

God of the Oppressed



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CHAPTER 6

Who Is Jesus Christ for Us Today?

To say that Jesus Christ is the truth of the Christian story calls for further examination. It is one thing to assert that the New Testament describes Jesus as the Oppressed One who came to liberate the poor and the weak (Chap. 4); but it is quite another to ask, Who is Jesus Christ for us today? If twentieth-century Christians are to speak the truth for their sociohistorical situation, they cannot merely repeat the story of what Jesus did and said in Palestine, as if it were self-interpreting for us today. Truth is more than the retelling of the biblical story. Truth is the divine happening that invades our contemporary situation, revealing the meaning of the past for the present so that we are made new creatures for the future. It is therefore our commitment to the divine truth, as witnessed to in the biblical story, that requires us to investigate the connection between Jesus' words and deeds in first-century Palestine and our existence today. This is the crux of the christological issue that no Christian theology can avoid.

SOCIAL CONTEXT, SCRIPTURE, AND TRADITION

The interplay of social context with Scripture and tradition is the starting point for an investigation of Jesus Christ's meaning for today. The focus on social context means that we cannot separate our questions about Jesus from the concreteness of everyday life. We ask, "Who is Jesus Christ for us today?" because we believe that the story of his life and death is the answer to the human story of oppression and suffering. If our existence were not at stake, if we did not experience the pain and the contradictions of life, then the christological question would be no more than an intellectual exercise for professional

theologians. But for Christians who have experienced the extreme absurdities of life, the christological question is not primarily theoretical but practical. It arises from the encounter of Christ in the struggle of freedom.

The question, "Who is Christ?" is not prior to faith, as if the answer to the christological question is the precondition of faith. Rather, our question about Christ is derived from Christ himself as he breaks into our social existence, establishing the truth of freedom in our midst. This divine event of liberation places us in a new sociopolitical context wherein we are given the gift of faith for the creation of a new future for ourselves and for humanity. It is because we have encountered Christ in our historical situation and have been given the faith to struggle for truth that we are forced to inquire about the meaning of this truth for the totality of human existence. The people of Macedonia A.M.E. Church bore witness with songs of praise and joy to Jesus' power to make the crooked straight and the rough places plain. With Jesus' coming, they contended, Isaiah's prophecy was being fulfilled. "Every valley shall be exalted, and every mountain and hill shall be made low. And the glory of the Lord shall be revealed, and all flesh shall see it together: for the mouth of the Lord hath spoken it" (Isa. 40:4–5 KJV). Because the people believed that Jesus could conquer sorrow and wipe away the tears of pain and suffering, they expressed their faith in song:

When my way grows drear,
Precious Lord, linger near.
When my life is almost gone,
Hear my cry, hear my call,
Hold my hand lest I fall.
Take my hand, Precious Lord,
Lead me home.

It is therefore the people's experience of the freedom of Christ in the context of injustice and oppression that makes them want to know more about him. Who is this Christ who lightens our burdens and eases our pain? It is our faith in him, born of our deliverance by him here and now, that leads us to the christological question.

On the other hand, the truth of Jesus Christ, whom we meet in our social existence, is not exhausted by the questions we ask. The meaning of Christ is not derived from nor dependent upon our social

context. There is an otherness which we experience in the encounter with Christ that forces us to look beyond our immediate experience to other witnesses. One such witness is Scripture. The Bible, it is important to note, does not consist of units of infallible truth about God or Jesus. Rather, it tells the story of God's will to redeem humankind from sin, death, and Satan. According to the New Testament witnesses, God's decisive act against these powers happened in Jesus' life, death, and resurrection. According to Luke's account in Acts, Peter told the story in this manner:

You know about Jesus of Nazareth, how God anointed him with the Holy Spirit and with power. He went about doing good and healing all who were oppressed by the devil, for God was with him. And we can bear witness to all that he did in the Jewish country-side and in Jerusalem. He was put to death by hanging on a gibbet; but God raised him to life on the third day, and allowed him to appear, not to the whole people, but to witnesses whom God had chosen in advance—to us, who ate and drank with him after he rose from the dead. He commanded us to proclaim him to the people, and affirm that he is the one who has been designated by God as judge of the living and the dead. It is to him that all prophets testify, declaring that everyone who trusts in him receives forgiveness of sins through his name. (Acts 10:38–43 NEB)

This passage is one of several succinct accounts of the early apostles' witness to the revelatory significance of Jesus of Nazareth. The variety of these testimonies enriches our perception of Christ while reminding us that words cannot capture him. The Gospel of Mark speaks of him as the Son of God, while John's Gospel says that he is "the offspring of God himself," "the Word [that] became flesh to dwell among us" (1:13–14 NEB). For the writer of I Timothy, Jesus was

He who was manifested in the body,
vindicated in the spirit,
seen by angels;
who was proclaimed among the nations,
believed in throughout the world,
glorified in high heaven.
(I Timothy 3:16 NEB)

In contrast to I Timothy's emphasis on Jesus as a manifestation of the divine glory (with no stress on his pre-existence), the apostle Paul declared that the divine glory is not revealed, but hidden in the form of a slave. "For the divine nature was his from the first; yet he did not think to snatch at equality with God, but made himself nothing, assuming the nature of a slave, . . . and in obedience accepted even death—death on a cross" (Phil. 2:6, 8 NEB).

