

Foreword by
THABITI ANYABWILE

BLACK & REFORMED

SEEING GOD'S SOVEREIGNTY IN THE
AFRICAN-AMERICAN CHRISTIAN EXPERIENCE

Second Edition

ANTHONY J. CARTER

As an African American, I am delighted with the publication of this book. It will serve as an excellent introduction to Reformed theology for the emerging black Reformed community in the United States. I anticipate that it will be a great resource for church planters and anyone else seeking to reach the black community.

—**Anthony B. Bradley**, Associate Professor of Theology and Ethics, The King's College; Author, *Liberating Black Theology: The Bible and Black Experience in America*

A most edifying and important work. I suspect that generations to come will look back upon its publication as a milestone in the history of the Reformed theology. This book needed to be written, and, more importantly, it needs to be read.

—**Keith A. Mathison**, Professor of Systematic Theology, Reformation Bible College

When I met Anthony Carter several years ago, I detected a rigorous mind, a righteous concern for racial justice, and a Reformed vision of God—a rare combination. Since then I have wanted to be a listener. Now this book makes that easier. May the Lord of nations use it to shape a powerful movement of God-centered Christians from all peoples who have tasted suffering.

—**John Piper**, Founder and Teacher, desiringGod.org; Chancellor, Bethlehem College and Seminary, Minneapolis

This work is greatly needed in the church, and I am confident the Lord will use it for the re-Africanization of the church.

—**Richard L. Pratt Jr.**, President, Third Millennium Ministries

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ANTHONY J. CARTER


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To Adie

While I'm on this pilgrim journey,
I'm glad you hold my hand.

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Foreword

To be *black and* is a curious thing. This “*and*”-ness reflects a two-ness, a double consciousness made famous by sociologist W. E. B. DuBois.

It’s an *and* with ambivalence. Sometimes the *and* does what *conjunctions* are meant to do—it *joins* two objects or adjectives in a peaceful coexistence. But in the African-American experience, *and* sometimes signifies *disjunctions*—a series of impossibilities or at least improbabilities. In those instances, *and* reads like *but*. When he’s described as “black *and* intelligent,” the speaker implicitly denies black native intelligence. When she’s described as “black *and* beautiful,” the speaker suggests that beauty is a thing foreign to blackness. In such cases, the *and* reveals a speaker’s difficulty putting the *black* together with a positive adjective, the way matching poles of two magnets refuse touching against their magnetic wills.

To be *black and* _____ isn’t as simple as filling in the blank. There’s a tension that must be addressed.

So much of African-American life is lived in that tension, in that in-between world populated by *ands* that so often negate *black*. I suspect this tension arises out of the centuries-long battle to define what it means to be black. A long line of assailants has

attempted to make *black* an utterly negative thing, demeaning and defaming it. Placing beyond its reach those things belonging to other supposedly more noble creatures. So to be black meant *not* thinking white, *not* speaking white, *not* acting white, *not* owning what whites owned, *not* going where whites went, *not* being white. It was their *not* that gave an incredulous tone to the *and* in the phrase *black and* ____.

So in cultural, legal, and psychological self-defense, a long line of African Americans redefined what it means to be black, dignifying and beautifying blackness over and against its despisers. They sang with James Brown, “Say it loud—I’m black *and* I’m proud.” They made beauty products called Black & Beautiful. They celebrated being “young, gifted *and* black.” What the popular imagination separated, these artists, activists, and everyday folks reappropriated. They restored the conjunction to its proper use and restored to *black* a positive potential.

But all that happened largely in the world of art, culture, and politics. It was long past time that someone did in theological circles what Tony Carter did in *On Being Black and Reformed*—unabashedly break the back of that two-ness, that *and-ness* that said you couldn’t really be black *and* Reformed.

This book, in God’s providence, came along at a time when African-American Christians of conservative biblical faith needed to be assured that to be Christian—specifically a Reformed Christian—was not a contradiction to being black. In God’s kindness, the book came along when people in search of a spiritual identity greater than *black* and greater than *Reformed* were listening. What they heard in *On Being Black and Reformed* was a clarion call to be so deeply Christian that all the Christian tradition could belong to all Christ’s people *as Christian people*—black, white, Asian, Latin and Hispanic, Reformed and not. What they heard—perhaps for the first

time in African-American Christian writing—was a brother and friend telling them in love that the *and* was not a tension but an invitation. An invitation to embrace what some said couldn't be embraced and to find in that embrace more of Christ and his wondrous love.

