influenced not only by their African history or by the culture they encountered in America, but by the institution of slavery itself. In an analysis of religion as experienced by African American slaves, Albert Raboteau writes, "Adaptability based upon respect for spiritual power wherever it originated, accounted for the openness of African religions to syncretism with other religious traditions and for the continuity of a distinctively African religion conscious."[20] Far from sharing one common religion or culture, African American slaves came from different parts of Africa, bringing with them a diverse set of histories and beliefs. Thus, even as they built a new religious tradition on the foundation of their shared experience of oppression, this "slave religion," as Raboteau calls it, involved pieces of older religious traditions from around the African continent.

A summary of African religion and even religion among those engaged in the transatlantic slave trade could fill many volumes, but a high-level overview identifies some important foundations of African American religion. The majority of those pulled into the transatlantic slave trade hailed from indigenous traditions unique to the region they were from. Smaller, though still significant, portions of African American slaves were Muslim, Christian, or

[20] Raboteau, Albert J. *Slave Religion: The "Invisible Institution" in the Antebellum South* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978), 4.

belonged to other religious traditions at the time of their enslavement. This is not to say that African indigenous traditions are entirely separate from Islam or Christianity; there certainly was overlap between various religions and belief systems. However, most slaves were unfamiliar with the particular brand of Christianity they encountered in America, at least in a positive sense. Some had encountered it as a result of colonialism and attempts by European missionaries to force conversion to their own version of Christianity.[21] In his detailed analysis, Raboteau notes that while there were many different Western African religions from which slaves came, these religions shared enough common beliefs and characteristics to identify a general overarching belief system. Common to many African religions was the belief in a Supreme Creator of the universe who was somewhat removed from human affairs, and a number of smaller divinities and spirits who were more directly involved with humans.

E. Franklin Frazier is a well-known Black American sociologist who wrote about slave religion and the African American church. His quintessential work, *The Negro Church in America,* offers a detailed explanation of African slaves' embrace of Christianity after arriving in America. Frazier makes a compelling argument that when slaves were brought to America from Africa, social cohesion was all but destroyed. The horrific conditions experienced by the slaves, as well as the disruption of basic social units like tribes and families, led to unprecedented social upheaval. Religion, he argues, served as a new form of social cohesion; it was a unifying force which could unite slaves together based upon their shared experiences.[22] As slaves were brought to America, some were baptized by "missionaries" who sought to convert them. It was not until the Great Awakening, however, that slaves began embracing an American form of Christianity in large numbers and building a unified African American religious culture. Baptist and Methodist

[21] Raboteau, 5-6.
[22] Frazier, E. Franklin. *The Negro Church in America* (New York: Schocken Books, Inc., 1963), 12-14.

preachers spread messages about God's care for the poor and needy, and this combined with African Americans' existing religious background to create a unique sense of religious fervor.[23] These preachers should not be credited with spreading hope and kindness to the slaves specifically, as this was generally not their main intention, but the Great Awakening did lead to an increased exposure among African Americans to American Christianity. Ultimately, it was the slaves themselves who sought hope in the pages of the Bible.

The messages they heard, combined with their religious and cultural roots, meant something different to slaves than they did to the White listeners whom these sermons were addressed to. For White people, by and large, God's care for the poor and needy meant that God had sympathy for the African slaves who were to be pitied because of their less-than-human status. Rather than reinforce their identity as fully human, Biblical ideals served to speed up the dehumanization of slaves in White eyes. For slaves, however, Biblical stories of love and deliverance revealed to them a God who embraced their humanity and lamented their suffering. The embrace of Christianity among African Americans can also be explained by their search for meaning in their existence in America. Some slaves expressed confusion that their gods and deities had not protected them from the atrocities of slavery, and turned to Christianity with hope that the God of the Bible would deliver them from their suffering.[24] It may seem contradictory that slaves turned to the God of their oppressors for hope, but to African American slaves, the Bible proclaimed a vastly different message about oppression than their White oppressors did. Another factor that contributed to the growth of Christianity among slaves was the attempt by Whites to control African Americans. In many places, White masters outlawed the practice of African religion, fearing that it would lead to slave revolts. On the other hand, they supported the

[23] Frazier, 15-16.
[24] Frazier, 17.

implementation of Christian practices among slave communities, and often included slaves in certain religious rituals like family prayer or oversaw their religious gatherings. Thus, even as African Americans turned to the God of the Bible in search of hope, deliverance, and social cohesion, their embrace of American Christianity is in part the result of their oppression. However complicated its beginnings may be, slave religion served as a powerful unifying force both during slavery and in the many decades following its end.

The dichotomy between White interpretations of Biblical narratives and Black interpretations of the Bible's message persisted. Even during the height of slavery in America, the Bible was weaponized against African Americans and used to justify their enslavement. Because of their shared history of oppression, however, African Americans increasingly saw their own story of oppression and hope for deliverance reflected in the Bible. This perspective and its effect on the African American community can be seen in various "freedom narratives," or slave narratives, that were written in the years leading up to the Civil War. James Pennington, a pastor and prominent abolitionist, wrote, "If the word of God does sanction slavery, I want another book, another repentance, another faith, another hope!" He ultimately concluded, "slavery is condemned by the general tenor and scope of the New Testament."[25] Though the conclusion that the Bible does not in fact support slavery may seem obvious to modern readers, this proclamation serves as the foundation for an African American version of liberation theology that would become integral to the fight for racial justice. While some initial mentions of the Bible in slaves' written accounts are negative, they are almost never entirely so. Instead,

[25] Powery, Emerson B. and Sadler, Rodney S. *The Genesis of Liberation: Biblical Interpretation in the Antebellum Narratives of the Enslaved* (Kentucky: John Knox Press, 2016), P.

some slaves spoke negatively about the Bible when discussing American Christianity in a broad sense, or in the way that Whites used it to justify slavery.[26]

African Americans, much like the Latin Americans who had long been influenced by liberation theology, saw their own story reflected in both the Old and New Testaments. In regard to the Old Testament, slave religion specifically emphasized the book of Exodus and the deliverance of the Israelites. Slaves were able to identify with the struggles of Old Testament leaders like Daniel, Joshua, Jeremiah, and Moses, who all played a role in leading the Israelites out of oppression. African American slaves drew hope from these stories, proclaiming that if God could protect Daniel in the Lion's Den and part the Red Sea to deliver the Israelites from Egypt, he could certainly rescue them from slavery.[27] One popular spiritual oration displayed this hope:

> *He delivered Daniel from de lion's den,*
> *Jonah from de belly of de whale,*
> *And de Hebrew children from de fiery furnace,*
> *And why not every man?*[28]

