

The Continuing Task of Black Theology: The Challenges Emerging from the Contemporary Black Church in the United States

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Abstract

Because of continual shifts in the sociocultural, political, and economic realities of any setting, theology, in order to maintain relevance, must be reflective of such shifts. It must commit itself to the maintenance of recognised confessional constants, but it must speak in relevant ways to the needs of the church's present situation. This is the voice of many African Christian theologians. Black theology in the United States is confronted with the same type of challenge, namely, what is relevant reflection for the black church and the black community in the present? Confronting and overcoming racism has been a constant challenge for people of African descent in the United States. What kind of theological reflection emerging from the black church, would best accomplish two things: to enable the black church to exercise leadership in the movement toward black flourishing despite the effects of racism, and to contribute to the enhancement of Christian theological reflection for the church of Jesus Christ, in general. There are a number of important factors to be considered, but I see three areas of needed consideration. First, what is the meaning of "blackness" in play today? Second, what is the nature of "oppression" experienced in the present? Finally, is there a place for forgiveness in the black church in the present?

Keywords: Black church; black theology; blackness; oppression; forgiveness

For everything there is a season, and a time for every matter under heaven:
 a time to be born, and a time to die;
 a time to plant, and a time to pluck up
 what is planted;
 a time to kill, and a time to heal;
 a time to break down, and a time to build up;
 (Ecclesiastes 3:1–3 [ESV])



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Black Theology: A Background and Framework

Qoheleth reminds the readers that there are seasons for all that unfold in human existence. Reality is that there are some things that are within a person, or a people's control ("a time to plant, and a time to pluck up"), and others that are beyond one's control ("a time to be born, and a time to die").¹ Situations in life can require adjustments to facilitate ongoing existence itself, not to mention meeting needs for safety, comfort, and an over-arching meaning for life. So much in life is changeable, thus undermining the maintenance of these desired ideals. The constant in the passage above, is "heaven," often understood as the unique domain of God. God is the constant and prevents Qoheleth from descending into total scepticism while observing much futility in the changeable affairs of life. God is not an escape from the instabilities of life; rather, God is the originator and sustainer of life as everything moves towards the realm of eternity. Concerning Qoheleth's method of engagement with life, Jacques Ellul argues: "He speaks to us of the actual reality of human life. He does not speak of it with his personal wisdom, as a man of experience who looks at reality and tells it like it is; rather, he starts with God. Qoheleth gives us a revelation from God."² What gives structure and meaning to existence is the journey towards God and fulfilment of God's designs.³

Theology, in general, has the capacity and responsibility to bring the changing, temporal world, in which resides the church, into a dialogue with the eternal. I am not suggesting that the dialogue is fully mutual, a conversation between two equal authorities. Theology, assuming it is built upon biblical teaching, carries dimensions of divine authority.⁴ The realm of the temporal possesses its own authenticity within the rubric of God's work in creation, particularly in light of all human beings being made in the image of God (Genesis 1:26–27).⁵ There is always, however, a perpetual challenge within the discipline to pass on what has been deemed authoritative teaching on God and relationships within the creation/human realm, with the changing questions that occur within the changeableness of personal human existence. Theology, like a good sermon, seeks to bring God "down" to address real, sometimes catastrophic, human situations

1 Derek Kidner, *The Message of Ecclesiastes: A Time to Mourn, and a Time to Dance* (Downers Grove: Illinois, 1976), 38.

2 Jacques Ellul, *Reason for Being: A Meditation on Ecclesiastes* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 1990), 29.

3 Qoheleth arrives at this very thing in 12:13–14: "The end of the matter; all has been heard. Fear God and keep his commandments, for this the whole duty of man (or, mankind). For God will bring every deed into judgment, with every secret thing, whether good or evil" (ESV).

4 I know that this is a major area of debate, particularly as it relates to biblical interpretation. Because my treatment focuses much on the black church, I will simply say that within the church, over centuries, the majority view on the Bible, has been that it is the Word of God. For a critical assessment of the black church's historical engagement with the Bible, see Vincent L. Wimbush, *The Bible and African Americans: A Brief History*, Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 2003. For a more positive assessment of the Bible in the black church, see, Thabiti M. Anyabwile, *The Decline of African American Theology: From Biblical Faith to Cultural Captivity*, Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2007 (especially, chapter one).