The New Testament is the early Church's response to the history of Jesus Christ. That response is important for our christological reflections, because the Bible is our primary source of information about the Jesus we encounter in our social existence. Black people in America had great confidence in the holy Book. This confidence has not been shaken by the rise of historical criticism and its impact on the Bible as reflected in theological writings from Rudolf Bultmann's "New Testament and Mythology"¹ to James Barr's *The Bible in the Modern World*.² This does not mean that black people are fundamentalists in the strict sense of the term. They have not been preoccupied with definitions of inspiration and infallibility. Accordingly, their confidence in the Book has not been so brittle or contentious as that of white conservatives. It is as if blacks have intuitively drawn the all-important distinction between infallibility and reliability. They have not contended for a fully explicit infallibility, feeling perhaps that there is mystery in the Book, as there is in the Christ. What they have testified to is the Book's reliability: how it is the true and basic source for discovering the truth of Jesus Christ. For this reason there has been no crisis of biblical authority in the black community. The Jesus of black experience is the Christ of Scripture, the One who was born in Bethlehem, grew up in Nazareth, taught in Galilee, and died and was resurrected in Jerusalem.

The authority of the Bible for Christology, therefore, does not lie in its objective status as the literal Word of God. Rather, it is found in its power to point to the One whom the people have met in the historical struggle of freedom. Through the reading of Scripture, the people hear other stories about Jesus that enable them to move beyond the privateness of their own story; through faith because of divine grace, they are taken from the present to the past and then thrust back into their contemporary history with divine power to transform the sociopolitical context. This event of transcendence enables the people

to break the barriers of time and space as they walk and talk with Jesus in Palestine along with Peter, James, and John. They can hear his cry of pain and experience the suffering as he is nailed on the cross and pierced in the side.

They nail my Jesus down
They put on him the crown of thorns,
O see my Jesus hangin' high!
He look so pale an' bleed so free:
O don't you think it was a shame,
He hung three hours in dreadful pain?

They also can experience the divine victory of Jesus' resurrection.

Weep no more, Marta,
Weep no more, Mary,
Jesus rise from the dead,
Happy Morning.

When the people are thrown back into their present social context, they bring with them this sense of having been a witness to Jesus' life, death, and resurrection. Through the experience of moving back and forth between the first and the twentieth centuries, the Bible is transformed from just a report of what the disciples believed about Jesus to black people's personal story of God's will to liberate the oppressed in their contemporary context. They can now testify with the apostle Paul: "For I am not ashamed of the Gospel. It is the saving power of God for everyone who has faith . . . because here is revealed God's way of righting wrong, a way that starts from faith and ends in faith" (Rom. 1:16–17 NEB).

Who Jesus is for us today is not decided by focusing our attention exclusively on either the social context alone or the Bible alone but by seeing them in dialectical relation. The true interpretation of one is dependent upon viewing it in the light of the other. We must say unequivocally that who Jesus Christ is for black people today is found through an encounter with him in the social context of black existence. But as soon as that point is made, the other side of this paradox must be affirmed; otherwise the truth of the black experience is distorted. The Jesus of the black experience is the Jesus of Scripture. The

dialectic relationship of the black experience and Scripture is the point of departure of Black Theology's Christology.

Serving as an authority, in addition to Scripture, is the tradition of the Church. Tradition is important because it is the bridge that connects Scripture with our contemporary situation. While tradition does not carry the same weight of authority as Scripture, our understanding of the meaning of Jesus Christ in the latter is mediated through the former. Tradition then represents the Church's affirmation of faith in Jesus Christ at different periods of its history. By looking at the meaning of Jesus Christ in different church traditions, we are given clues to ways of understanding him today. Tradition, like Scripture, opens our story of Christ to other stories in the past and thus forces us to move outside of the subjectivity of our present. Tradition requires that we ask, What has my experience of Christ today to do with the Christ of Nestorius of Constantinople and Cyril of Alexandria?

However, we must not forget that what is usually called "tradition" represents the Church's theological justification of its existence on the basis of its support of the state in the oppression of the poor. What are we to make of a tradition that investigated the meaning of Jesus' relation to God and the divine and human natures in his person, but failed to relate these christological issues to the liberation of the slave and the poor in the society? We must not only ask about the social context of the tradition that made it possible for the Church to treat Christ's relations to the slave as peripheral to its proclamation of the gospel, but we also must press the question to its logical conclusion: In the absence of the theme of freedom or the liberation of the slave, did the Church lose the very essence of the gospel of Jesus Christ?

Whether we answer the foregoing question negatively or positively, it is no less true that American black people have a tradition of their own that stretches back to Africa and its traditional religions. We are an *African* people, at least to the degree that our grandparents came from Africa and not from Europe. They brought with them their stories and combined them with the Christian story, thereby creating a black religious tradition unique to North America. African culture informed black people's perspective on Christianity and made it impossible for many slaves to accept an interpretation of

the Jesus story that violated their will for freedom. The passive Christ of white Christianity when combined with African culture became the Liberator of the oppressed from sociopolitical oppression. Under the influence of this Christ, Richard Allen and James Varick led black people to separate themselves from the white Methodist Church. At another time, Nat Turner saw Jesus as the spirit of violent revolution against the structures of slavery. Again this Christ takes the black believer out of history entirely and places him in a new heaven where the streets are gold and the gates are pearl. But in every case, Christ is the *otherness* in the black experience that makes possible the affirmation of black humanity in an inhumane situation. We must turn to this tradition of black Christology for a perspective on Jesus Christ that will enable us to address the right questions to the "classical" tradition and also locate the Christ of Scripture in our contemporary situation.