Freedom narratives written by slaves are filled with examples of their identification with the oppressed in the Bible. Frederick Douglass applied Isaiah 53:10 to the African American experience, writing about his fellow slaves, "They were in very deed men and women of sorrow, and acquainted with grief. Their backs had been made familiar with the bloody lash, so that they become callous."[29] Like many slaves, Douglass directly applies the experiences of African Americans, like being whipped, to the experiences of the Israelites who were overtaken and exiled. African American slaves also identified with the suffering Jesus of the New Testament. In

[26] Powery, et. al., 52-53.
[27] Miller, Keith D. *Voices of Deliverance: The Language of Martin Luther King, Jr. and Its Sources* (New York: The Free Press, 1992), 18-19.
[28] Miller, 20.
[29] Powery, et. al., 55.

writing about his experience as a slave, Matthew Bibb writes, "I could indeed afford to crucify my own flesh for the sake of redeeming myself from perpetual slavery."[30] Just as Cone and other liberation theologians would go on to do, Bibb recognized that the narrative of Jesus's crucifixion signifies redemption from oppression. Most freedom narratives do not explore this concept of identifying with the oppressed and crucified Christ, but some hint at the connection between his suffering and the suffering of slaves. Although Bibb made a clear connection between the person of Jesus and the condition of African Americans, other slave writers made connections between the words of Jesus and their own experiences. Samuel Ward wrote, "They hear Christ say, 'Inasmuch as ye did it (or did it not) to the least of these my bretheren, ye did it (or did it not) unto me.' Black men are, in the estimation of these brethren who oppose the antislavery cause, 'the least.' Should not religious men tremble, lest the Son of Man should denounce these terrible words against them?"[31] Ward invokes the words of Jesus to condemn the actions of antislavery Whites, recognizing that when Jesus identified with the "least of these," he identified with all those who are oppressed, including Black Americans. Ward's words are particularly significant because he uses theology to suggest that God is not on the side of White Christians; this ideology would become increasingly prevalent as African Americans moved throughout the next century and toward the Civil Rights Movement.

The Roots of Black Liberation Theology: Post-Slavery

As many historians have since proclaimed, slavery did not end when President Lincoln issued the Emancipation Proclamation in 1963. Even as things did begin to change for slaves, African Americans still faced immense violence and discrimination. In this sense, they would

[30] Powery, et. al., 55.
[31] Powery, et. al., 57.

remain "enslaved" for many years. They were still enslaved in the sense that freedom had not yet been granted to them, and they were still seen as subhuman. Out of the formal institution of slavery, however, African Americans carried with them a unique culture. Religion, though certainly not a formative aspect of every African American's worldview, influenced the broader African American culture in significant ways. E. Franklin Frazier argued that religion had served as a unifying agent in the midst of the social upheaval caused by slavery; in a similar way, it served as a unifying agent in the social turmoil caused by the end of the Civil War and the transition out of slavery. It was during the decades following the end of "slavery" as a legal institution that the African American Church saw its development, and this development would prove crucial to the success of the Civil Rights Movement. Charles Marsh, a professor and theologian who studies African American religion, wrote,

> "While Jim Crow society was designed to convince blacks they were nobodies, the black churches preached a gospel that embraced the longings and desires of a disenfranchised people. A new social space took shape, offering an alternative to the social world of Jim Crow – a 'nation within a nation,' as E Franklin Frazier once wrote – a world displaying the very reversal of the racist patterns embedded in the segregated South."[32]

Liberation theology not only propelled the growth of the African American Church but was further developed by it, leading to the formation of Cone's ideology in the latter half of the twentieth century. Some Black activists in the nineteenth century wrote about their religion as being totally separate from the religion of White slaveholders. White hypocrisy appears as a common theme in the writings of Peter Randolph and Frederick Douglass. In his autobiography, Randolph writes, "In these times of which I speak it was not customary for a colored preacher to address a white congregation; various were the views maintained by the white people relative to the colored man. Some said that he was not a member of the human family; others, that he was

[32] Marsh, Charles. *God's Long Summer: Stories of Faith and Civil Rights* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1997), 13.

void of a moral and intellectual nature."[33] Just as Black people have long been excluded from the benefits of "Whiteness," they have also been excluded from the benefits and experiences of White faith. For African Americans during the emancipation era, this led to the development of a faith that was by very definition Black; in their exclusion from white religious communities, Black religious communities became knit around a common theology that affirmed their Black experience.

Thus, many in the African American community sought to establish their own religious communities and congregations, and the emergence of a "Social Gospel" among white congregations served to widen the gap even further. In the twentieth century, popular evangelical figures like Walter Rausenchbush preached the message that industrialization had not been economically or socially beneficial for all, and acknowledged the fact that it had served to "make the rich richer and the poor poorer."[34] Although this social gospel was beneficial in some ways, it was underpinned by a "White saviorism" in which White Christians adopted the attitude that they were God's chosen people, fulfilling their destiny to exercise dominion over the earth and bring about justice. Inequality was addressed on a larger scale than it had been before, but the racial aspects of inequality, as well as White Christians' ongoing complicity in oppression, were largely ignored.[35] The misguided attempts by White Christians to bring about justice did not seek to bring about true liberation, but to provide aid to those they saw as "less fortunate." This movement within mainstream White Christianity isolated African Americans even further, and affirmed that the roots of their oppression, which ran deep, would not be eradicated by White

[33]Randolph, Peter. "From Slave Cabin to the Pulpit: The Autobiography of Rev. Peter Randolph: The Southern Question Illustrated and Sketches of Slave Life: Electronic Edition." Available at https://docsouth.unc.edu/neh/randolph/randolph.html, p. 45.
[34] Pinn, Anthony B. "JESUS AND JUSTICE: An Outline of Liberation Theology within Black Churches." *CrossCurrents* 57, no. 2 (2007): 218. http://www.jstor.org/stable/24461366, P.
[35] Pinn, 218-219.

Christians alone. Just as the Biblical interpretation aspect of Black liberation theology developed during the slavery era, the social action aspect of this theology developed in the decades following emancipation, when White Americans made it clear that freedom would not be easily won.

In conjunction with the Social Gospel movement present among some predominantly White churches, Black congregations increasingly began to prioritize social justice. Because these churches had been established on the foundation of the unique Black experience, they recognized the need for Black people to take social action. Many of those who would participate in the activities and demonstrations of the Civil Rights Movement heard their first calls to action within the walls of Black churches.[36] Many activists who rose to prominence spoke about their tightly held religious convictions and influential upbringings in the church. Perhaps the most important belief underpinning the formation of African American churches and religious organizations deals with the concept of freedom. In their discussion of the importance of "freedom" to the African American religious experience, Lincoln and Mamiya write,

> "During slavery it meant release from bondage; after emancipation it meant the right to be educated, to be employed, and to move about freely from place to place… From the very beginning of the black experience in America, one denotation of freedom has remained constant: freedom has always meant the absence of any restraint which might compromise one's responsibility to God."[37]

In the African American religious experience, freedom has a uniquely communal connotation. For White Americans, "freedom" implies an individual's ability to work hard, to express oneself, and to make choices, but for Black Americans, "freedom" emphasizes a communal deliverance from oppression and a lack of systemic restraints that keep African Americans from seeking

[36] Pinn, 220.
[37] Lincoln and Mamiya, 29.

education, justice, etc.[38] The communal nature of the African American religious community that emerged, along with the importance of freedom in the African American tradition, paved the way for a Civil Rights Movement that was at once social, political, and spiritual.