5 Although the topic of being made in the image of God is a critical topic, I cannot pursue it sufficiently, in this work. For some exposure to the meaning and significance of human beings in the image of God and touching on multiple spheres of day-to-day life, see John F. Kilner, *Dignity and Destiny: Humanity in the Image of God*. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2015.

through the channels of authoritative instruction and reliable witness. This is not to diminish theology's role in enhancing the worship of God and the call to appropriate obedience. The discipline, if engaged with spiritual empowerment, can facilitate a union between the construction of the meaning of life and the entertainment of this meaning derived from the view of eternity.

In order for theology to speak with relevance, authority, and transformational power, it must arise from and speak to the needs of people within the concreteness of their historical existence. Addressing his understanding of the African context, Emmanuel Katongole argues that an effective tool of control used by the colonisers of Africa, was to treat the people of the continent as if they had no history and all that this entails, until their history emerged during colonisation.⁶ This would help facilitate the legitimation of dominance, including the shaping of theological reflection. Jean-Marc Ela could speak of "the catechisms used for teaching are generally only condensations of Christian theology that empties God's plan of any historical dimension."⁷ God has worked out and is working out a plan, but it has particularity in expression in the history of a people. It begins with biblical revelation and finds expression uniquely in the life of the church.

In the contemporary scene, theological reflection, on the one hand, should take very seriously Ela's call to renewed formulation:

Called to confess Jesus Christ in a continent which tends to become a veritable empire of hunger, perhaps we should rethink the whole question of understanding and experiencing faith. Our reflection must begin with the concrete practices and alternatives wherein the memory and the resistance of our people have been articulated. How to speak about God in the living conditions of the poor in African societies torn apart by many forms of neo-colonial violence? This is the question which should mobilize African churches.⁸

This process would certainly call for a fresh Christian "imagination" along the lines of what Stanley Hauerwas has argued as "not a mental faculty, something we have in the mind, but a pattern of possibilities fostered within a community by the stories and correlative commitments that make it what it is."⁹ The concreteness of human existence, particularly for the dehumanised, should be a focus of remedial reflection. Any consideration of "Christian" reflection, however, immediately puts the individual theologian, or the church in a given context, in touch with another "history." This is not to suggest a "supra" history detached from the realities of time and space expressed uniquely in the history and life of a people. It is simply to remind engagers of

6 Katongole, *The Sacrifice of Africa: A Political Theology for Africa* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2011), 66. Here he cites favourably from the work of Basil Davidson, *The Black Man's Burden: Africa and the Curse of the Nation-State*, (New York, NY: Three Rivers Press, 1992).

7 Ela, Jean-Marc, *My Faith as an African* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1988). 163.

8 Ela, *My Faith as an African*, xvii.

9 Cited in Katongole, *The Sacrifice of Africa*, 112. Hauerwas, admittedly, was speaking of "social imagination", but it has applicability to theological reflection in the church. This framework of "imagination" was magnificently expanded and applied by Willie James Jennings, *The Christian Imagination: Theology and the Origins of Race* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2010).

thought with the reality of a framework that has particularity, for example, the history of the people of Israel, but also an intense interwovenness with the eternal. An immediate illustration, though greater attention is warranted to this theme, is Paul's reference to the Philippian believers, who existed in the context of a favoured Roman colony, yet their citizenship (*politeuma*) was in heaven (Philippians 3:20). Any church, regardless of its setting, or history, who neglects this dimension, is in danger of a harmful enculturation. I am not ignoring Ela's concern, but I am seeking a balance. To flesh out the messiness of such an attempt, I will deal briefly with a sphere of which I have a little more familiarity.

Black theology, much of which is being formulated by descendants of an enforced African diaspora,¹⁰ makes needed contribution to the larger theological community through forging a bridge between unique encounters with God, the Eternal, and unique characteristics of the black experience. This "experience" is multifaceted, with foundational elements such as confession, tradition, and history which all this entails, but it also has changeable elements that are affected over time through life situations. Existence under slavery, for example, has some similarities and dissimilarities with existence under Jim Crow segregation laws.¹¹ This is not to diminish the injustice, humiliation and trauma of each era. It is simply to say that some things are similar between the two and others dissimilar between the two. Any theology that emerges from the black church and the black community must teach what is recognised as unchanging truth, tempered in expression and application by the realities faced by the community at particular times. Black theology also contributes more of a self-awareness of its own situatedness.

Not all theological communities have this kind of self-awareness and, therefore, they are ill-equipped to engage in the occasional needed task of self-correction in their worship of God and in the life lived within and without the church existing in its various settings.

