CHAPTER 6

Jesus Christ in Black Theology

Christian theology begins and ends with Jesus Christ. He is the point of departure for everything to be said about God, humankind, and the world. That is why christology is the starting point of Karl Barth's *Dogmatics* and why Wolfhart Pannenberg says that "theology can clarify its Christian self-understanding only by a thematic and comprehensive involvement with Christological problems."[1] To speak of the Christian gospel is to speak of Jesus Christ who is the content of its message and without whom Christianity ceases to be. Therefore the answer to the question "What is the essence of Christianity?" can be given in the two words: Jesus Christ.

Because Jesus Christ is the focal point for everything that is said about the Christian gospel, it is necessary to investigate the meaning of his person and work in light of the black perspective. It is one thing to assert that he is the essence of the Christian gospel, and quite another to specify the meaning of his existence in relation to the slave ships that appeared on American shores. Unless his existence is analyzed in light of the oppressed of the land, we are still left wondering what his presence means for the auction block, the Underground Railroad, and contemporary manifestations of black power. To be sure, white theology has informed us that Jesus Christ is the content of the gospel, but it has failed miserably in relating that gospel to Nat Turner, Denmark Vesey, and Gabriel Prosser. It is therefore the task of black theology to make theology relevant to the black reality, asking, "What does Jesus Christ mean for the oppressed blacks of the land?"

The task of explicating the existence of Jesus Christ for blacks is not easy in a white society that uses Christianity as an instrument of oppression. White conservatives and liberals alike present images of a white Jesus that are completely alien to the liberation of the black community. Their Jesus is a mild, easy-going white American who can afford to mouth the luxuries of "love," "mercy," "long-suffering," and other white irrelevancies, because he has a multibillion-dollar military force to protect him from the encroachments of the ghetto and the "communist conspiracy." But black existence is existence in a hostile world without the protection of the law. If Jesus Christ is to have any meaning for us, he must leave the security of the suburbs by joining blacks in their condition. What need have we for a white Jesus when we are not white but black? If Jesus Christ is white and not black, he is an oppressor, and we must kill him. The appearance of black theology means that the black community is now ready to do something about the white Jesus, so that he cannot get in the way of our revolution.

The Historical Jesus and Black Theology

Investigation of the question "Who is Jesus Christ?" involves the question about the historical Jesus. Since the appearance of Albert Schweitzer's *The Quest of the Historical Jesus* and the rise of the form-history school, knowledge about the historical Jesus cannot be taken for granted. During the nineteenth century, theologians assumed that the real Jesus was accessible to historical investigation, and they attempted to go behind the preaching (kerygma) of the early church in order to find the authentic Jesus of Nazareth. But Schweitzer demonstrated conclusively that the liberal search for the historical Jesus was a failure and only represented creations of the human mind. The nineteenth-century "lives" of Jesus told us more about the investigators than about Jesus himself.

Rudolf Bultmann and the form critics went even further by suggesting that the Gospels (the only source for knowledge about Jesus) are not historical at all. The setting of the narratives is artificial, and their contents were created entirely by the early Christian community

in order to meet its own practical needs. It is therefore foolish to imagine that it is possible to find a historical kernel within them. That is why Bultmann says that "we can know almost nothing concerning the life and personality of Jesus, since the early Christian sources show no interest in either, are moreover fragmentary and often legendary."[2]

Bultmann's radical historical skepticism has been questioned by some of his followers. The new quest for the historical Jesus began in 1953 with Ernst Käsemann's lecture, "The Problem of the Historical Jesus." According to Käsemann:

> Only if Jesus' proclamation decisively coincides with the proclamation about Jesus is it understandable, reasonable, and necessary that the Christian kerygma in the New Testament conceals the message of Jesus; only then is the resurrected Jesus the historical Jesus. From this perspective we are required, precisely as historians, to inquire behind Easter. . . .
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> By this means we shall learn whether he stands behind the word of his church or not, whether the Christian kerygma is a myth that can be detached from his word and from himself or whether it binds us historically and insolubly to him.[3]

Günther Bornkamm, Ernst Fuchs, and Hans Conzelmann joined Käsemann in his concern.[4] Although all agreed that a life of Jesus is impossible, they do not agree that history is irrelevant to the Christian gospel as implied in Bultmann's analysis of New Testament mythology.[5] Bornkamm puts it this way:

> Certainly faith cannot and should not be dependent on the change and uncertainty of historical research. . . . But no one should despise the help of historical research to illumine the truth with which each of us should be concerned.[6]