By focusing on the black tradition, we not only receive a check against the inordinate influence of the "classical" tradition but also gain a fresh perspective for interpreting Scripture in the light of Christ. The black tradition breaks down the false distinctions between the sacred and the secular and invites us to look for Christ's meaning in the spirituals and the blues, folklore and sermon. Christ's meaning is not only expressed in formal church doctrine but also in the rhythm, the beat, and the swing of life, as the people respond to the vision that stamps dignity upon their personhood. It does not matter whether the vision is received on Saturday night or Sunday morning or whether the interpreter of the vision is bluesman B. B. King or the Rev. C. L. Franklin. Some people will be able to participate in both expressions without experiencing any contradiction. Others will feel at home with only one, whether blues or spiritual. But the crucial point is that both expressions represent the people's attempt to transcend, to "step over,"³ the limitations placed on them by white society. This is the context for a black analysis of Christ's meaning for today.

To summarize: the dialectic between the social situation of the believer and Scripture and the traditions of the Church is the place to begin the investigation of the question, Who is Jesus Christ for us today? Social context, Scripture, and tradition operate together to enable the people of God to move actively and reflectively with Christ in the struggle of freedom.

JESUS IS WHO HE WAS

The dialectic of Scripture and tradition in relation to our contemporary social context forces us to affirm that there is no knowledge of Jesus Christ today that contradicts who he was yesterday, i.e., his historical appearance in first-century Palestine. Jesus' past is the clue to his present activity in the sense that his past is the medium through which he is made accessible to us today. The historical Jesus is indispensable for a knowledge of the Risen Christ. If it can be shown that the New Testament contains no reliable historical information about Jesus of Nazareth or that the kerygma (early Christian preaching) bears no relation to the historical Jesus, then Christian theology is an impossible enterprise.

In this sense Wolfhart Pannenberg is correct in his insistence that Christology must begin "from below" with the historical Jesus and not "from above" with the divine Logos separated from the Jesus of history. "Jesus possesses significance 'for us,' " writes Pannenberg, "only to the extent that this significance is inherent in himself, in his history, and in his person constituted by this history. Only when this can be shown may we be sure that we are not merely attaching our questions, wishes, and thoughts to his figure."⁴ If we do not take the historical Jesus seriously as the key to locating the meaning of Christ's presence today, there is no way to avoid the charge of subjectivism, the identification of Christ today with a momentary political persuasion. Although we cannot "prove," by historical study alone, that Jesus is the Christ, the historical record provides the essential datum without which faith in Christ is impossible.⁵

The error of separating the historical Jesus from the Christ of faith has a long history. The Church Fathers, including the great theologian Athanasius, tended to make Jesus' divinity the point of departure for an understanding of his humanity. Therefore, whatever else may be said about the limitations of Harnack's perspective on the *History of Dogma*, he was not too far wrong in his contention that "no single outstanding church teacher really accepted the humanity [of Jesus] in a perfectly unqualified way."⁶ For example, Athanasius stressed the humanity of Jesus because without becoming human, Christ could not have divinized us. "For he was made man," writes Athanasius, "that we might be made God."⁷ Here, as with other church teachers,

soteriology determined Christology. Who Christ is was controlled by the Greek view of what God had to do to save humanity. Few, if any, of the early Church Fathers grounded their christological arguments in the concrete history of Jesus of Nazareth. Consequently, little is said about the significance of his ministry to the poor as a definition of his person. The Nicene Fathers showed little interest in the christological significance of Jesus' deeds for the humiliated, because most of the discussion took place in the social context of the Church's position as the favored religion of the Roman State. It therefore became easy to define Jesus as the divinizer (the modern counterpart is "spiritualizer") of humanity. When this happens Christology is removed from history, and salvation becomes only peripherally related to this world.

This tendency continued through the Middle Ages and, as Schweitzer demonstrated, into the modern German tradition.⁸ The historical Jesus was separated from the Christ of faith, and the result was docetism. The historical component of the New Testament witness was subordinated or discredited, leaving Christ's humanity without support. This was the danger of Kierkegaard's contention that "from history one can learn nothing about Christ"⁹ and of Bultmann's program of demythologization. If the historical Jesus is unimportant, then the true humanity of Christ is relegated to the periphery of christological analysis. At best Christ's humanity is merely verbalized for the purpose of focusing on his divinity.

This error was evident in the early developments of "dialectical theology" as represented in Emil Brunner's *The Mediator*¹⁰ and in Karl Barth's emphasis on Christ as the Revealed Word. Barth's stress on Christ as the Word of God who stands in judgment on the human word led him to subordinate the historical Jesus in his analysis of the Christian gospel. For example, he admitted in the "Preface to the Second Edition" of *The Epistle to the Romans* (1921) that his system is "limited to a recognition of what Kierkegaard called the 'infinite qualitative distinction' between time and eternity."¹¹ And since the historical Jesus lived in time, Barth's avowed concern to hear God's eternal Word caused him to play down the human side of Christ's presence. To be sure, the 1920s and the 1930s needed that emphasis, and later Barth corrected much of this one-sided view in *The Humanity of God* (1956).¹² But he never really recovered from the early theme of God's absolute transcendence and thus did not achieve the proper dialectical relationship between the historical Jesus and the Christ of faith.