For the purpose of this discussion, I will be speaking of black theology as formulated by James H. Cone and others after his monumental and foundational contribution, *Black Theology and Black Power* (1969).¹² This brand of Christian theology attempted to bring together an engagement with God, black church tradition, and the concrete historical and contemporary experiences of oppression and humiliation of black people in the United States. Proponents of emerging black theology carefully researched black history, black church history and the

10 An understanding that I am incorporating from Earl Lewis, "To Turn as on a Pivot: Writing African Americans into a History of Overlapping Diaspora", in *Crossing Boundaries: Comparative History of Black People in Diaspora* (Indianapolis, IN: Indiana University Press, 2001), 3.

11 Jim Crow was the name of the racial caste system which operated primarily, but not exclusively in southern and border USA states, between 1877 and the mid-1960s (<http://www.ferris.edu/jimcrow/what.htm>).

12 Cone and other members of the black theology community readily acknowledge their historical and their more contemporary prophetic predecessors who preached, taught and wrote of crimes of injustices done to people of African descent in the "Christian" United States. They collectively forged a theology in a way to address such hypocrisy against the backdrop of the Christian faith. Their starting point was "the black experience" as viewed through their own understanding and interpretation of said "experience," looking through DuBois's "veil" W.E.B. DuBois, *The Souls of Black Folk* (New York, NY: Bantam Books, 1989), xxxi.

symbiotic, though unequal, relationship with the dominant Caucasian culture throughout this history to theologically understand and respond to this problematic relationship. Particularly since the 1980s, womanist voices have been added to the experiential and theological depth of this conjunction of divine perspective and activity with the experience of oppression.¹³ The accentuation of the situatedness of African American women biblical and theological scholars brought fresh attention to the responsibility of theological reflection to provide answers both for the historical factors that contributed to contemporary conditions, and for the concreteness of oppressive existence. Analysis of said concreteness named the varied experiences of oppression and why they existed. Theology conversant with the reality of oppression must also provide not only a sense of hope, but proposed pathways for the actualisation of hope. Proposed pathways of hope must also arise within the concreteness of a people's existence in their history, traditions and a divinely informed analysis of their present situation.

Relevant theological formulation must be sensitised continually regarding changes to the situations of need in the church and the communities in which the church ministers. To continue forging theological principles based solely upon yesterday's realities, however, does not strengthen the church in the present, nor does it move the surrounding communities along critical lines of flourishing, as in movements from "why are we behind others" to "what do we have to do to surpass others?" So much of this movement depends on the adopted tools of analysis for the determination of needs in the church and its surrounding communities, as well as the heart-orientation of the analysers.

My concern in these days focuses on the attempts of a significant number of black people who see the task of studies in multiple disciplines such as history, sociology, the arts, politics, philosophy and theology, as the means to uncover more fully the height, depth, width and pervasiveness of racism in every fibre of existence in the United States. I am not suggesting that such identifications are unwarranted. Great care must always be exercised in these studies and what one sees and interprets is definitely a function of the heart. I simply wonder: What is the best response to the reality of racism as it exists in this present point of history? What are the needs in the black church, the black community (assuming there is sufficient commonality to speak in such general terms), and what tools of analyses are best incorporated to answer such questions? Black theology must then call upon all that has been formulated thus far in the black church, the Scriptures and its appropriate interpretation, as well as the understanding of the days and times, to meet the task of black theology in all of its particularity. Then it can contribute significantly to the Christian church's theological formulations in general.

Black theology, since the 1960s, has attempted much to mine the depths of black church tradition, artistic expression, and the concreteness of dehumanisation in multiple manifestations

¹³ For beginnings of exposure to the unique theological formulations of African American women, see the works of Delores S. Williams and Emily M. Townes.

throughout the history of the United States; to construct a theology that brings together Christian tradition in general and the particular expressions of Christian black church tradition. Cone, well-trained in general Christian tradition, placed much emphasis on the black experience as a source of black theology:

For theology to be black, it must reflect upon what it means to be black. Black theology must uncover the structures and forms of the black experience, because the categories of interpretation must arise out of the thought forms of the black experience itself.¹⁴

The understanding of “experience” is a culmination of the areas of study mentioned above. What is pivotal to the black experience is the call to demand how members of the black community will regard themselves, instead of looking at themselves through DuBois’s “veil” mentioned above.