Liberation Theology and the Civil Rights Movement

When the Civil Rights Movement began in the 1950s, the stage had been set for a clash of conflicting theologies. It has been well established that religion served as a powerful uniting and motivating force for the African American community and that White communities used religion to back up their own actions and beliefs as well. In his book of stories about religion's role in the Civil Rights Movement, Charles Marsh writes, "In every mass anti-civil rights meeting, church service, and Klan rally, God's name was invoked and his power claimed… all staked their particular claims for racial justice and social order on the premise that God was on their side."[39] The African American community's unique interpretation of the Bible and belief in its emphasis on liberation had a profound impact on their actions as the fight for racial justice escalated, even as White Americans claimed that the same Bible justified their attempts to maintain the status quo. This conflict helps to explain why the liberation theology narrative is unique to the African American community, and why it was such a significant undercurrent in the broader Civil Rights Movement. Liberation theology helps to explain the movement by showcasing both the motivations and methods employed by African Americans in their fight for racial justice. Because liberation theology affects each member of the Black American community to a different degree, and because not all Black Americans are profoundly shaped by this ideology, it can be difficult to paint a comprehensive picture of its impact on the Civil rights

[38] Lincoln and Mamiya, 28-29.
[39] Marsh, 3.

Movement. Its impact can most clearly be seen in the lives of specific individuals. Before turning to individual examples, however, a brief synopsis of liberation theology's role in the overall movement provides some necessary context.

As the African American community began to organize in the name of a racial justice movement, liberation theology continued to develop as it was translated into direct action. Liberation theology begins with the belief that God has given to all people the gift of life, and that this gift includes the freedom to flourish as human beings, without the bondage of oppressive systems. For the African American community, this belief has tangible implications. Rosetta E. Ross points out two of these implications that explain the close relationship between religious belief and social justice: racial uplift and social responsibility. Racial uplift refers to the practices and perspectives by which Black communities seek to liberate themselves from oppressive white systems.[40] Racial uplift is an inclusive vision of advancement that focuses on the liberation of whole communities, not just individuals. It reflects the Black community's priorities of not just survival but forward progress. Racial uplift has pervaded racial justice movements since long before the mid-twentieth century, and racial uplift can be seen in the development of black churches after slavery. Ultimately, the concept of racial uplift embraces a definition of freedom that not only resists the existence of explicit discrimination, but provides racial minorities with opportunities to be fully involved in the nation's political and social atmosphere. A closely related concept, social responsibility refers to a more universal sense of obligation to help those in need. In the context of African American racial justice, racial uplift and social responsibility are always related. Social responsibility recognizes that racial justice is necessary for all humans to obtain freedom and flourish. Its end goal, however, goes beyond the

[40] Ross, Rosetta E. *Witnessing & Testifying: Black Women, Religion, and Civil Rights* (Minnesota: Fortress Press, 2003), 3.

immediate dismantling of racist structures and looks forward to a world in which all humans flourish and needs are met. Black women, specifically, exemplify this motif in their writings and actions, reflecting their history and sense of obligation to respond to the needs of others.[41]

Both racial uplift and social responsibility are woven into the very fabric of liberation theology and can be seen throughout all aspects of the Civil Rights Movement. Even when liberation theology's role in the Civil Rights Movement is not explicit, its role in making racial uplift and social responsibility central to Black activism makes liberation theology foundational to the movement. A history of the movement published by Hourly History explains many of the factors that contributed to the climax of the racial justice movement in America. The resurgence of the Ku Klux Klan in the 1920s, the Great Depression in the 1930s, and World War II in the 1940s all paved the way for an eruption of African American activism in the 1950s.[42] In the decades leading up to the 1950s, Black people were experiencing overwhelming amounts of physical violence, economic disparity, and social isolation. Black people were among the hardest hit by the Great Depression and were largely left out of attempts by the United States government to recover after the war. The oppression faced by African Americans during slavery had taken a new form, but the African American community felt its crushing weight all the same. Famously, W.E.B. Du Bois wrote, "The slave went free; stood a brief moment in the sun; and then moved back again toward slavery."[43] Though they were afforded more "freedom" by the law than they had been before the Civil War, African Americans were not free according to the definition of freedom underpinning liberation theology. God had delivered them from slavery, but he had not yet delivered them from oppression. In addition to outright hatred and

[41] Ross, 4.
[42] Hourly History, *Civil Rights Movement: A History from Beginning to* End (Hourly History, 2021), 7.
[43] Hourly History, 3.

discrimination, the lack of attention paid by Whites contributed to a growing desire among Black Americans to participate in their own liberation in a different way than they had before. In accordance with the Black community's definition of "freedom" as a communal concept, the Civil Rights Movement began when the Black community came together to stage large-scale boycotts.

The Montgomery bus boycott began in 1955, just 100 days after the murder of Emmett Till, a 14-year-old Black boy who was killed following an accusation of flirting with a White man's wife. Emmett Till's death, though only one of countless murders and lynchings the Black community had endured, served as a catalyst for the broader movement to begin. The Montgomery Bus Boycott was widespread and successful, involving 90% of Montgomery's Black population and leading to the desegregation of Montgomery's bus system. It was the first of many organized attempts by Black Americans to push for the enforcement of desegregation following the *Brown v. Board of Education* ruling in 1954.[44] Throughout the nation, Black communities began staging nonviolent boycotts and protests, forcing the desegregation of schools and other public spaces. In this sense, Black Americans were participating in racial uplift. Black Americans were fighting for more than mere survival or freedom under the law; they were fighting for forward progress and societal advancement. They were fighting for large-scale, true equality that would pervade all American systems and institutions. In line with their communal understanding of the concept of freedom, Black Americans began the fight for liberation at the community level, gathering in large groups to stage demonstrations and protests.

The Protestant American church became directly involved in the Civil Rights Movement in the early 1960s. In 1963, the General Board of the National Council of Churches established a

[44] Hourly History, 9-11.