I remember when I was first introduced to *On Being Black and Reformed*. It was at a small dinner made up mostly of black and Reformed pastors. We were getting to know each other with that sheepish caution and wonder that comes when you discover you're not the only one. We asked questions of each other and listened, making sure the theological and the cultural shibboleths were accurately pronounced. Then one brother asked me, "Have you read Tony Carter's *On Being Black and Reformed*?" I confessed that I had not, and with that confession he slowly leaned back in his chair, satisfied that he was both more black and more Reformed than me. The next day I picked up a copy of the book and began to devour it.

To my delight, I discovered that day that not only was I not alone but that the Lord had raised up a witness who was intelligent, articulate, passionate, discerning, courageous, black, and Reformed. As I read this book those many years ago, my soul was made happy and I was set free from that bedeviling *and-ness* that had held my ethnic identity at arm's length from my theological identity. The two became one, and I joined the movement to make it known to all that being black is not at odds with being Reformed and being Reformed does not in the least invalidate any claims to being black.

On Being Black and Reformed was the opening gambit in an effort to see the riches of the Reformed tradition joined unselfconsciously to the riches of African America. A decade later its insights continue to be relevant to those finding their way in Christian and ethnic identity. I'm thrilled to see P&R

FOREWORD

demonstrate wisdom and foresight in publishing this revised edition. If you want to be free from that stubborn two-ness to live in whole-person integrity as a Christian, read this book with hope and joy! It just might set you free!

Thabiti Anyabwile
Pastor, Anacostia River Church

Preface to the Second Edition

THANK you for reading (or rereading) this book. Incredibly, you are not the first. Every day I am amazed by those who say they have read it and who tell me how it has impacted their understanding of the faith. Such comments are beyond anything I anticipated when I first sat down to put pencil to paper thirteen years ago. Still, God has been pleased to use this book in the lives of many and to help them tell the story of their faith. I recall one in particular.

I remember well the day I met Timothy Byrd. It was April 2009 in Chicago at The Gospel Coalition's first national conference. Tim was walking across the hotel lobby, and I noticed him because he was a young black man in a place where young black men were scarce. Naturally, I stopped him, asked him his name, and introduced myself. When he heard my name he immediately associated it with the book *On Being Black and Reformed*. The connection was made.

We sat and talked for a while. Tim told me his story, his journey from being born into a military family in Germany to currently being on staff with Campus Outreach in South

Africa. He shared with me how he had read my book and was now passing it around to the college students and other staff members in Campus Outreach Johannesburg. At that moment I realized that God was using this book in ways and in places I would never have imagined.

Tim graciously thanked me for writing the book and relayed to me how it had greatly influenced his thinking and encouraged him in the labors God had given to him. That day we became friends and collaborators in the gospel.

On Being Black and Reformed had done it again—amazed and humbled me at the lives it has impacted for the kingdom of Christ.

When I first set out to write this book in 2001, being black and Reformed, as far as I knew, was an anomaly. The only prominent names I was aware of were Ken Jones and Carl Ellis Jr. Both of these brothers had long been holding up the standard of Reformed theology in relative obscurity. I like to say that they were Reformed before being Reformed was cool. Following their example and wanting to encourage others to openly embrace the truth of biblical and historical theology, I endeavored to write a book that would show that being black, being American, and being Reformed are not antithetical. On the contrary, the black experience in the United States is a God-ordained experience and thus fits rightly and gloriously with a Reformed theological worldview.

If you had told me that *On Being Black and Reformed* would not only still be in print thirteen years after it was first published, and still being read, but that the publisher would desire to publish a second edition, I would have asked what planet you had just arrived from—not this book, not this subject. And yet, here we are. Thirteen years later, and I am still amazed at the reach and influence the book continues to have.

Since its publication, many others have taken up the pen and written better and more expansively on this subject. Praise God! I never intended for *On Being Black and Reformed* to be the final word. On the contrary, I always hoped to spark a conversation that those smarter, wiser, and faster than me would take and run with. Thankfully, many have.