Contemporary theologians have attempted to correct the one-sidedness of the early Church and the implied docetism of dialectical theologians. Pannenberg is a case in point: "Where the statement that Jesus is God would contradict his real humanity, one would probably rather surrender the confession of his divinity than to doubt that he was really a man."¹³ In my perspective, this means that Christology must begin with an affirmation of who Jesus was in his true humanity in history, using that point as the clue to who Jesus is for us today.

The docetic error crossed the Atlantic to North America in the seventeenth century. Particularly during the nineteenth century, it displayed special "made in U.S.A" features, as white theologians and preachers contended that slavery was consistent with the gospel of Jesus. Like their German contemporaries whom Schweitzer criticized for allowing subjective interests to determine their analyses of the historical Jesus, the white American Church's analysis of Christ was defined by white people's political and economic interests, and not by the biblical witness.

Black slaves, on the other hand, contended that slavery contradicts the New Testament Jesus. They claimed to know about a Jesus who came to give freedom and dignity to the oppressed and humiliated. Through sermon, prayer, and song, black slaves bore witness to the little baby that was born of "Sister Mary" in Bethlehem and "everytime the baby cried, she'd a-rocked Him in the weary land." He is the One who lived with the poor and died on the cross so that they might have a new life. The white minister preached to black people about the joys of heaven from a white viewpoint, saying: "Now you darkies need not worry, for God has some mighty good asphalt streets and cement streets for you to walk on." But Uncle Jim's prayerful response to the white minister put the situation quite differently: "Lawd, I knows dat I's your child and when I gets to heaven I's gonna walk any damn where I please."¹⁴ Now if there is no real basis for Uncle Jim's faith in the historical Jesus, then the distinction between the white minister's and Uncle Jim's claims about God is limited to a difference in their social contexts. The same is true of contemporary white theology and Black Theology. Unless the latter takes seriously who Jesus was as the key to who he is today, then black theologians have no reason to complain about white people using Jesus for the advancement of the present system of oppression.

My assertion that "Jesus is who he was" not only affirms the importance of Scripture as the basis of Christology. It also stresses the biblical emphasis on Jesus' humanity in history as the starting point of christological analysis. For without the historical Jesus, theology is left with a docetic Christ who is said to be human but is actually nothing but an idea-principle in a theological system. We cannot have a human Jesus unless we have a historical Jesus, that is, unless we *know* his history. That is why the writers of the four Gospels tell the good news in the form of the story of Jesus' life. The events described are not intended as fiction but as God's way of changing the course of history in a human person.

The historical Jesus emphasizes the social context of Christology and thereby establishes the importance of Jesus' racial identity. *Jesus was a Jew!* The particularity of Jesus' person as disclosed in his Jewishness is indispensable for christological analysis. On the one hand, Jesus' Jewishness pinpoints the importance of his humanity for faith, and on the other, it connects God's salvation drama in Jesus with the Exodus-Sinai event. Through the divine election of Jesus the Jew as the means of human salvation, Yahweh makes real the divine promise that through Abraham "all the families of the earth shall bless themselves" (Gen. 12:3 rsv). In order to keep the divine promise to make Israel "a kingdom of priests and a holy nation" (Exod. 19:6 rsv), Yahweh became a Jew in Jesus of Nazareth, thereby making possible the reconciliation of the world to God (I Cor. 5:19). Jesus' Jewishness therefore was essential to his person. He was not a "universal" man but a particular Jew who came to fulfill God's will to liberate the oppressed. His Jewishness establishes the concreteness of his existence in history, without which Christology inevitably moves in the direction of docetism.

The humanity of Jesus was the emphasis of black slaves when they sang about his suffering and pain during the crucifixion.

Were you there when they crucified my Lord?
were you there when they crucified my Lord?
Oh! sometimes it causes me to tremble, tremble, tremble;
were you there when they crucified my Lord?

With deep passion and a transcendent leap back into first-century Jerusalem, black people described the details of Jesus' suffering on the

cross: “Dey whupped him up de hill,” “dey crowned him wid a thorny crown,” “dey nailed him to de cross,” “dey pierced him in de side,” “de blood came twinklin’ down, an’ he never said a mumbalin’ word, he jes hung his head an’ he died.” Unless the biblical story is historically right in its picture of the humanity of Jesus, then there is no reason to believe that he shared our suffering and pain.

The authenticity of the New Testament Jesus guarantees the integrity of his human presence with the poor and the wretched in the struggle of freedom. In Jesus’ presence with the poor in Palestine, he disclosed who they were and what they were created to be (Heb. 2: 17–18). Likewise, we today can lay claim on the same humanity that was liberated through Jesus’ cross and resurrection. Because Jesus lived, we now know that servitude is inhuman, and that Christ has set us free to live as liberated sons and daughters of God. Unless Jesus was truly like us, then we have no reason to believe that our true humanity is disclosed in his person. Without Jesus’ humanity constituted in real history, we have no basis to contend that his coming bestows upon us the courage and the wisdom to struggle against injustice and oppression.