Commission on Religion and Race to help churches engage in the fight for racial justice that had engulfed the country. Soon after, other organizations like the United Presbyterian Church, U.S.A. and the United Church of Christ followed suit and established similar commissions. While these organizations were predominantly made up of White churches, around the time of the Civil Rights Movement they became closely aligned with Black activists like Martin Luther King Jr. For the first time, Black and White churches across the nation were uniting to pour support and monetary aid into the movement. One spokesperson from the National Council of Churches said, "In such a time the Church of Jesus Christ is called upon to put aside every lesser engagement, to confess her sins of omission and delay, and to move forward to witness her essential belief that every child of God is a brother to every other."[45] Here, this spokesman speaks from the classic perspective of liberation theology, which relies on the foundation that all people are created equal and in God's image, and that the oppressed are called to participate in their own liberation from oppression. As is reflected in this statement, Black churches across the nation adopted a sense of urgency in 1963, believing that a significant breakthrough in the Civil Rights Movement was imminent. Because liberation theology was so deeply engrained in the ethos of these churches, there was little debate about the Church's responsibility to take action.

Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.: A Liberation Theologian

The most well-known figure associated with the Civil Rights Movement of the 1950s and 1960s, Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. remains a revered figure around the world, and his nonviolent stance continues to carry considerable influence in various struggles for justice throughout the globe. Countless schools, streets, and churches bear his name, and words from some of his

[45] Findlay, James F. *Church People in the Struggle: The National Council of Churches and the Black Freedom Movement, 1950-1970* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 3.

speeches are regarded as some of the most important ever spoken in regards to racial justice.[46] With a national holiday dedicated to honoring his legacy, Americans clearly view King, in some respects, as a figurative identity of the Civil Rights Movement. Popular consensus about King's motivations and legacy, however, merits a closer look. In many ways, King's legacy has been reduced to one of conservatism and peace-making as a response to justice, and he is enshrined as the gentle, well-spoken protagonist of the Civil Rights Movement rather than an activist who called for radical action. King's theological perspective and philosophical ideology are often largely ignored, and his words and actions are reduced to mere inspirational quotes. Understanding King's true legacy proves to be a complicated task, as many of his speeches outline complex sociopolitical phenomena as he explains the roots of racism and discusses what will be required to uproot it. There are two factors that are critical to explaining King's theological legacy: understanding his own theological beliefs and motivations, and understanding *why* King rose up as the most prominent leader of the movement when so many others shared similar ideologies.

When discussing the importance of Dr. King to the broader Civil Rghts movement, it is important to clarify that the movement was much larger than King himself. Keith Miller writes, "King's unique status was not self-evident to many who breathed the movement, suffered the movement, slept the movement, and sometimes died the movement."[47] King played many different roles within the Civil Rights Movement, but most of these roles were not unique to him. He acted as a minister, a voice for the nonviolent movement, a political strategist, and ultimately, a martyr for the liberation movement, but so did many others. Ultimately, King became a

[46] Ivory, Luther D. *Toward a Theology of Radical Involvement: The Theological Legacy of Martin Luther King Jr.* (Tennessee: Abingdon Press, 1997), 13.
[47] Miller, 10

figurative identity of the movement not because he acted in a unique way but because the African American community and the American media turned him into a "superstar" of sorts. Miller argues that the reason King obtained this stardom while other activists did not is because of his language.[48] King's unmatched oratory skills and powerful messages about freedom allowed him to become a voice for the movement in a way that no one else could. His could both unite African American communities behind the cause of liberation with his words and convince middle-of-the-road whites to listen. Vital to the messages King proclaimed and the style in which he proclaimed them was the tradition he had grown up in – the tradition of the Black church, which was built on a foundation of liberation theology.

King's nonviolent stance has been explored at length by historians, but many have neglected to discuss the importance of Black liberation theology in guiding King's beliefs and choices. In his monograph about King's theological legacy, Luther Ivory calls King's theology a "theology of radical involvement."[49] Ivory argues that had King not remained grounded in the tradition of the black church, his leadership in the Civil Rights Movement might have looked quite different. It was the unique belief system of the African American community that propelled him to turn his theology into justice-seeking action; had he assimilated more into "Anglo-American culture, he might not have carried the Civil Rights Movement as far as he did.[50] Understanding the influence of liberation theology on King's own personal belief system helps not only to explain the influence of liberation theology on the broader movement, but it reveals that liberation theology can be at once radical and nonviolent. Those who would seek to

[48] Miller, 10
[49] Ivory, title
[50] Ivory, 35-36

discredit liberation theology on account of its encouragement of violent liberation fail to realize the complexity of this theology and its role in American history.

Keith Miller argues that scholars have produced a highly distorted image of King by focusing on the influence of Euro-American philosophers and theologians on his theology.[51] They often use his time in seminary as the starting place for discussing the evolution of his theology; in reality, slavery must serve as its foundation. King learned about slave religion and theology from the broader African American community around him, but specifically from his father who was also a preacher. Slaves' ability to practice religion in a traditional sense was limited, mainly because many slaves did not have the ability to read and write. Even those who could read and write had limited access to Bibles. Therefore, sermons served as the primary means by which they received religious instruction. African American preachers practiced and perfected their "highly oral form of religious art," providing hope to the African American community in the midst of intense hardship.[52] King's father, and King himself, were influenced by this tradition that was born during the slavery era, making them both artful orators who had the power to captivate audiences. A closer look at specific orations delivered by King provides evidence of the degree to which liberation theology influenced him.

In March of 1958, King delivered a speech entitled "Who Speaks for the South?" in which he argued that White racist radicals had no power to speak for the experiences of Southern Blacks. In this speech, King said, "Under God we were born free. Misguided men robbed us of our freedom. We want it back; we would keep it forever… We are prepared to press on unceasingly and persistently, to obtain our birthright and to hand it down to our children and to

[51] Miller, 17.
[52] Miller, 18.

their children's children."[53] Here, King clearly articulates the very foundation of liberation theology: freedom is the goal of human existence. God created humans to live in freedom, but sin and oppression rob the poor of this God-given freedom. The oppressed are called to rise up against oppression and fight for their freedom. In this portion of his speech, King acknowledges the God-ordained freedom of Black people, contends that this freedom has been stolen by oppressors, and calls the Black community to action. When King uses the phrase "our children and their children's children," he echoes a theme found throughout the Old Testament in which the Israelites repeated stories of God's deliverance to younger generations. King knew that much of his audience was familiar with these Old Testament stories and appealed to their identification with the Israelites of the Old Testament. Liberation theology, at its very core, is more than an ideology but a call to communal action, and here King outlines this call to action in simple terms. Because King believes in the Black community's birthright of freedom, he believes in their responsibility and power to rise up and reclaim this freedom.

In addition to articulating the beliefs that form the foundation of liberation theology, the calls to action King proclaimed reflect a belief that the oppressed are called to participate in their own liberation. King's activism may not have been violent, but it was certainly radical; he called for the Black community to stand against injustice in all its forms. In another speech, he proclaimed,

> "I never did intend to adjust myself to religious bigotry…And I call upon all men of good will to be maladjusted because it may well be that the salvation of our world lies in the hands of the maladjusted. So let us be maladjusted, as maladjusted as the prophet Amos, who in the midst of the injustices of his day could cry out in words that echo across the centuries, 'Let justice run down like waters and righteousness like a mighty stream.'"[54]

[53] Washington, James M., Ed. *A Testament of Hope: The Essential Writings and Speeches of Martin Luther King, Jr.* (New York: HaperCollins Publishers Ltd., 1991), 92.
[54] Washington, 216.