Since the book's original publication, my list of black and Reformed friends and heroes has grown exponentially. There are too many to name in this space, but a few deserve special notes. Ken Jones and Carl Ellis continue to be stalwarts, as was the late Robert Cameron. We all owe a great debt of gratitude to these pioneers in many ways.

Today, I have the privilege of laboring closely with three dear friends, Thabiti Anyabwile, Louis Love, and Philip Duncanson. My faith is stronger because of them. They are my pastors and collaborators in Christ. They are my examples. When I think of being black and Reformed, I think of their labors. They faithfully preach and practice the faith they profess. I am particularly thankful for Thabiti's contribution of the Foreword in this present volume. His words and thoughts alone make this edition worth publishing.

I would be remiss if I didn't mention the faithful brothers and sisters at P&R Publishing. For these past thirteen years, not only have they kept the book in publication, but they have also not failed to promote it and make it readily available to a new and growing generation of young, enthusiastic, creative, and influential black and Reformed-minded thinkers. I thank them for their continued confidence in this book. *May the favor of the Lord our God be upon them and establish the work of their hands; yes, establish the work of their hands!* (Ps. 90:17).

This current edition has a few additions and changes. You will notice the title has been slightly adjusted, an aforementioned

PREFACE TO THE SECOND EDITION

foreword by Thabiti added, as well as discussion questions following each chapter, and a new appendix featuring Questions and Answers with the author. Other than these new additions, the contents have remained the same.

Lastly, I want to thank you again for reading (or rereading) this book. I pray God would be pleased to use it in your life. And, if you ever get the chance, I pray you would do me the honor and privilege of hearing how God used this book in your life. Until then, enjoy, and God bless.

Preface to the First Edition

OF making many books there is no end” (Eccl. 12:12). So is the testimony of the Preacher, who through the wisdom of God and the seeming futility of life would have been personally acquainted with such things. There is no end to the writing of books because there is no end to the asking and the answering of questions. Humans are inquisitive creatures, living in a world full of questions that demand answers. And nowhere are the questions as pronounced as they are in history.

The study of history is a pursuit in the asking and answering of the good questions. The who, what, when, where, why, and how of history can be the source of understanding, enlightening, and resolution. For the study of history, as much as any other discipline, demands that we know who did what; when and where their actions took place; what resulted from their actions; why the outcome mattered to them; and how it can be relevant to us. This thirst for knowledge is particularly acute when we seek to understand history as the revelatory instrument of God and his character.

God is the primary mover of the universe. The study of history is fundamentally a study of God and what he is accomplishing

through his moving. This is evidenced in the truth that the vast majority of the Bible is a historical record of God's dealings with his people. And the Bible is best understood when we ask the right questions and seek God to supply the right answers. Similarly, when we look at the history outside of Scripture, we must also seek to ask the right questions and thereby attain the right answers. It is to this end that I write the words contained in these pages.

On Being Black and Reformed is my attempt to ask, and posit answers to, the basic questions of the African-American experience: Where was God in the Atlantic slave trade and the subsequent slavery that was perpetrated on the African brought to what we now know as the United States? How does Christianity triumph among a people oppressed in a so-called Christian society by so-called Christians? I am aware that these questions are like multifaceted diamonds and can be approached from a variety of angles. I am hopeful, however, that the reader will find within these pages some answers, as well as some challenges, to the questions that have plagued me and many like me.

This book does not purport to have all the answers that the reader may seek. No human-authored work can. And no reader should approach any book believing that it will satisfy all his questions. With that in mind, I hope that the reader will find in these pages a pointer in the direction of the One who can answer every question and resolve every issue, the One in whom all wisdom consists—namely, the Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. In the end, only the study that points men and women to the Savior is worthy of our admiration. I pray that by the time you've reached the end of the following material, the glories of God in Christ will have been made more plain and lovely to you.

Again, the propositions set forth in this work are in no way exhaustive. They merely attempt to stimulate others to think

about and even further extrapolate their ideas. Contained in these pages is my small—yet, I pray, helpful—contribution to the conversation encouraging continued reformation and reconciliation in the church. Much more needs to be said, by minds more keen than mine. Yet its saying must be within the framework of and consistent with historic, biblical Christianity.