JESUS IS WHO HE IS

To declare that God raised Jesus from the dead is to say that our knowledge of Jesus is not limited to his life in Palestine. Jesus is not merely a historical person who once identified with the poor people of his land and subsequently was executed by the Roman authorities for disturbing the social and political status quo. The Crucified One is also the Risen Lord. Faith in the resurrection means that the historical Jesus, in his liberating words and deeds for the poor, was God’s way of breaking into human history, redeeming humanity from injustice and violence, and bestowing power upon little ones in their struggle for freedom.

While the *wasness* of Jesus is Christology’s point of departure, thereby establishing Christ’s inseparable relationship with the historical Jesus, the *isness* of Jesus relates his past history to his present involvement in our struggle. Unless his past existence is the clue to his present presence with us in our fight for justice, then what Jesus did in first-century Palestine is of little consequence to human existence. Against Pannenberg who uses the historical Jesus as the

sole criterion for Christology, I contend that our interest in Jesus’ past cannot be separated from one’s encounter with his presence in our contemporary existence. To be sure, Pannenberg is correct in his insistence that soteriology should not determine Christology. Our subjectivity must not be the starting point for the definition of Jesus’ person. But unlike Pannenberg, I contend that Jesus’ historicity alone is insufficient christologically. In his effort to correct the soteriologically determined Christologies of the existentialist school, especially Rudolf Bultmann, Pannenberg overreacted in the opposite direction. We do not have to choose between a Christology either “from below” or “from above.” Instead we should keep both in dialectical relation, recognizing that Christ’s meaning for us today is found in our encounter with the historical Jesus as the Crucified and Risen Lord who is present with us in the struggle of freedom. Indeed, it is Jesus’ soteriological value as revealed in his past, experienced in our present, and promised in God’s future that makes us know that it is worthwhile, indeed necessary, to inquire about his person. It is because the people have encountered the power of his presence in their social existence that they are motivated to ask, “What manner of man is this?” One person might answer the question this way: “He is my helper in time of distress. He is the One that’s been so good to me, he gave me victory, the Son of the Almighty God we serve.” Another might testify to Jesus’ presence by claiming that “he is the One who makes things right, and that’s why I have to ‘steal away’ to him in prayer, for ‘I ain’t got long to stay here.’ He is the One who ‘calls me by the thunder,’ and ‘he calls me by the lightning,’ ‘the trumpet sounds within my soul’; and then I know that ‘I ain’t got long to stay here.’ ”

If Pannenberg is right when he says that “no one now has an experience of [Christ] as risen and exalted, at least not an experience that could be distinguished with certainty from illusion” because “the *experience* of the presence of Christ is promised for the end of time,”¹⁵ then black religion is nothing but an account of black people’s subjective fancies. I reject Pannenberg’s conclusions about the absence of Christ in our present not only because of the Scripture’s testimony about the promise and presence of Christ’s Holy Spirit (Acts 1:8; 2:1f.), but also because of the witness of the black Church tradition and the contemporary testimonies of black people, both of which proclaim Christ’s present power to “make a way

out of no way.” As a black theologian whose consciousness was shaped in a black community moving from slavery to freedom, I must take my stand against Pannenberg and with my people who say that Jesus has not left us alone but is with us in the struggle of freedom. According to the black religious story, black people could survive the slave ships and auction blocks because Jesus was present with them. Jesus gave them dignity in the midst of humiliation. He gave them freedom as whites attempted to define blacks as slaves. Now I realize that not all blacks survived the brutalities of slavery, and that fact alone raises some crucial questions about the justice and righteousness of God, an issue that I will discuss in Chapter 8. Here I merely want to argue that Jesus’ identity for us today cannot be separated from his presence with us in our present existence. Without the certainty that Christ is with us as the historical Jesus was present with the humiliated and weak in Palestine, how can black people account for the power and courage to struggle against slave masters and overseers in the nineteenth century and the Ku Klux Klan and police in the twentieth? What is it that keeps the community together when there are so many scares and hurts? What is it that gives them the will and the courage to struggle in hope when so much in their environment says that fighting is a waste of time? I think that the only “reasonable” and “objective” explanation is to say that the people are right when they proclaim the presence of the divine power, wholly different from themselves. I can remember, at an early age, the people of Bearden bearing witness to the power and meaning of Jesus in their lives. There were times when the burden and the agony of life became very difficult, and the people felt powerless to do anything to change sorrow into joy. These occasions happened when somebody’s house was destroyed by fire, leaving a family shelterless with winter approaching. Then there was death, an ever present enemy, who came like a “train blowin’ at the station,” leaving somebody a “motherless child.” The most visible symbol of death’s power was found in the everyday presence of white people who violated black dignity at every level of black existence. Black people had to deal with the reality of whites on the job, in the stores, and at other significant areas of human affirmation. Sometimes the people were passive and speechless, not knowing how to respond to the extreme contradictions of life. But on Sunday morning, after spending six days of struggling to create meaning out of life, the people of Bearden would go to

church, because they believed that Jesus was going to be there with an answer for their troubled minds. At Macedonia A.M.E. Church, Sister Ora Wallace would line a familiar hymn, investing a depth of passion and meaning far greater than Isaac Watts ever intended.