Like the theologians of the new quest, black theology also takes seriously the historical Jesus. We want to know who Jesus *was* because we believe that that is the only way to assess who he *is*. If

we have no historical information about the character and behavior of that particular Galilean in the first century, then it is impossible to determine the mode of his existence now. Without some continuity between the historical Jesus and the kerygmatic Christ, the Christian gospel becomes nothing but the subjective reflections of the early Christian community. And if that is what Christianity is all about, we not only separate it from history, but we also allow every community the possibility of interpreting the kerygma according to its own existential situation. Although the situation is important, it is not the gospel. The gospel speaks *to* the situation.

Christianity believes, as Paul Tillich has suggested, that it has the answer to the existential character of the human condition. It is the function of theology to analyze the changeless gospel in such a way that it can be related to changing situations. But theology must be careful not to confuse the two. If the situation becomes paramount (i.e., identified with the gospel), as it appears in Bultmann's view of the kerygmatic Christ, then there are no checks to the community's existential fancies. Black theology also sees this as the chief error of white American religious thought, which allows the white condition to determine the meaning of Jesus. The historical Jesus must be taken seriously if we intend to avoid making Jesus into our own images.

Taking seriously the New Testament Jesus, black theology believes that the historical kernel is the manifestation of Jesus as the Oppressed One whose earthly existence was bound up with the oppressed of the land. This is not to deny that other emphases are present. Rather it is to say that whatever is said about Jesus' conduct (Fuchs), about the manifestation of the expectant eschatological future in the deeds and words of Jesus (Bornkamm), or about his resurrection as the "ultimate confirmation of Jesus' claim to authority" (Pannenberg), 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. To understand the historical Jesus without seeing his identification with the poor as decisive is to misunderstand him and thus distort his historical person. And a proper theological analysis of Jesus' historical identification with the helpless is indispensable

for our interpretation of the gospel today. Unless the contemporary oppressed know that the kerygmatic Christ is the real Jesus (as Martin Kähler would put it), to the extent that he was completely identified with the oppressed of his earthly ministry, they cannot know that their liberation is a continuation of his work.

The Character of the New Testament Jesus

What evidence is there that Jesus' identification with the oppressed is the distinctive historical kernel in the gospels? How do we know that black theology is not forcing an alien contemporary black situation on the biblical sources? These questions are important, and cannot be waved aside by black theologians. Unless we can clearly articulate an image of Jesus that is consistent with the essence of the biblical message and at the same time relate it to the struggle for black liberation, black theology loses its reason for being. It is thus incumbent upon us to demonstrate the relationship between the historical Jesus and the oppressed, showing that the equation of the contemporary Christ with black power arises out of a serious encounter with the biblical revelation.

Black theology must show that the Reverend Albert Cleage's description of Jesus as the Black Messiah[7] is not the product of a mind "distorted" by its own oppressed condition, but is rather the most meaningful christological statement in our time. Any other statement about Jesus Christ is at best irrelevant and at worst blasphemous.

1. Birth. The appearance of Jesus as the Oppressed One whose existence is identified exclusively with the oppressed of the land is symbolically characterized in his birth. He was born in a stable and cradled in a manger (the equivalent of a beer case in a ghetto alley), "because there was no room for them in the inn" (Luke 2:7). Although most biblical scholars rightly question the historical validity of the birth narratives in Matthew and Luke, the mythic value of these stories is important theologically. They undoubtedly reflect the early Christian community's *historical* knowledge of Jesus as a man who defined the meaning of his existence as being one with

the poor and outcasts. The visit of the shepherds, the journey of the wise men, Herod's killing of the babies, the economic, social, and political unimportance of Mary and Joseph—all these features reflect the early community's image of the man Jesus. For them Jesus is certainly a unique person, but the uniqueness of his appearance reveals the Holy One's concern for the lonely and downtrodden. They are not simply Matthew and Luke's explanation of the origin of Jesus' messiahship, but also a portrayal of the significance of his messiahship.

Jesus' messiahship means that he is one of the humiliated and the abused, even in his birth. His eating with tax collectors and sinners, therefore, is not an accident and neither is it a later invention of the early church; rather it is an expression of the very being of God and thus a part of Jesus' purpose for being born.