Here, once again, King refers to the Old Testament. He identifies the Black struggle against injustice with the struggle faced by the exiled Israelites, telling the Black community not to "adjust" to the version of American Christianity that justified racial discrimination. King essentially urges the Black Church to maintain its theological foundation, reminding them that they are called to participate in their own salvation and reminding them that the Bible promotes justice.

King employs the language of liberation theology in almost all of his speeches, including his most famous speech, "I have a Dream." As King stood on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial and delivered this speech, he did so with powerful, repetitive language that pointed to a future hope of freedom for all Black people. "I have a dream that one day every valley shall be exalted, every hill and mountain shall be made low, the rough places shall be made plain, and the crooked places shall be made straight and the glory of the Lord will be revealed and all flesh shall see it together."[55] This portion of King's most famous speech is unique because of its ambiguity; here, King no longer looks to a future day on earth in which racial justice will be achieved, but looks forward to a day in heaven. He employs biblical language to paint a picture of a new heaven and new earth in which injustice will no longer exist, reflecting the ultimate hope of the African American community. Liberation theology, while it serves as a tangible framework for change, is shaped by a more long-term hope that one day God will deliver his people from all oppression, and people from every race, gender, and class will coexist as one. Here, King appeals to that future hope, reminding the Black community that their hope extends beyond the immediate success of the Civil Rights Movement. This same hope is reflected in the works of James H. Cone. King, though often revered due to his emphasis on nonviolence and peace, proclaimed the

[55] Washington, 219.

same message of radical social action reflected in Cone's words. Both men serve as voices for the pain and hope of generations of Black Americans who identify with the Bible's powerful narrative of liberation.

Theological Influences of Black Female Activists

To present a clear picture of liberation theology's role in the Civil Rights Movement, special attention must be paid to the black women who led in the fight for justice. Histories of the movement have been disproportionately focused on its male leaders, ignoring the vital contributions of countless women and downplaying the power of the African American community as a whole. Dr. King may have served as a figurative identity for the Civil Rights Movement, but his words and beliefs should not overshadow the unique experiences of Black women who experienced discrimination on account of both race and gender. Although the voices of Black women are often ignored, they served as some of the most powerful forces for justice in the twentieth century. Danielle McGuire writes, "By deploying their voices as weapons in the wars against white supremacy, whether in the church, the courtroom, or in congressional hearings, African-American women loudly resisted what Martin Luther King, Jr. called the "thingification" of their humanity."[56] Black women, in many ways, formed the foundation of the Civil Rights Movement; it was Black women who experienced unimaginable amounts of physical and sexual violence, and Black women who were seen as least "human." The racism and discrimination they faced, along with the gendered roles they were forced to occupy, led Black women to engage in activism in unique ways. While prominent male leaders had louder voices in the movement for racial justice, women were far more involved at the grassroots level.

[56] McGuire, Danielle L. *At the Dark End of the Street: Black Women, Rape, and Resistance – a New History of the Civil Rights Movement from Rosa Parks to the Rise of Black Power* (New York: Vintage Books, 2010), xvii-xx.

Black women practiced "social responsibility" on a large scale, partly because gender roles mean that Black women assumed responsibility not only for their own survival but for the survival of their families.[57]Their unique methods have been diminished in the eyes of history, but they were integral to the success of the Civil Rights Movement. Like King, many of these women were influenced by their own theologies and religious backgrounds, and their theological beliefs merit closer examination.

While the voices of many Black women have been drowned out by historians, a few maintain well-known status. However, the details of even these women's backgrounds and motivations are often overlooked. Much like the men who serve as the face of the Civil Rights Movement in the popular historical perspective, many prominent Black female activists were profoundly shaped by the perspective of liberation theology. Fannie Lou Hamer, one of the most well-remembered Black female activists, led a life that was shaped by her faith in significant ways. Born in Mississippi to parents who were sharecroppers, Hamer spent her early years working in the fields in order to help her family survive. In 1962, when she was in her forties and married, Hamer attended a meeting led by civil rights activists from the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee, and her work as an activist began. She quickly became passionate about advocating for Black people to exercise their right to vote, and became a coordinating member of the SNCC for this purpose. From the beginning of her activist efforts, Hamer drew hope from the faith of her upbringing. Some of her fellow activists recalled that when they were driving home from a trip to the courthouse to register to vote, they were stopped by a police office and the driver was arrested. While everyone on the bus was afraid and unsure of what to do, Hamer started singing hymns, eventually compelling the rest of the bus to join in.[58]

[57] Cone, James H. *The Cross and the Lynching Tree* (New York: Orbis Books, 2012), 132-133.
[58] Marsh, 15.

The following year, as Hamer became more involved in the Civil Rights Movement, she faced immense suffering at the hands of White people. In the summer of 1963, Hamer was arrested along with a group of other activists for sitting at the lunch counter of a White restaurant in Winona, Mississippi. In jail, Hamer endured brutal beatings, suffering permanent injuries. The other Black people in the Winona jail received similar treatment, but despite the unimaginable suffering the faced, Hamer began to sing from her jail cell. She recalls, "Singing brings out the soul."[59] Specifically, she sang,

> "Paul and Silas began to shout, let my people go.
> Jail doors open and they walked out, let my people go."[60]

In singing this hymn, Hamer identified with the oppressed in both the Old and New Testaments. She refers to the jailing of Paul and Silas on account of their Christianity, and to the demands of Moses for Pharoah to let the Israelites go from Egypt. While she was imprisoned, she continued to talk about her faith, both with the inmates and with the White family who ran the jail. In accounts of her time at the Winona jail, Hamer does not deny the horrific evil of the treatment the inmates faced, but she maintains that the hope she drew from hymns and the Bible kept her sane.[61]

Her experiences at the Winona jail were but a few instances of Hamer's use of faith to restore hope. When she was released, she resumed her activist efforts, and often sang hymns or proclaimed Biblical messages to fellow Black Americans. Hamer's reputation as an activist began to soar in following years when she co-founded the Mississippi Democratic Party, helped organize the Freedom Summer in 1964, and announced her candidacy for the Mississippi House of Representatives, although she was barred from the ballot. In many of her speeches, Hamer

[59] Marsh, 22.
[60] Marsh, 22.
[61] Marsh, 22-24.

proclaimed her belief that God would deliver Black Americans from the oppression they faced, and because liberation theology formed the basis of her Christian perspective, allowed this belief to propel her advocacy. Charles Marsh writes, "Combining praise and prophetic provocation, Mrs. Hamer set her eyes on the freedom land. If you were not going, you'd better get out of her way."[62] Fannie Lou Hamer is perhaps the most obvious example, as she remained outspoken about her faith throughout her life. There were other women, however, who spoke much less freely about the role of religion in their activism, but were influenced by it all the same.