O God, our help in ages past
Our hope for years to come,
Our shelter from the stormy blast,
And our eternal home.

Beneath the shadow of Thy throne,
Thy saints have dwelt secure;
Sufficient is Thine arm alone,
And our defence is sure.

Immediately, the entire congregation would join her in the singing of this hymn, because they felt the presence of Jesus in their midst, “guidin’ their feet” and “holdin’ their hands,” “while they run this race.” When the pastor would say, “I know the Lord is in this place! Can I get a witness?” the people responded with shouts of praise saying “Amen” and “Hallelujah.” Through song, prayer, and sermon the community affirmed Jesus’ presence and their willingness to try to make it through their troubled situation. Some would smile and others would cry. Another person, depending upon the Spirit’s effect on him, would clap his hands and tap his feet. Then again another person would get down on her knees, waving her hands and moaning the melody of a song whose rhythm and words spoke to what she felt in her heart. All of these expressions were nothing but black people bearing witness to Jesus’ presence among them. He was the divine power in their lives who gave them an “imagination to think of a good reason to keep on keepin’ on” in order that black people might “make the best of a bad situation.”

Of course, in the light of Feuerbach and Marx, Freud and Durkheim, Mannheim and the sociologists of knowledge, one could interpret black people’s jumping and shouting about Jesus in their midst as wishful thinking related to their political powerlessness and social and psychological maladjustment. But I contend that we cannot test the truth of the black story by using intellectual categories that were not created from black experience itself.

Instead we must immerse ourselves in the existence of the people, feeling their hurts and pain, and listening to their testimony that Jesus is present with them, taking black suffering upon himself so that the people can survive with dignity the oppression and violence committed against them. Only by listening to their story and viewing it in the light of the biblical story in relation to other stories in human history are we in a position to make a judgment about the "reasonableness" of black religion. Unless interpreters of black religion are willing to suspend their a priori definitions of reality, and open themselves to another reality found in the social existence of black people, then their comments about the truth or untruth of black religion become merely an academic exercise which tells us far more about their own subjective interests than about the religious life of black people. If the interpreters are willing to hear what the people have to say about their struggle and the reality of Jesus in the fight for freedom, and proceed to develop their tools of critical analysis in the light of their identification with the goals and aspirations of the people, then and only then are they prepared to ask the right questions and to hear the right answers. For in the Christian story, truth is not an object but is the project of freedom made possible by the presence of God in the midst of the people. Only stories that invite an openness to other human stories are true. In black religion, the people tell the story of their lives as they walked and talked with Jesus, telling the story of how Jesus ministered to their broken hearts and weak bodies. Because of the power of his presence with them, he has given to them not only the strength to struggle but also an openness to fight together with all victims regardless of their genetic origin.

Christologically, therefore, who Jesus is today is found by relating Jesus' past with his present activity. Black people affirm them both simultaneously and thus dialectically. On the one hand, through faith black people transcended spatial and temporal existence and affirmed Jesus' past as disclosed in the historicity of his life and death on the cross.

Those cruel people!
 Those cruel people!
 Those cruel people!
 Those cruel people!

They crucified my Lord,
 They crucified my Lord,
 They crucified my Lord,
 They crucified my Lord.

In this spiritual, the repetition of the lines enhances the reality of Jesus' suffering and emphasizes his humanity as he struggles against the pain of the cross.

But on the other hand, black people's faith that Jesus was raised from the dead meant that his historicity and humanity are not the only relevant factors about his person. He is also the divine One who transcends the limitations of history by making himself present in our contemporary existence. This is the meaning of Jesus' resurrection. When God raised Jesus from the dead, God affirmed that Jesus' historical identity with the freedom of the poor was in fact divinity taking on humanity for the purpose of liberating human beings from sin and death.

It is within this context that the resurrection is a *political* event. The politics of the resurrection is found in its gift of freedom to the poor and the helpless. Being granted freedom while they are still poor, they can know that their poverty is a contrived phenomenon, traceable to the rich and the powerful in this world. This new knowledge about themselves and the world, as disclosed in and through the resurrection, requires that the poor practice political activity against the social and economic structure that makes them poor. Not to fight is to deny the freedom of the resurrection. It is to deny the reality of Christ's presence with us in the struggle to liberate the slaves from bondage. This is the political side of the resurrection of Jesus.

The affirmation "Jesus is Lord," like the cry "Christ is risen!" has political overtones. The Lordship of Christ emphasizes his present rule in the lives of the people, helping them to struggle for the maintenance of humanity in a situation of oppression. "Jesus is Lord" is an affirmation of his reigning presence, moving the people toward the future realization of their humanity. Lordship is Christ's presence with power from on high to be with the little ones in trouble. As John Knox puts it: "The phrase 'Jesus Christ is our Lord' designates, not primarily an historical individual but a *present* reality actually experienced within the common life."¹⁶

JESUS IS WHO HE WILL BE

The meaning of Jesus Christ for us today is not limited to his past and present existence. Jesus Christ is who he will be. He is not only the crucified and risen One but also the Lord of the future who is coming again to fully consummate the liberation already happening in our present.