2. *Baptism and Temptation.* The baptism (affirmed by most scholars as historical) also reveals Jesus' identification with the oppressed. According to the synoptic Gospels, John's baptism was for repentant sinners, an act which he believed provided an escape from God's messianic judgment. For Jesus to submit to John's baptism not only connects his ministry with John's but, more importantly, separates him from John. By being baptized, Jesus defines his existence as one with sinners and thus conveys the meaning of the coming kingdom. The kingdom is for the poor, not the rich; and it comes as an expression of God's love, not judgment. In baptism Jesus embraces the condition of sinners, affirming their existence as his own. He is one of them! After the baptism, the saying "Thou art my beloved Son; with thee I am well pleased" (Mark 1:11) expresses God's approval of that very definition of Jesus' person and work.

The temptation is a continuation of the theme already expressed in the baptism. As with the birth narratives, it is difficult to recover the event as it happened, but it would be difficult to deny that the narrative is intimately related to Jesus' self-portrayal of the character of his existence. The tempter's concern is to divert Jesus from the reality of his mission with the poor. Jesus' refusal to turn the stone into bread, or to worship the tempter, or to throw himself from the

pinnacle of the temple (Luke 4:3–12) may be interpreted as his refusal to identify himself with any of the available modes of oppressive or self-glorifying power. His being in the world is as one of the humiliated, suffering poor.

3. Ministry. The Galilean ministry is an actual working out of the decision already expressed in his birth and reaffirmed at the baptism and temptation. Mark describes the implication of this decision: "Now after John was arrested, Jesus came into Galilee, preaching the gospel of God, and saying, 'The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent and believe in the gospel'" (Mark 1:14–15).

New Testament scholars have spent many hours debating the meaning of this passage, which sometimes gives the average person the impression that there is a hidden meaning discernible only by seminary graduates. But the meaning is clear enough for those who are prepared for a radical decision about their movement in the world. Jesus' proclamation of the kingdom is an announcement of God's decision about oppressed humankind. "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand"—that is, slavery is about to end, because the reign of God displaces all false authorities. To "repent and believe in the gospel" is to recognize the importance of the hour at hand and to accept the reality of the new age by participating in it as it is revealed in the words and work of Jesus. The kingdom is Jesus, whose relationship to God and human beings is defined by his words and work.

From this it is clear that Jesus' restriction of the kingdom to the poor has far-reaching implications for our understanding of the gospel message. It is interesting, if not surprising, to watch white New Testament scholars explain away the real theological significance of Jesus' teachings on the kingdom and the poor. Nearly always they are at pains to emphasize that Jesus did not necessarily mean the economically poor but rather, as Matthew says, "the poor in spirit." Then they proceed to point out the exceptions: Joseph of Arimathea was a rich man (Matthew 27:57) and he was "a good and righteous man" (Luke 23:50). There are also instances of Jesus' association with the wealthy; and Zacchaeus did not

promise to give up *all* his goods but only *half*. As one biblical scholar has put it:

> It was not so much the possession of riches as one's attitude towards them and the use one makes of them which was the special object of Jesus' teachings and this is true of the biblical teachings as a whole. Jesus does not condemn private property, nor is he a social reformer in any primary sense; he is concerned with men's motives and hearts.[8]

With all due respect to erudite New Testament scholars and the excellent work that has been done in this field, I cannot help but conclude that they are "straining out a gnat and swallowing a camel"! It is this kind of false interpretation that leads to the oppression of the poor. As long as oppressors can be sure that the gospel does not threaten their social, economic, and political security, they can enslave others in the name of Jesus Christ. The history of Christendom, at least from the time of Constantine, is a history of human enslavement; and even today, white "Christians" see little contradiction between wealth and the Christian gospel.

It seems clear that the overwhelming weight of biblical teaching, especially the prophetic tradition in which Jesus stood unambiguously, is upon God's unqualified identification with the poor precisely because they are poor. The kingdom of God is for the helpless, because they have no security in this world. We see this emphasis in the repeated condemnation of the rich, notably in the Sermon on the Mount, and in Jesus' exclusive identification of his ministry with sinners. The kingdom demands the surrender of one's whole life. How is it possible to be rich, seeing others in a state of economic deprivation, and at the same time insist that one has complete trust in God? Again, how can it be said that Jesus was not primarily a social reformer but "concerned with men's motives and hearts," when the kingdom itself strikes across all boundaries—social, economic, and political?