Another well-known female activist, Ella Baker, was also influenced by liberation theology. Known as an architect of the Civil Rights Movement, Baker's perspective on human rights and human dignity gave voice to the convictions of young Black people across the country. Although she was involved in racial justice campaigns as early as the 1930s, Baker is perhaps best known for founding two major organizations that formed a major part of the Civil Rights Movement: The Southern Christian Leadership Conference and the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee. Like most Black women, the details of Baker's activism have not been studied in the detail that her male counterparts' actions have been, but a brief look at her upbringing and early life provide a glimpse of Baker's theological and moral influences. Throughout her childhood, Baker's mother engaged in various local missionary activities, remaining involved in the Baptist Missionary Union. Like many Black women during the time, Mrs. Baker's religious beliefs manifested themselves mainly through the concept of "social responsibility." She often gave speeches to groups of women, encouraging them to allow their faith to guide their daily activities and discussing the importance of helping the poor. Later in life, Ella Baker would reflect on stories of her mother sharing the family's food with others in the

[62] Marsh, 25.

community and taking care of sick neighbors. Much of Baker's own childhood was spent assisting her mother in her missionary work, helping to take care of the sick and needy. Though Baker's own activism would take on a different shape than her mother's, her childhood taught her about the dignity of people and the importance of community. She learned to share time and resources with others not because she had to, but because they were human beings and because she had a responsibility to her community. Baker was eventually baptized, and when she left home to attend Shaw University, she carried with her a deep conviction that faith ought to be reflected in practice.[63]

After attending Shaw University, Ella Baker moved to live with relatives in New York, where she found employment in several different professions before turning fully toward her work as a civil rights activist. Throughout the 1930s, she organized several small activist movements within the city, and in 1941, her participation in the broader Civil Rights Movement took off when she accepted a position with the NAACP (The National Association for the Advancement of Colored People). The influence of liberation theology on Baker's activism is not explicit. Unlike Dr. King, Baker was not a preacher by trade, nor was she overly outspoken about her faith. Shaped by a growing network of activists and the Harlem Renaissance, however, Baker's moral values built on the religious experiences of her youth to inform her perspective.[64] In later writings, Baker reflected on the influence religion had on her activism. She wrote that Christianity had shaped her belief about human dignity, instilling in her a strong conviction that every person has value. Her mother and grandparents, who were all deeply involved in their local religious communities, believed that all people deserve freedom and love, and that human beings share a communal responsibility to one another. Baker's beliefs, though certainly more radical

[63] Ross, 32-37.
[64] Ross, 37-46.

than her family's, reflect this conviction. In a 1964 speech, Baker said, "I always like to think that the very God who gave us life, gave us liberty. And if we don't have liberty, it is because somebody else stood between us and that which God has granted us."[65] Baker's statement reflects the paradigm of liberation theology: All people are born with God-ordained freedom, but Oppressors deny this God-ordained truth. Therefore, the Oppressed are called to rise up and reclaim their intrinsic human dignity and right to freedom. Baker believed in each individual's ability to assert their unique identity, and fought for the recognition of Black Americans' humanity.

In addition to Baker, Dorothy Height, known as the "godmother" of the Civil rights Movement, held ideals that reflected a liberation theology-centered mentality. In her memoir, entitled *Open Wide the Freedom Gates,* she writes that after she graduated from New York University in the 1930s, she served as an officer at the United Christian Youth Movement of North America, a group committed to relating faith to real-world issues, and was the president of the Harlem Youth Council. She also became an officer in the National Youth Congress established to focus on the economic issues facing African Americans. In all of these organizations, she writes, they grappled with complex issues and developed tactics for combatting them. Specifically, she learned from the young Communists in these groups that fighting for justice necessitated a common mission, and even learned about the role of militancy in fighting against injustice. She writes,

> "We Christians often had the big theoretical picture, but it was a constant struggle to bring everyone together so that we could move forward on a given task…Too often, people in Christian groups babbled on about how 'all men are created equal' or 'we're all children of God,' but if you asked them what line they're going to pursue to make those ideas reality, their convictions seems to crumble… They'd always have some excuse for not taking direction action.'"[66]

[65] Ross, 49.
[66] Height, Dorothy. *Open Wide the Freedom Gates: A Memoir* (United States: PublicAffairs, 2003), 63.

She goes on to criticize an American theology that claims to promote justice, but refuses to take radical action for fear of making other white people uncomfortable and upsetting the nation's carefully constructed power dynamic. For her, learning from Communists who promoted a very communal strategy for achieving justice made her more accepting of radical and militant strategies.[67] In her criticism of the tactics of mainstream Christians, Height expresses a perspective that is directly in line with liberation theology, which not only declares a need for justice but promotes direct action. In the 1950s and 1960s, Dorothy Height was a powerful voice for racial justice, taking the direction action she saw a need for and advocating for Black women. She was not as outspoken about her religious beliefs as Hamer, but for Height and for many other Black women, liberation theology served as an underlying force propelling her activism.

James Cone's Personal Perspective

James Cone's theology not only reflects the long history of liberation theology in the Black American community, but his own life experiences as well. Without Cone's autobiography, which he published at the end of his life, it would be difficult to form a complete picture of the context surrounding his theology. His final work, *Said I Wasn't Gonna Tell Nobody: The Making of a Black Theologian* was published in 2018, the same year Cone died. In the introduction to the book, he writes that he had resisted writing it for a long time, but he points to the history of African American narratives in which those who came before him, like W.E.B. Dubois and Frederick Douglass, used their voices to speak to the rest of America. Like King, Baker, and many other Black activists, Cone was shaped by a long tradition of Black men and women who shared their stories of oppression and activism through words and speech. He writes

[67] Height, 62-63.

that the more he tried to avoid writing an autobiography, the more he felt compelled to share his personal story in detail.[68] In writing this book, Cone proves what he argued in *A Black Theology of Liberation:* that the Black experience serves as the primary source for Black theology. He walks through his own life experiences, explaining how they shaped his perspective on God and the world around him.