Since the publication of Albert Schweitzer's *The Quest of the Historical Jesus* in 1906,¹⁷ in which he emphasized "consistent" eschatology, European and American scholars have generally recognized the importance of the future in Jesus' consciousness about his ministry. More recently, advocates of a so-called "hope theology," taking their cue from Ernst Käsemann's contention that "apocalyptic . . . was the mother of all Christian theology,"¹⁸ have related eschatology to politics and the struggle of the oppressed to liberate themselves from bondage. Although eschatology is the study of "last things" (particularly the "end of the age"), the "hope" theologians contend that eschatology should be the beginning for theological exploration. "Christianity," according to Jürgen Moltmann, "is eschatology, is hope, forward looking and forward moving, and therefore also revolutionizing and transforming the present. The eschatological is not one element of Christianity, but it is the medium of Christian faith as such, the key in which everything in it is set. . . ."¹⁹ Eschatology for these writers is more than longing for the next world; it is the grounding of hope in God's liberating work in this world, which thus becomes the foundation of the divine promise to liberate the oppressed from human captivity.

It is important to point out that black people in their sermons, prayers, and songs of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries were talking about the politics of hope long before the appearance of hope theology in Germany. The rise of hope theology is related to the increasing disenchantment of contemporary European theologians with the alternatives posed by Barth's kerygmatic theology and Bultmann's existentialist approach. Unlike Barth who ignored Marx and in contrast to Bultmann who seemed to depoliticize the gospel, the hope theologians made political praxis a decisive ingredient in theology itself, thereby laying the groundwork for dialogue with Marxism.²⁰ By contrast, black people's talk about hope, though

contemporary with Marx, did not arise out of a dialogue with Marxism. Black religion and its emphasis on hope came into being through black people's encounter with the crucified and risen Lord in the context of American slavery. In their encounter with Jesus Christ, black slaves received a "vision from on high" wherein they were given a new knowledge of their personhood, which enabled them to fight for the creation of a world defined by black affirmations. Their hope sprang from the actual presence of Jesus, breaking into their broken existence, and bestowing upon them a foretaste of God's promised freedom. They could fight against slavery and not give up in despair, because they believed that their earthly struggle was a preparation for the time when they would "cross over Jordan" and "walk in Jerusalem just like John." They were willing to "bear heavy burdens," "climb high mountains," and "stand hard trials," because they were "trying to get home." Home was the "not yet," the other world that was not like this one. Jesus was the divine coming One who would take them to the "bright mansions above."

Unfortunately, American white "hope" theologians have been influenced too much by German and American philosophical discourse on hope and too little by the actual bearers of hope in our social existence. And if they continue their talk about hope primarily in relation to Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, Alfred North Whitehead, Moltmann, and Pannenberg, while ignoring the hope disclosed in the songs and tales of black slaves, then we can only conclude that white theology's hope is a reason for despair on the part of the oppressed and thus alien to the gospel of Jesus. How can Christian theology truly speak of the hope of Jesus Christ, unless that hope begins and ends with the liberation of the poor in the social existence in which theology takes shape? In America this means that there can be no talk about hope in the Christian sense unless it is talk about the freedom of black, red, and brown people.

I am baffled that many American white theologians still continue to do theology independently of the oppressed of the land. That a public conference on Hope and the Future of Man²¹ could be held in New York (1971) featuring Moltmann, Pannenberg, and Metz but including no one from Africa, Latin America, or even black America is completely beyond my comprehension. I contend that when theological discourse overlooks the oppressed and the hope given by

Jesus Christ in their struggle, it inevitably becomes “abstract” talk, geared to the ideological justification of the status quo.

Jürgen Moltmann raised this issue in the New York conference on hope in his public response to the American theologians of hope.

The future which does not begin in this transformation of the present is for me no genuine future. A hope which is not the hope of the oppressed today is no hope for which I could give a theological account. A resurrection symbol which is not the symbolizing resurrection of the crucified one does not touch me. If theologians and philosophers of the future do not plant their feet on the ground and turn to a theology of the cross and the dialectic of the negative, they will disappear in a cloud of liberal optimism and appear a mockery of the present misery of the suffering. If we cannot justify the theme of the conference, “Hope and the Future of Man,” before the present reality of the frustration and oppression of man, we are batting the breeze and talking merely for our own self-satisfaction.²²

The public reaction was intense but mixed. Some thought the comment was in bad taste and others said that Moltmann rightly exposed the navel-gazing of academic theologians. This issue was taken up again in a small working group of about forty theologians. I was the only black person present, which seemed to be due to my faculty status at Union Theological Seminary. (All Union Theological Seminary faculty were invited.) In the first workshop meeting (there were three in all), theologians discussed hope’s relation to politics as defined by Moltmann. Most seemed uncomfortable with the discussion, because they had come to discuss the philosophical structure of hope as defined by Whitehead, Teilhard, and Bloch and not the political status of poor people. In the other two workshops, discussion returned to its expected status.

Because Black Theology’s Christology is based on the biblical portrayal of Jesus Christ and Jesus’ past and present involvement in the struggle of oppressed peoples, it affirms that who Jesus Christ is for us today is connected with the divine future as disclosed in the liberation fight of the poor. When connected with the person of Jesus, hope is not an intellectual idea; rather, it is the praxis of freedom in the oppressed community. To hope in Jesus is to see the vision of his

coming presence, and thus one is required by hope itself to live as if the vision is already realized in the present. Black slaves combined the vision of the new Jerusalem with the struggle of freedom in this world. They talked about Jesus not only as the One who was born in Bethlehem and died on Calvary, and as the Risen One present with them, but also as the One who would come again and take them home to glory. That is why they sang:

I’m going back with Jesus when He comes,
I’m going back with Jesus when He comes,
O He may not come today,
But He’s coming anyway
I’m going back with Jesus when He comes.