There are a number of matters challenging the contemporary black church and the communities surrounding them in the present that, I believe, are worthy of attention as the church’s theologians ponder the needs in these spaces and do theology in ways that seek to bring the divine perspective into engagement with these needs; resulting in a fortifying theology. Many in the black theological community have been in a critical mode when it came to interaction with the largely Caucasian wing of theological reflection. In an admirable movement of self-evaluation, Cone expressed concern with elements of this critical mode as “the” primary motivation for doing black theology at an earlier time. He pointed out that this led to a number of weaknesses, among them, a “negative overreaction to white racism.”¹⁵ In the midst of this self-criticism he demonstrated awareness of needed modifications that arise in the midst of shifts in the “times” as he writes: “A measure of reaction was necessary and appropriate because racism is evil and must be attacked and destroyed. But one’s theological vision must be derived from something more than merely a reaction to one’s enemy.”¹⁶

Theology should arise from the church and be for the church first and foremost. The discipline can help fortify the people in all areas of life, including subsequent theological constructions. I want to raise some questions that, I believe the black church and its theologians would do well to consider. First, what is the prevailing understanding of what it means to be “black” in the present day? Is there a common view on this matter? What effect should such an investigation have on subsequent black theological reflection and application?¹⁷ In addition, “blackness” is an important factor because it transcribes something that “degraded and oppressed people” need,

14 James H. Cone, *God of the Oppressed* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1997 [1975]), 17.

15 James H. Cone, *For My People: Black Theology and the Black Church* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1984), 86–88. Other self-criticisms raised were: a lack of social analysis, a lack of economic analysis, and a lack of sexual analysis (pp. 88–98).

16 Cone, *For My People*, 87.

17 I am trying to avoid the concern that Jennings (2010) raised about many in the academic theological community: “What I observed in the theological academy was fundamentally the resistance of theologians to think *theologically* about their identities” (*The Christian Imagination*, p. 7).

namely, “identity, meaning, and self-worth.”¹⁸ Second, what is the nature of “oppression” that is most problematic for black people in the present times? If there are laws on the books, granting voting rights, anti-discrimination, and still manifestations of affirmative action, what forms of oppression are still oppressing us? Finally, is there a place for forgiveness, at least within the sphere of the black church? I know that to some, an insistence on reparations is regarded as justice. It may be the case to some degree, but how much so in the church when forgiveness is such a pervasive theme? I will now give a little more attention to each.

Who or What Determines the Meaning and Significance of “Blackness”?

Many others are certainly more qualified than I to comment on this issue, but my question arises primarily from two considerations. One, I grew up during the residual period of the “one-drop” rule.¹⁹ Two, the other factor stimulating the inquiry is the attention given recently to the “Black Lives Matter” (BLM) movement. Though I will not give any further attention to the old “one-drop” rule, suffice to say that it was then understood that if a person had one drop of black blood in them, then socially speaking, he/she was black. Without going fully into the origin and activities of BLM, I want to pose a few questions in light of some material they communicate on their website. The purpose of this interaction is simply to press the point that if one wants to continue reflection on life in the black church and subsequent theological reflection, what does “black” mean?

Is “black” primarily a category of genetics, or a particular phenotype? One could use the term “people of African descent,” but would that be a matter of genetics? Does being “black” involve more than genetics, and if so, just what more does it involve? My first in-depth exposure to a definition of blackness beyond the genetic/phenotype reality was Cornel West, as he called for a dismantling of the present day “framework of racial reasoning” existing in the United States in order to identify “authentic” blackness:

Hence any claim to black authenticity—beyond that of being a potential object of racist abuse and an heir to a grand tradition of black struggle—is contingent on one’s political definition of black interest and one’s ethical understanding of how this interest relates to individuals and communities in and outside black America. In short, blackness is a political and ethical construct.²⁰

If blackness involves a “political and ethical construct,” how is it to be identified and who should do the identifying? As the grounds for authentic blackness are being forged with implications for the black church, the black community, and subsequent theological reflection, observing some of the “Guiding Principles” of BLM, I have questions. Is it “black” to disrupt the “Western-prescribed nuclear family structure?”²¹ It seems that this “structure” has biblical bases, though

18 Cornel West, *Race Matters* (New York, NY: Vintage Books, 2003), 20.

19 I was born in 1951.

20 West, *Race Matters*, 39.

21 www.blacklivesmatter.com (accessed 30 August 2016).

often violated even in the stories of Scripture, itself, and has a long pedigree in human civilisation even before something could be labelled as “Western.” Separation and breakdown of families was one of the crimes charged against the institution of slavery, following the lead, for example, of David Walker:

The sufferings of the Helots among the Spartans, were somewhat severe, it is true, but to say that theirs were as severe as ours among the Americans, I do most strenuously deny—for instance, can any man show me an article on a page of ancient history which specifies that the Spartans chained and handcuffed the Helots, and dragged them from their wives and children, children from their parents, mothers from their suckling babes, wives from their husbands, driving them from one end of the country to the other? Notice the Spartans were heathens, who lived long before our Divine Master made his appearance in the flesh. Can Christian Americans deny these barbarous cruelties?²²

There must have been an ideal in place even during the days of slavery, namely to allow families to stay together; and who would desire to have otherwise?