In another one of his books, *My Soul Looks Back* (1999), Cone describes his early life growing up in Bearden, Arkansas, where he experienced for the first time the reality of "White injustice," and learned about the communal and historical burden placed upon the black community.[69] His personal experiences, as well as the injustice he saw permeating the world around him, created a tension in his soul that would eventually fuel him to advocate for Black liberation. For first decades of his life, however, Cone writes that he was a "good" Black person. He did not bring up issues of race to his White colleagues, and he did not speak or write about injustice in America. He went to seminary, during which he remembers only one instance of dropping his "mask" and speaking up about racism. Shortly after the Detroit Rebellion in July of 1967, Cone released some of his anger and shouted at his White professor in class for refusing to speak about the active violence against Black people. Almost immediately, Cone recalls, he apologized for his outburst and replaced his "mask."[70] After graduating, Cone went on to teach at Adrian College, where for the first year, he dutifully taught the theology of famous European theologians, largely ignoring the unique perspective of Black Christians. As time went on and more protests and violence broke out throughout the nation, his rage grew. Finally, Cone writes, "when Detroit exploded, so did I. My explosion shook me at the core of my racial identity,

[68] Cone, James H. *Said I Wasn't Gonna Tell Nobody* (New York: Orbis Books, 2018).
[69] Joseph, Celucien L. "The Meaning of James H. Cone and the Significance of Black Theology: Some Reflections on His Legacy." *Black Theology* 18, no. 2 (May 2020): 112–43. doi:10.1080/14769948.2020.1785662.
[70] Cone, James H. *Said I Wasn't Gonna Tell Nobody,* 1-6.

killing the 'Negro' in me and resurrecting my black self."[71] As he fought to suppress his rage and even his Black identity around his white neighbors, students, and colleagues, he began to look for a way to express it.

Throughout the bulk of his autobiography, Cone explains the ways in which the evolving liberation movement of the mid-twentieth century informed his perspective. Eventually, he writes, he gained the courage to write about theology without relying on the traditionally held theological perspectives of White theologians. He wrote directly out of the Black experience, realizing that Jesus himself identified with this experience.[72] He recalls that when he published his first book, *Black Theology and Black Power,* he had just begun to tap into this courage. He quoted popular White theologians to show that he was academically informed, well aware that they would not have agreed with his assertions regarding Blackness.[73] He acknowledges that his ideology was only just beginning to develop then, but he does not discredit his own work. Regardless of how his theology would go on to develop, he spoke truthfully from his experience as a Black American. Through his experiences as a professor, an author, and a speaker, Cone acknowledges the controversy his works inspired, but he maintains that Whites' opinions on his ideology were always irrelevant given that they did not understand the Black experience. "Blackness was my authority, my starting point," he writes.[74] Cone's perspective on his own theology, as articulated in *Said I Wasn't Gonna Tell Nobody,* must inform readers' interpretation of his other works. His intentions are just as important as his words themselves, and Cone clearly never intended to prescribe a universal ideology for all people to follow. Instead, he wrote out of

[71] Cone, *Said I Wasn't Gonna Tell Nobody,* 6.
[72] Cone, *Said I Wasn't Gonna Tell Nobody,* 15.
[73] Cone, *Said I Wasn't Gonna Tell Nobody,* 16.
[74] Cone, *Said I Wasn't Gonna Tell Nobody,* 46.

and spoke to the Black American experience during a time when they faced immense oppression, pushing them toward the necessary next step of fighting for their own liberation.

James H. Cone's Theology in Context

Fully interpreting James Cone's theology proves to be a complicated task, and remains an impossible achievement for White people, who have not experienced and will never experience the oppression which drives his theology. However, the task of reading his theology, of listening to his experiences, and of amplifying the voices of Black people who have experienced unspeakable injustice remains quite within reach. Many scholars have erred in their attempts to offer a critique of Cone's theology or explain away his more extreme sentiments. Taking into account the complicated historical context of his works, many have inadvertently tried to discredit his theology by suggesting it is mere hyperbole, born out of the intense emotion that imbibed Black Americans during the Civil Rights era. Such bold assumptions serve only to reinforce the historical pattern of silencing Black voices and discrediting their experiences. The historical context of Cone's theology remains important not because it softens his claims, but because it provides a lens through which to better understand the Black experience, the state of Christianity in America, and the steps that still need to be taken to correct centuries of deeply rooted racial injustice. When Cone asserted in the postscript to *A Black Theology of Liberation* that his theology could only be understood in its social and political context, he offered a challenge to readers to see beyond the words on the page, diving into the rich history of African American religion and the fight for racial justice. He offered readers a chance not to critique or discredit his words, but to truly listen to his message and all that is represents.

In *Said I Wasn't Gonna Tell Nobody,* Cone recalls a conversation he had with John Bennett, the president of Union Theological Seminary, when he was being considered for a position there. Bennett referenced a claim Cone made in *Black Theology and Black Power,* in which he stated that "the white church is the antichrist." Bennet asked him if the statement was hyperbolic, and Cone simply replied "Absolutely not! I mean it literally – every word of it."[75] As he recalls this conversation, Cone remembers explaining that white supremacy is America's original sin, and that it has led to the death of countless Black people. White supremacy is woven into the fabric of every American institution – including White churches, seminaries, and white theology as a whole.[76] Therefore, because White churches act as a vehicle for this great evil, the White church is the antichrist. Though Cone owed no explanation to Bennett, a White man who questioned the authenticity of his theological claims, he responded with a brief statement about the history of white supremacy and racism in America.[77] This indicates that when it comes to questions about Black theology, answers are not found in questioning the intentions of Black theologians, but rather examining the history of a country built on white supremacy. Therefore, readers who seek to understand Cone's theology as it relates to the broader African American experience must do so by examining its context, focusing not only on historical manifestations of racism but on the oppression that still exists within American systems and institutions.

While Cone did write about the history of the Black experience and liberation theology as a whole, he did not spell out the exact context for each piece of theological truth he shared. To understand his theology most fully, an outside history of Black liberation theology should be developed and understood alongside the pieces of history Cone himself provides. In *Martin &*

[75] Cone, *Said I Wasn't Gonna Tell Nobody,* 51.
[76] Cone, *Said I Wasn't Gonna Tell Nobody,* 51.
[77] Cone, *Said I Wasn't Gonna Tell Nobody*, 54.

Malcom & America, Cone recognizes the theological and philosophical influence of Martin Luther King Jr. In *Said I Wasn't Gonna Tell Nobody,* he writes, "The actions, songs, and preaching of the Civil Rights Movement, with Martin Luther King Jr. as its central spokesperson, expressed liberation in bus boycotts, sit-ins, marches, and Freedom Rides."[78] He recognized that the Civil Rights Movement was a liberation movement, and his theology was profoundly influenced by it. In *The Cross and the Lynching Tree,* Cone acknowledges that the Civil Rights Movement was largely led by black women. He writes,

> "The civil rights movement was also a women's movement. Women started it, sustained it through difficult times, and made religion its central focus through song – giving hope that 'we shall overcome,' because, as the great Ella Baker said, 'we who believe in freedom shall not rest until it comes.'…Nowhere were hope and resistance more abundant than among women."[79]

As Cone wrote in the context of the Civil Rights Movement, he recognized the unique activism carried out by Black women. He indicated, over and over, that Black liberation theology was a collective experience and belief system, not merely his own theological musings. Many who have attempted to discard his theology do so without recognizing that it is not his alone; rather, Cone's theology represents the foundational beliefs and experiences of an entire group of people. His words serve as an outcry against generations of oppression and injustice.