Jesus' teaching about the kingdom is the most radical, revolutionary aspect of his message. It involves the totality of a person's

existence in the world and what that means in an oppressive society. To repent is to affirm the reality of the kingdom by refusing to live on the basis of any definition except according to the kingdom. Nothing else matters! The kingdom, then, is the rule of God breaking in like a ray of light, usurping the powers that enslave human lives. That is why exorcisms are so prominent in Jesus' ministry. They are a visible manifestation of the presence of the kingdom. "If it is by the finger of God that I cast out demons, then the kingdom of God has come upon you" (Luke 11:20).

Jesus is the Oppressed One whose work is that of liberating humanity from inhumanity. Through him the oppressed are set free to be what they are. This and this alone is the meaning of his *finality*, which has been camouflaged in debates about his humanity and divinity.

4. *Death and Resurrection.* The death and resurrection of Jesus are the consummation of his earthly ministry with the poor. The Christian church rightly focuses on these events as decisive for an adequate theological interpretation of Jesus' historical ministry. Rudolf Bultmann pointed this out convincingly. Although post-Bultmannians generally do not agree with Bultmann's extreme skepticism regarding history, they do agree on his assessment of the importance of the death-resurrection event in shaping the Christian view of the earthly ministry of Jesus. The Jesus of history is not simply a figure of the past but the Christ of today as interpreted by the theological significance of the death-resurrection event.

Black theology certainly agrees with this emphasis on the cross and resurrection. The Gospels are not biographies of Jesus; they are *gospel*—that is, good news about what God has done in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. This must be the focus of christological thinking.

The theological significance of the cross and resurrection is what makes the life of Jesus more than just the life of a good man who happened to like the poor. *The finality of Jesus lies in the totality of his existence in complete freedom as the Oppressed One who reveals through his death and resurrection that God is present in all dimensions of human liberation.* His death is the revelation of the

freedom of God, taking upon himself the totality of human oppression; his resurrection is the disclosure that God is not defeated by oppression but transforms it into the possibility of freedom.

For men and women who live in an oppressive society this means that they do not have to behave as if *death* were the ultimate. God in Christ has set us free from death, and we can now live without worrying about social ostracism, economic insecurity, or political tyranny. "In Christ the immortal God has tasted death and in so doing . . . destroyed death"[9] (compare Hebrews 2:14ff.).

Christian freedom is the recognition that Christ has conquered death. Humankind no longer has to be afraid of dying. To live as if death had the last word is to be enslaved and thus controlled by the forces of destruction. The free are the oppressed who say no to an oppressor, in spite of the threat of death, because God has said yes to them, thereby placing them in a state of freedom. They can now deny any values that separate them from the reality of their new being.

Moltmann is correct when he speaks of the resurrection as the "symbol of protest":

> To believe in the resurrection transforms faith from a deliverance from the world into an initiative that changes the world and makes those who believe into worldly, personal, social and political witnesses to God's righteousness and freedom in the midst of a repressive society and an unredeemed world. In this, faith comes to historical self-consciousness and to the recognition of its eschatological task within history.[10]

The Black Christ

What is the significance of the historical and resurrected Jesus for our times? The answer to this question must focus on both the meaning of the historical Jesus and the contemporary significance of the resurrection. It is impossible to gloss over either one of these emphases and still retain the gospel message.

Focusing on the historical Jesus means that black theology recognizes *history* as an indispensable foundation of christology. We are not free to make Jesus what we wish him to be at certain moments of existence. He *is* who he *was*, and we know who he was through a critical, historical evaluation of the New Testament Jesus. Black theology takes seriously Pannenberg's comment that "faith primarily has to do with what Jesus was."[11]

To focus on the contemporary significance of the resurrection means that we do not take Pannenberg's comment on the historical Jesus as seriously as he does. No matter how seriously we take the carpenter from Nazareth, there is still the existential necessity to relate his person to black persons, asking, "What is his relevance to the black community today?" In this sense, unlike Pannenberg, we say that the soteriological value of Jesus' person must finally determine our christology. It is the oppressed community in the situation of liberation that determines the meaning and scope of Jesus. We know who Jesus *was* and *is* when we encounter the brutality of oppression in his community as it seeks to be what it is, in accordance with his resurrection.

The christological significance of Jesus is not an abstract question to be solved by intellectual debates among seminary professors. The meaning of Jesus is an existential question. We know who he is when our own lives are placed in a situation of oppression, and we thus have to make a decision for or against our condition. To say no to oppression and yes to liberation is to encounter the existential significance of the Resurrected One. He is the Liberator *par excellence* whose very presence makes persons sell all that they have and follow him.