It could be a true demonstration of great strength to declare that they are “unapologetically” black: “In affirming that Black Lives Matter, we need not qualify our position.” Is it “black” to make such a seeming autonomous claim of worth? There is no denying the truth of this message, but what is the foundation for establishing such worth? Is it the autonomous claim, itself? In the same section of Walker’s *Appeal* cited above, he condemns the white oppressor’s denial of black people’s common membership in the “human family.”²³ In more recent times, Dr Martin Luther King, Jr., in a call for legitimate “extremism” in his monumental “Letter from a Birmingham Jail,” incorporated a quote from the Declaration of Independence: “We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal.”²⁴ My point is that blacks often made common, biblical appeals to advance the case for the worth and equality of their persons. Appeals to the uniqueness and worth of black people must be maintained, but as part of this appeal. The appeal to common humanity can help to fortify structures of common respect.

22 David Walker, *Appeal to the Coloured Citizens of the World* (Article I. Our Wretchedness in Consequence of Slavery) [etc.iath.virginia.edu/abolitn/abesdwalt.html](http://utc.iath.virginia.edu/abolitn/abesdwalt.html) (accessed 30 August 2016). Frederick Douglass, the great abolitionist, condemned the breakup of families: “The warm defender of the sacredness of the family relation is the same that scatters whole families—sundering husbands and wives, parents and children, sisters and brothers—leaving the hut vacant, and hearth desolate.” “Slaveholding Religion and the Christianity of Christ”, in *African American Religious History: A Documentary Witness*, Milton C. Sernett, editor (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1999), 106.

23 “But to prove farther that the condition of the Israelites was better under the Egyptians than ours is under the whites [sic] I call upon the professing Christians, I call upon the philanthropist, I call upon the very tyrant himself, to show me a page of history, either sacred or profane, on which a verse can be found, which maintains, that the Egyptians heaped the *insupportable insult* upon the children of Israel, by telling them that they were not of the *human family*. Can the whites deny this charge? Have they not, after having reduced us to the deplorable condition of slaves under their feet, held us up as descending originally from the tribes of *Monkeys* or *Orange-Outangs*? O! My God! I appeal to every man of feeling—is not this insupportable? Is it not heaping the most gross insult upon our miseries, because they have got us under their feet and we cannot help ourselves? Oh! Pity us we pray thee, Lord Jesus, Master.” Walker, *Appeal to the Coloured Citizens of the World* (accessed 30 August 2016).

24 Cited in Sernett, *African American Religious History*, 529.

There is much that is valid among the concerns of the BLM movement, but they also provide reason for a fresh re-visitation on what constitutes “blackness.” May the black church and its theologians give attention to this question.

What Is the Nature of Black Oppression Experienced Presently?

Cone and others in the black theological project have long confronted forms of black oppression, while demonstrating a concern for other oppressed people groups, globally. Beginning with his ground-breaking work, *Black Theology and Black Power*, Cone addressed the reality of oppression through the lens of “black power”: “Black Power means black freedom, black self-determination, wherein black people no longer view themselves as without human dignity but as men, human beings with the ability to carve out their own destiny. In short, as Stokely Carmichael would say, black power means T.C.B (Take Care of Business)—black folk taking care of black folks’ business, not on the terms of the oppressor, but on those of the oppressed.”²⁵ J. Deotis Roberts, another pioneer in the black theology movement, continually cites the black church as the foundation for black theological protest: “The black church was born in protest against racism. It first had to confront the brutal system of chattel slavery. Since discrimination based on race has continued, the protest character of black religion/theology persists.”²⁶ Oppression of black people still persists today, but tools of analysis exist to identify its manifestations in all aspects of our sociocultural fibre. There is one form of oppression of a highly insidious nature, however, that the church uniquely can identify and address.