And we won’t die anymore when He comes,
And we won’t die anymore when He comes,
O He may not come today,
But He’s coming anyway
And we won’t die anymore when He comes.

This spiritual connects hope in Jesus with human suffering, wherein Jesus becomes the Expected One who is coming to liberate the oppressed from slavery.

The vision of the future and of Jesus as the Coming Lord is the central theme of black religion. This theme is expressed with the idea of heaven, a concept that has been grossly misunderstood in black religion. For many people the idea of heaven, in the songs and sermons of black people, is proof of Marx’s contention that religion is the opiate of the people. Unfortunately, many uninformed young blacks, hearing this Marxian analysis in college, have accepted this criticism as true without probing deeper into the thought forms of black people. To be sure, white missionaries and preachers used Jesus Christ and heaven to make black slaves obedient and docile. But in reality, the opposite happened more often than not. For many black slaves, Jesus became the decisive Other in their lives who provided for them a knowledge of themselves, not derived from the value system of slave masters. How could black slaves know that they were human beings when they were treated like cattle? How could they know that they were somebody when everything in their environment said that they were nobody? How

could they know that they had a value that could not be defined by dollars and cents, when the symbol of the auction block was an ever present reality? Only because they knew that Christ was present with them and that his presence included the divine promise to come again and to take them to the "New Jerusalem." Heaven, therefore, in black religion was inseparably connected with Jesus' promise to liberate the oppressed from slavery. It was black people's vision of a new identity for themselves which was in sharp contradiction to their present status as slaves. This vision of Jesus as the Coming One who will take them back to heaven held black people together mentally as they struggled physically to make real the future in their present.

Christologically, we are required to affirm Jesus Christ in terms of his past, present, and future. This means that we do not have to choose between a Christology "from below" (Pannenberg) or "from above" (Barth), or even "from before" (Moltmann).²³ These three aspects of his history and person must be approached dialectically, recognizing that each is a valid experience of Jesus Christ when viewed in relation to the others. We can truly know Jesus' past and its soteriological significance only if his past is seen in dialectical relation to his present presence and his future coming. Unlike Pannenberg who postpones the validity of Jesus' truth disclosed in the resurrection experience until the end of time, black theologians claim, on the basis of the biblical witness and the past and contemporary testimonies of black people, that Jesus is who he is as his *isness* is known in his present activity with the oppressed in the struggle of freedom. In our analysis of the past history of Jesus, we cannot ignore his present soteriological value as the Lord of our present struggle. The same is true for his future coming. The past and present history of Jesus are incomplete without affirmation of the "not yet" that "will be." The power of Christ's future coming and the vision that it bestows upon the people is the key to why the oppressed can "keep on keepin' on" even when their fight seems fruitless. The vision of Christ's future that breaks into their slave existence radically changes their perspective on life; and to others who stand outside the community where the vision is celebrated, black people's talk about "long white robes" and "golden slippers" in heaven seems to be proof that black religion is an opium of the people. But in reality it is a radical judgment which black people are making upon the society that enslaved them. Black religion, therefore, becomes a revolutionary

alternative to white religion. Jesus Christ becomes the One who stands at the center of their view of reality, enabling slaves to look beyond the present to the future, the time when black suffering will be ended. The future reality of Jesus means that what is contradicts what ought to be.

When Jesus is understood as the Coming One who will establish divine justice among people, then we will be able to understand why black slaves' religion emphasized the *other* world. They truly believed the story of Jesus' past existence with the poor as told in the Bible. Indeed, their own power to struggle to be human was due to the presence of Jesus with them. From his past history with the weak and his present existence with them, black people received a vision of his coming presence to fully heal the misery of human suffering. That is why they sang with unique passion and meaning:

If I walk in the pathway of duty,
If I work to the close of the day,
I shall see the great King in his beauty,
When I've gone the last mile of the way.

When I've gone the last mile of the way,
I shall rest at the close of the day,
And I know there are joys that await me,
When I've gone the last mile of the way.

Black people knew that they could not trust the power of their own strength to break the chains of slavery. People get tired of fighting for justice and the political power of oppressors often creates fear in the hearts of the oppressed. What could a small band of slaves do against the armed might of a nation? Indeed what can the oppressed blacks today do in order to break the power of the Pentagon? Of course, we may "play" revolutionary and delude ourselves that we can do battle against the atomic bomb. Usually when the reality of the political situation dawns upon the oppressed, those who have no vision from another world tend to give up in despair. But those who have heard about the coming of the Lord Jesus and have a vision of crossing on the other side of Jordan, are not terribly disturbed about what happens in Washington, D. C., at least not to the extent that their true humanity is dependent on the political perspective of

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

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

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

JESUS IS BLACK

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

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

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

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

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

a light to the nations,
to open the eyes that are blind,
to bring out the prisoners from the dungeon,
from the prison those who sit in darkness.

(Isaiah 42:6–7 RSV)

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

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

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

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

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

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