Now what does this mean for blacks in America today? How are they to interpret the christological significance of the Resurrected One in such a way that his person will be existentially relevant to their oppressed condition? The black community is an oppressed community primarily because of its blackness; hence the christological importance of Jesus must be found in his blackness. If he is not black as we are, then the resurrection has little significance for our times. Indeed, if he cannot be what we are, we cannot

be who he is. Our being with him is dependent on his being with us in the oppressed black condition, revealing to us what is necessary for our liberation.

The definition of Jesus as black is crucial for christology if we truly believe in his continued presence today. Taking our clue from the historical Jesus who is pictured in the New Testament as the Oppressed One, what else, except blackness, could adequately tell us the meaning of his presence today? Any statement about Jesus today that fails to consider blackness as the *decisive* factor about his person is a denial of the New Testament message. The life, death, and resurrection of Jesus reveal that he is the man for others, disclosing to them what is necessary for their liberation from oppression. If this is true, then Jesus Christ must be black so that blacks can know that their liberation is his liberation.

The black Jesus is also an important theological symbol for an analysis of Christ's presence today because we must make decisions about where he is at work in the world. Is his presence synonymous with the work of the oppressed or the oppressors, blacks or whites? Is he to be found among the wretched or among the rich?

Of course clever white theologians would say that it is not either/or. Rather he is to be found somewhere in between, a little black and a little white. Such an analysis is not only irrelevant for our times but also irrelevant for the time of the historical Jesus. Jesus was not for and against the poor, for and against the rich. He was for the poor and against the rich, for the weak and against the strong. Who can read the New Testament and fail to see that Jesus took sides and accepted freely the possibility of being misunderstood?

If the historical Jesus is any clue for an analysis of the contemporary Christ, then he must be where human beings are enslaved. To speak of him is to speak of the liberation of the oppressed. In a society that defines blackness as evil and whiteness as good, the theological significance of Jesus is found in the possibility of human liberation through blackness. Jesus is the black Christ!

Concretely, to speak of the presence of Christ today means focusing on the forces of liberation in the black community. Value perspectives must be reshaped in the light of what aids the

self-determination of black persons. The definition of Christ as black means that he represents the complete opposite of the values of white culture. He is the center of a black Copernican revolution.

Black theology seeks to do in American theology what Copernicus did to thinking about the physical universe. Inasmuch as this country has achieved its sense of moral and religious idealism by oppressing blacks, the black Christ leads the warfare against the white assault on blackness by striking at white values and white religion. The black Copernican revolution means extolling as good what whites have ignored or regarded as evil.

The blackness of Christ clarifies the definition of him as the *Incarnate* One. In him God becomes oppressed humanity and thus reveals that the achievement of full humanity is consistent with divine being. The human being was not created to be a slave, and the appearance of God in Christ gives us the possibility of freedom. By becoming a black person, God discloses that blackness is not what the world says it is. Blackness is a manifestation of the being of God in that it reveals that neither divinity nor humanity resides in white definitions but in liberation from captivity.

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 blacks determining the way they are going to behave in the world. It is refusing to allow white society to place strictures on black existence as if their having guns means that blacks are supposed to cool it.

Black empowerment is the black community in defiance, knowing that he who has become one of them is far more important than threats from white officials. The black Christ is he who nourishes the rebellious impulse in blacks so that at the appointed time the black community can respond collectively to the white community as a corporate "bad nigger," lashing out at the enemy of humankind.

It is to be expected that some whites will resent the christological formulation of the black Christ, either by ignoring it or by viewing

it as too narrow to include the universal note of the gospel. It will be difficult for whites to deny the whiteness of their existence and affirm the oppressed black Christ. But the concept of black, which includes both what the world means by oppression and what the gospel means by liberation, is the only concept that has any real significance today. If Christ is not black, then who is he? We could say that he is the son of God, son of Man, messiah, lord, son of David, and a host of other titles. The difficulty with these titles is not that they fail to describe the person of Christ, but they are first-century titles. To cling to them without asking, "What appropriate symbol do these titles refer to today?" is to miss the significance of them altogether.

What is striking about the New Testament names of Jesus is the dimension of liberation embedded in them. For example, Jesus Christ as Lord, a postresurrection title, emphasizes his complete authority over all creation. Everyone is subject to him. The Lord is the "ruler," "commander," he who has all authority. If "Jesus is Lord," as one of the earliest baptismal creeds of the church puts it, then what does this say about black and white relationships in America? The meaning is perhaps too obvious for comment. It means simply that whites do not have authority over blacks. Our loyalty belongs only to him who has become like us in everything, especially blackness. To take seriously the lordship of Christ or his sonship or messiahship is to see him as the sole criterion for authentic existence.