There are few things more tragic and dangerous than self-imposed oppression. Specifically, it is a form of hopelessness whereby external forces are regarded as of such great power that I/we, cannot overcome and achieve in our sociocultural and political spheres. It may be accompanied by such thoughts as: “I/we do not have what it takes to overcome the forces arrayed against us.” “I have internalised the messages of my/our inferiority, but am afraid to confront this type of bondage.” I know about such struggles. My family, however, implanted an accompanying message, that is, with family, friends, the church, God has ways of “making a way where there is no way.” The overcoming of obstacles was not only the product of my abilities, but the work of a God who does not always provide *when* I want, but “He is always on time.” In addition, in the effort to overcome obstacles of oppression, maybe I do not experience the full fruits of such effort, but my children and my grandchildren may. This is what makes the struggle worthwhile, even when I do experience the fruit of effort and sacrifice. The church can confront and provide against this potentially devastating form of oppression. May the black church and its theologians address this type of oppression as well.

25 Cone, *Black Theology and Black Power* (New York, NY: Seabury Press, 1969), 6. Cone’s call flows much along with DuBois’s rejection of the “veil.”

26 J. Deotis Roberts, *The Prophethood of Black Believers: An African American Political Theology for Ministry* (Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1994), 25.

For the Black Church, Is there a Place for Forgiveness?

In the name of a particular understanding of justice, some in the black community are pushing for reparations, though much detailed thought lies ahead on just what, and how much money should be involved. If reparations were allotted to people of African descent in the United States, could they be considered as contributing to the exploitation of Native American people? I raise the question, not only because of the injustices involved in the treaty-making policies of the United States government during “Westward expansion,”²⁷ but also because of the way land is regarded among many Native American tribes. George “Tink” Tinker, a member of the Osage nation, speaks of the centrality of land in the life of the people:

Each nation has some understanding that they were placed into a relationship with a particular territory by spiritual forces outside of themselves and thus have an enduring responsibility for that territory just as the earth, especially the earth in that particular place, has a filial responsibility toward the people who live there.²⁸

Such a consideration may contribute further to the network of critical and complicated thought involved in such an endeavour as the seeking of reparations. What can the church, particularly the black church, bring to the table for discussion of a unique character?

Scripture is filled with ways of speaking about, or referring to the church. It can also be identified as a community of forgiven ones. Even when Christ is instructing his disciples on how to pray, he incorporates the words, “... and forgive us our sins, for we ourselves forgive everyone who is indebted to us” (Luke 11:4 [ESV]). Many other passages could be cited, but the point is, how do we measure what “justice” is and what it should look like, in light of the fact that we have been forgiven much? I do not take the question lightly. My temptation is to demand that those who have wronged me and mine, should first recognise the devastation of their injustices, and then seek my forgiveness. I want them first to experience my pain; then maybe we can talk of a near-reconciliatory experience. Reconciliation cannot be full, because I will never trust you even though we share a common faith expression in Jesus Christ.

But then, what is the nature of the times that we are in? If Qoheleth spoke of the changeableness of human existence, then according to the statements made at the beginning of this piece, God and heaven remain the constants. Voices like Ela are right to call for theological reflection that is founded on the concreteness of African existence. But a challenge shared by such voices in the African context and those among black theologians, is the call to greater awareness of what lenses such “concreteness” or “experience” is viewed through.

27 See, Vine Deloris Jr., *Behind the Trail of Broken Treaties: An Indian Declaration of Independence*. Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 2000 (1974).

28 George E. “Tink” Tinker, *American Indian Liberation: A Theology of Sovereignty* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2008), 72.

Perhaps from an attempt to discern the heavenly perspective on the matter of needed healing, the church, particularly the black church and its theologians, needs to consider not only forgiveness, but also lament. Lament is not resignation to the way things are, nor does it result in a hot-tempered response to atrocities committed. It is acknowledgment of sorrow, anger, a sense of powerlessness at times.

For this our heart has become sick, for these things our eyes have grown dim, for Mount Zion which lies desolate; jackals prowl over it. But you, O Lord, reign forever; why do you forsake us for so many days? Restore us to yourself, O Lord, that we may be restored! Renew our days as of old—unless you have utterly rejected us, and you remain exceedingly angry with us. (Lamentations 5:16–22 [ESV])

When attention is turned towards God and what can be accomplished by his strength, his own people can thirst more for healing and peace, than they can for a particular understanding of justice. Perhaps it could be a time when black believers and white believers can stand before a Confederate Civil War monument together, shed tears of sorrow and shame in lament together, and vow to one another, “Never again!” May the black church and its theologians consider the times and formulate accordingly.

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