A true analysis of Cone's theology of liberation would be incomplete without careful consideration of his most popular work, *The Cross and the Lynching Tree*. In this book, Cone approaches liberation theology differently than in his other books. He published it late in life, just 6 years before his death in 2018, so its context is not as directly wrapped up in the Civil Rights Movement of the late twentieth century. Often understood to be Cone's most accessible exploration of Black theology, *The Cross and the Lynching Tree* approaches Black liberation and

[78] Cone, *Said I Wasn't Gonna Tell Nobody,* 15.
[79] Cone, *The Cross and the Lynching Tree,* 143.

the fight for justice from a somewhat softer, though no less powerful, angle. In *The Cross and the Lynching Tree,* Cone offers a sort of conclusion to his overarching theological narrative, explaining that the cross of Christ in the New Testament and the lynching tree on which so many black men and women were murdered serve as parallel symbols of suffering and oppression. Throughout the book, Cone acknowledges that his other works stemmed directly from the context in which they were written, discussing the impact of liberation theology and Black religion in the fight for freedom of the late twentieth century.[80] Cone never corrects or rescinds the words he proclaimed in earlier books, but instead offers modern readers a chance to understand Black liberation theology through a more modern lens. *The Cross and the Lynching Tree* has proven especially controversial in White evangelical circles because of its heavy emphasis on Jesus's unique relation to the Black community, but the powerful connection between the imagery of the cross and the horror of the lynching tree is undeniable.

In each of his works, Cone wrote in direct response to the historical and ongoing experiences of Black people. His earlier works, like *A Black Theology of Liberation* and *God of the Oppressed* require an external examination of liberation theology's history and influence on the Black community, but in *The Cross in the Lynching Tree,* Cone lays out much of the relevant history himself. He discusses what he calls the "lynching era" between the end of the Civil War and the 1950s, describing the violence and terror that permeated the Black American existence during this time. He writes, "Both the cross and the lynching tree represented the worst in human beings and at the same time 'an unquenchable ontological thirst' for life that refuses to let the worst determine our final meaning."[81] In other words, the lynching tree serves as a powerful representation of the oppression faced by Black Americans, but their survival and willingness to

[80] Cone, *The Cross and the Lynching Tree*.
[81] Cone, *The Cross and the Lynching Tree,* 3.

fight for justice in the Civil Rights era showcase the same hope and victory over suffering that Jesus displayed in his death on the cross. The culmination of Cone's theology can be summed up in these words: "The cross was God's critique of power – White power – with powerless love, snatching victory out of defeat."[82] Readers can understand two things from this statement: First, that when Cone speaks of evil, suffering, oppression, and "Whiteness," he speaks not about White individuals themselves but about White power, and second, that a foundational aspect of Black liberation theology is recognition of oppressed people's unique relationship to the Gospel of Jesus.

Conclusion: Steps Forward

In their history of liberation theology, Leonardo and Clodovis Boff write, "So the criticisms made of liberation theology by those who judge it on a purely conceptual level, devoid of any real commitment to the oppressed, must be seen as radically irrelevant. Liberation theology responds to such criticism with just one question: What part have *you* played in the effective and integral liberation of the oppressed?"[83] Since James Cone's first works were published in the 1970s, he has been recognized as the founder of Black liberation theology. While many White Christians and scholars have ignored his works as a theologian entirely, others have condemned his ideology. Cone's radical words and seemingly harsh judgments have been regarded at best as hyperbole and at worst as heresy. However, I argue that Cone's works have both been misinterpreted and misused. Readers have failed to delve into the context in which Cone wrote, instead taking his words at face value and misinterpreting them. In addition, White readers have misused his works by choosing to judge and critique them at all; because of

[82] Cone, *The Cross and the Lynching Tree,* 2.
[83] Boff, et. al., 9.

the unique historical situation of Black Americans and the ongoing oppression they face, the most appropriate response by White readers of Cone's theology is to validate the Black experience, acknowledge their own complicity in that ongoing oppression, and seek to learn how they might participate in the liberation of the oppressed.

The most significant criticism of liberation theology by White theologians has been its propensity to promote violence as a means of liberation. This is yet another example of White readers' failure to understand the lived experience which liberation theology stems from. In reality, the implications of liberation theology are far more complex than most readers believe. In some instances, liberation theologians have called for violence as a way to bring about deliverance from oppression and upset the existing power dynamics. In other cases, however, liberation theologians have called for an end to oppression while maintaining that physical violence is not the solution. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. is among the most prominent of these theologians; he is widely known for his nonviolent stance, but he is less often known for the liberation theology underpinning his beliefs and calls to action. A closer look at Dr. King's theology and his influence in the Civil Rights Movement shows that in his case, liberation theology led to positive social change without the use of significant violence, at least by Black Americans. For some, liberation theology has served as grounds for a radical and violent overthrow of power, but for many activists during the American Civil Rights Movement, liberation theology was a non-violent yet powerful force for systemic change. Both versions of liberation theology are valid and important; in many ways, a resort to physical violence as a means of fighting for liberation seems warranted in light of the overwhelming amount of violence Black Americans have endured at the hand of White Americans. In either case, however, the importance of liberation theology remains the same. There remains no excuse for

the outright discreditation of the theology that shaped the most widespread social justice movement in American history.

In this brief history, I have made no attempt to offer a comprehensive interpretation of Black liberation theology. Rather, I have showcased its nuances, highlighting the complexity and of the Black American experience and its relation to theology. An explanation of Black liberation theology's development, its role in the Civil Rights Movement, and the theological perspectives of prominent Black activists have provided a more complete picture of liberation theology's importance. James H. Cone remains one of the most powerful American voices of the twentieth century, not because of his words alone, but because he spoke to the experience of millions of Black Americans. For too long, the American church has ignored the Black American perspective entirely , muffling the voices of those who would speak out about their lived oppression and its relevance to the biblical narrative. The first step in eradicating racial division as it exists within the Church is to recognize the pervasive influence of liberation theology on American culture. The words of James H. Cone and the stories of activists like Fannie Lou Hamer and Martin Luther King Jr. are powerful yet underused tools for understanding the Black American experience, acknowledging White complicity in ongoing racism, and developing new understandings of the Bible that better reflect God's role in liberating the oppressed. There remains hope for justice, for reconciliation, and for peace. By amplifying Cone's words and all that they represent, Americans can prove true his final words in *The Cross and The Lynching Tree:* "No gulf between black and whites is too great to overcome, for our beauty is more enduring than our brutality… God took the evil of the cross and the lynching tree and transformed them both into the triumphant beauty of the divine. If America has the courage to

confront the great sin and ongoing legacy of white supremacy with repentance and reparation there is hope 'beyond tragedy.'"[84]

[84] Cone, *The Cross and the Lynching Tree,* 166.

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