If Jesus is the Suffering Servant of God, he is an oppressed being who has taken on that very form of human existence that is representation of human misery. What we need to ask is this: "What is the form of humanity that accounts for human suffering in our society? What is it, except blackness?" If Christ is truly the Suffering Servant of God who takes upon himself the suffering of his people, thereby reestablishing the covenant of God, then he must be black.

To get at the meaning of this and not get bogged down in racial emotionalism, we need only ask, "Is it possible to talk about suffering in America without talking about the meaning of blackness? Can we really believe that Christ is the Suffering Servant par excellence if he is not black?" Black theology contends that blackness is

the only symbol that cannot be overlooked if we are going to take seriously the christological significance of Jesus Christ.

But some whites will ask, "Does black theology believe that Jesus was *really* black?" It seems to me that the *literal* color of Jesus is irrelevant, as are the different shades of blackness in America. Generally speaking, blacks are not oppressed on the basis of the depth of their blackness. "Light" blacks are oppressed just as much as "dark" blacks. But as it happens, *Jesus was not white* in any sense of the word, literally or theologically. Therefore, Albert Cleage is not too far wrong when he describes Jesus as a black Jew; and he is certainly on solid theological grounds when he describes Christ as the Black Messiah.

The importance of the concept of the black Christ is that it expresses the *concreteness* of Jesus' continued presence today. If we do not translate the first-century titles into symbols that are relevant today, then we run the danger that Bultmann is so concerned about: Jesus becomes merely a figure of past history. To make Jesus just a figure of yesterday is to deny the real importance of the preaching of the early church. He is not dead but resurrected and is alive in the world today. Like yesterday, he has taken upon himself the misery of his people, becoming for them what is needed for their liberation.

To be a disciple of the black Christ is to become black with him. Looting, burning, or the destruction of white property are not *primary* concerns. Such matters can only be decided by the oppressed themselves who are seeking to develop their images of the black Christ. What is primary is that blacks must refuse to let whites define what is appropriate for the black community. Just as white slaveholders in the nineteenth century said that questioning slavery was an invasion of their property rights, so today they use the same line of reasoning in reference to black self-determination. But Nat Turner had no scruples on this issue; and blacks today are beginning to see themselves in a new image. We believe in the manifestation of the black Christ, and our encounter with him defines our values. This means that blacks are *free* to do what they have to in order to affirm their humanity.

The Kingdom of God and the Black Christ

The appearance of Jesus as the black Christ also means that the black revolution is God's kingdom becoming a reality in America. According to the New Testament, the kingdom is a historical event. It is what happens to persons when their being is confronted with the reality of God's historical liberation of the oppressed. To see the kingdom is to see a happening, and we are thus placed in a situation of decision—we say either yes or no to the liberation struggle.

The kingdom is not an attainment of material security, nor is it mystical communion with the divine. It has to do with the *quality* of one's existence in which a person realizes that *persons* are more important than property. When blacks behave as if the values of this world have no significance, it means that they perceive the irruption of God's kingdom. The kingdom of God is a *black* happening. It is black persons saying no to whitey, forming caucuses and advancing into white confrontation. It is a beautiful thing to see blacks shaking loose the chains of white approval, and it can only mean that they know that there is a way of living that does not involve the destruction of their personhood. This is the kingdom of God.

For Jesus, repentance is a precondition for entrance into the kingdom. But it should be pointed out that repentance has nothing to do with morality or religious piety in the white sense.

Günther Bornkamm's analysis of Jesus' call to repentance is relevant here. To repent, says Bornkamm, is "to lay hold on the salvation which is already at hand, and to give up everything for it."[12] It means recognizing the importance of the kingdom-event and casting one's lot with it. The kingdom is God's own event and inherent in its appearance is the invitation to renounce everything and join it. That is why Jesus said:

> If your hand or your foot causes you to sin, cut it off and throw it from you; it is better for you to enter life maimed or lame than with two hands or two feet to be thrown into eternal fire. And if your eye causes you to sin, pluck it out and

> throw it from you; it is better for you to enter life with one eye than with two eyes to be thrown into the hell of fire [Matthew 18:8–9].

According to Bornkamm:

> Repentance comes by means of grace. Those who sit at the table of the rich lord are the poor, the cripples, the blind and lame, not those who are already half-cured. The tax collectors and sinners with whom Jesus sits at meat are not asked first about the state of their moral improvement. . . . The extent to which all talk of the conditions which man must fulfill before grace is accorded him is here silenced, as shown by the parables of the lost sheep and the lost coin, which tell only of the finding of what was lost, and in this very manner describe the joy in heaven "over one sinner who repents" (Luke 15:7, 10). So little is repentance a human action preparing the way for grace that it can be placed on the level of being found.[13]

The kingdom is what God does and repentance arises solely as a response to God's liberation.

The event of the kingdom today is the liberation struggle in the black community. It is where persons are suffering and dying for want of human dignity. It is thus incumbent upon all to see the event for what it is—God's kingdom. This is what conversion means. Blacks are being converted because they see in the events around them the coming of the Lord, and will not be scared into closing their eyes to it. Black identity is too important; it is like the pearl of great value, which a person buys only by selling all that he or she has (Matthew 13:44–46).

Of course, whites can say that they fail to see the significance of this black phenomenon. But loss of sight is characteristic of the appearance of the kingdom. Not everyone recognizes the person from Nazareth as the incarnate One who came to liberate the human race. Who could possibly imagine that the Holy One of Israel would

condescend to the level of a carpenter? Only those with eyes of faith could see that in that person God was confronting the reality of the human condition. There is no other sign save the words and deeds of Jesus himself. If an encounter with him does not convince persons that God is present, then they will never know, except in that awful moment when perfect awareness is fatally bound up with irreversible judgment.

That is why Jesus compared the kingdom with a mustard seed and with yeast in dough. Both show a small, apparently insignificant beginning but a radical, revolutionary ending. The seed grows to a large tree, and the bread can feed many hungry persons. So it is with the kingdom; because of its small beginning, some viewers do not readily perceive what is actually happening.

The black revolution is a continuation of that small kingdom. Whites do not recognize what is happening, and they are thus unable to deal with it. For most whites in power, the black community is a nuisance—something to be considered only when the natives get restless. But what white America fails to realize is the explosive nature of the kingdom. Although its beginning is small, it will have far-reaching effects not only on the black community but on the white community as well. Now is the time to make decisions about loyalties, because soon it will be too late. Shall we or shall we not join the black revolutionary kingdom?

To enter the kingdom is to enter the state of salvation, the condition of blessedness. Historically it appears that "salvation" is Paul's translation of Jesus' phrase "kingdom of God." But, oh, how the word "salvation" has been beaten and battered in nineteen centuries of Christian verbiage! What can salvation possibly mean for oppressed blacks in America? Is it a kind of spiritual juice, squirted into the life of the dispirited that somehow enables them to withstand the brutality of oppressors because they know that heaven is waiting for them? Certainly, this is what rulers would like the oppressed to believe.

In most societies where political oppression is acute and religion is related to the state, salvation is interpreted always in ways that do not threaten the security of the existing government. Sometimes

salvation takes the form of abstract, intellectual analysis or private mystical communion with the divine. The "hope" that is offered the oppressed is not the possibility of changing their earthly condition but a longing for the next life. With the poor counting on salvation in the next life, oppressors can humiliate and exploit without fear of reprisal. That is why Karl Marx called religion the opiate of the people. It is an open question whether he was right in his evaluation; but he was correct in identifying the intention of oppressors. They promote religion because it can be an effective tool for enslavement.

The history of the black church is a case in point. At first, white "Christian" slaveholders in America did not allow their slaves to be baptized, because Christianity supposedly enfranchised them. But because the white church was having few converts among blacks, it proceeded to assure slaveholders that baptism had nothing to do with civil freedom. In fact, many white ministers assured slave masters that Christianity would make for better slaves. With that assurance, the masters began to introduce Christianity to blacks, confident that it would make blacks more obedient. But many blacks were able to appropriate white Christianity to their own condition by turning it into a religion of liberation. The emergence of the "invisible institution" (secret church) among the slaves of the south, the organization of the African Methodist Episcopal Church (1816) and the African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church (1821), together with other black independent religious institutions, and their involvement in the antislavery movement, show that black religionists did see through the fake white Christianity of the period.

For the pre–Civil War black church, salvation involved more than longing for the next life. Being saved was also a present reality that placed persons in a dimension of freedom so that earthly injustice became intolerable. That was why Nat Turner, a Baptist preacher, had visions of God that involved his own election to be the Moses of his people, leading it from the house of bondage. After his insurrection black preachers were outlawed in many parts of the south.

Unfortunately, the post–Civil War black church fell into the white trick of interpreting salvation in terms similar to those of white oppressors. Salvation became white: an objective act of

Christ in which God "washes" away our sins in order to prepare us for a new life in heaven. The resurgence of the black church in civil rights and the creation of a black theology represent an attempt of the black community to see salvation in the light of its own earthly liberation.

The interpretation of salvation as liberation from bondage is certainly consistent with the biblical view:

> In the Old Testament salvation is expressed by a word which has the root meaning of "to be wide" or "spacious," "to develop without hindrance" and thus ultimately "to have victory in battle" (I Sam. 14:45).[14]

To be saved meant that one's enemies have been conquered, and the savior is the one who has the power to gain victory:

> He who needs salvation is one who has been threatened or oppressed, and his salvation consists in deliverance from danger and tyranny or rescue from imminent peril (I Sam. 4:3, 7:8, 9:16). To save another is to communicate to him one's own prevailing strength (Job 26:2), to give him the power to maintain the necessary strength.[15]

In Israel, God is the Savior par excellence. Beginning with the exodus, God's righteousness is for those who are weak and helpless. "The mighty work of God, in which his righteousness is manifested, is in saving the humble . . . the poor and the dispirited."[16] The same is true in the New Testament. Salvation is release from slavery and admission to freedom (Galatians 5:1, II Corinthians 3:17), saying no to the fear of principalities and yes to the powers of liberty (I John 4:18). This is not to deny that salvation is a future reality; but it is also hope that focuses on the present.

Today the oppressed are the inhabitants of black ghettos, Amerindian reservations, Hispanic barrios, and other places where whiteness has created misery. To participate in God's salvation is to cooperate with the black Christ as he liberates his people from

bondage. Salvation, then, primarily has to do with earthly reality and the injustice inflicted on those who are helpless and poor. To see the salvation of God is to see this people rise up against its oppressors, demanding that justice become a reality *now*, not tomorrow. It is the oppressed serving warning that they "ain't gonna take no more of this bullshit, but a new day is coming and it ain't going to be like today." The new day is the presence of the black Christ as expressed in the liberation of the black community.

6. Jesus Christ in Black Theology

1. Wolfhart Pannenberg, *Jesus—God and Man*, trans. by L. L. Wilkins and Duane A. Priebe (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1968), p. 11.

2. Bultmann, *Jesus and the Word*, trans. by L. P. Smith and F. H. Lantero (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1958), p. 8.

3. Quoted in Pannenberg, *Jesus*, p. 56.

4. For an analysis of the new quest, see James Robinson, *The New Quest of the Historical Jesus* (London: SCM Press, 1959).

5. See Bultmann, "New Testament and Mythology," in H. W. Bartsch, ed., *Kerygma and Myth* (New York: Harper and Row, 1961).

6. Günther Bornkamm, *Jesus of Nazareth*, trans. by Irene and Fraser McLuskey with James Robinson (New York: Harper and Row, 1960), p. 9.

7. See this book published by Sheed and Ward, 1968. I should point out that my intention is not to suggest that my view of Christ is identical to Reverend Cleage's. Our perspectives do differ at points, but more importantly, we share in common the belief that *Christ is black*. It is also appropriate to express my indebtedness to his excellent work in this area.

8. Alan Richardson, "Poor," in Alan Richardson, ed., *Theological Word Book of the Bible* (New York: The Macmillan Co., 1960), pp. 168–69.

9. Richardson, "Death," in ibid., p. 60.

10. Moltmann, "Toward a Political Hermeneutics of the Gospel," *Union Theological Seminary Quarterly Review*, vol. 23, no. 4 (Summer 1968), pp. 311–312.

11. Pannenberg, *Jesus*, p. 28.

12. Bornkamm, *Jesus of Nazareth*, p. 82.

13. Ibid., pp. 83–84.

14. F. J. Taylor, "Save," in Richardson, *Theological Word Book*, p. 219.

15. Ibid.

16. Ibid.

7. Church, World, and Eschatology in Black Theology

1. Carl Michalson, *Worldly Theology* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1967), p. 184.

2. Quoted in L. I. Stell, "Changing of the Guard," *Tempo*, vol. 2, no. 9, February 15, 1969, p. 3 (Hitler's campaign speech, 1932).