If there is any redeemable value in the thoughts contained in these pages, it is due in large measure to those men who saw redeemable qualities in me and endeavored to invest their time and energies. They are my teachers. They have been men of whom I was not worthy, yet God sovereignly placed them in my life at the most opportune times. Consequently, my sincerest gratitude is extended to these teachers: Barry Blackburn, who taught me to think critically; R. C. Sproul, who taught me to think clearly; Richard Pratt, who taught me to think contextually and compassionately; and Ezra Ware, who taught me that Christians must think. The words of these men have been like goads to me. They have spurred me on to pursue the deep desire of my heart—God. Their wisdom has been instrumental in my desire to honor God by pointing others to the beauty of his glory.

Also, it has been my pleasure to meet and grow extremely fond of men whose care and devotion have made them true friends. Heartfelt thanks go to three such collaborators in the quest for reformation—Sherard Burns, David Brown, and Michael Leach—faithful brothers in due season, whose ministry to me as friends and sympathizers has been incalculable; to Carl Ellis for his long and faithful work in this pursuit and his words of encouragement and critique; to Justin Taylor, for his helpful critique and his willingness as a brother in Christ to agree to disagree on some issues; to Keith Mathison and Ethan Harris, who unknowingly through conversation and example spurred me to attempt what I thought was not achievable; and to Ken

Jones, whose untiring commitment to the truths of historic Christianity has made us all more eager to take up the mantle.

I extend my sincere thanks as well to Allan Fisher and the other wonderful people at P&R Publishing for their consideration of this project and their faithful labor in seeing it through to completion.

My thanks are never complete until I voice them to Adriane, my partner and wife. We went to seminary with two small children, and four years later we left seminary with five small children. If I achieved anything in those four years, it was due to her unwavering and tireless commitment to our family and me. Daily she strives to fulfill her godward call of mother and wife. She is my example, lover, and friend.

I am aware that all the aforementioned people are in my life by the sovereign, providential hand of almighty God. Therefore, ultimately my thanks go to him, who sovereignly made me the nationality that I am, gave me the loving mother I have, revealed the theology that I hold, and imparted to me the grace in which I stand, *simul justus et peccator*. Amen.

ONE

Do We Need a Black Theology?

Soon I will be done with the troubles of the world,
Troubles of the world, the troubles of the world.
Soon I will be done with the troubles of the world.
Goin' home to live with God.
—Negro spiritual

SEMINARY was great! Sitting under the teaching of some of the most learned minds anywhere was a humbling yet enriching experience. Being directly exposed to the theological giants of past generations and discovering how God graciously used their lives and work was an encouragement well worth the price. Even more for me, however, seminary was an awakening. It was a time when I was forced to wrestle with my consciousness of who I am as a Christian in light of my cultural context. I had to ask myself whether the experiences that contributed to making me who I am had hindered or helped me in understanding the will of God for my life. Fortunately, God used several professors, some knowingly and others unknowingly, to facilitate my

spiritual quest. In fact, one incident in particular served as the catalyst for this book.

In our first required systematic theology course we discussed the doctrines of God, man, and Scripture. During the term we were required to write a research paper on a related topic of our choice. I decided to write my paper on an examination of the God of black theology.¹ My intent was to give a brief history of black theology—its roots, ideology, major proponents, etc. Then I sought to give its views of God, man, Jesus Christ, and sin. I thought it would be a provocative and unique topic (surely no one else had approached the professor with this subject in mind) and would give me an opportunity for close study of the ideas of men such as James Cone and James Washington. On receiving the paper back from my professor, I noticed that, besides the grade, he had written a question that sparked in me a deeper interest in the subject. He asked, “Is it necessary to have a black theology?”

In my paper I did not seek to validate the black theology of James Cone, James Washington, and others; nor did I try to undermine the basic premise behind the movement. In fact, I complimented the black theologians for forcing the church to grapple with issues that conservative theologians have either dismissed or denied. Perhaps the professor took my stopping short of a total denunciation of the movement as tacit approval, which was far from the truth. Whatever the case, I found his question to be thought provoking. It did not take me long to

1. The National Committee of Black Churchmen defined “black theology” thus: “Black Theology is a theology of black liberation. It seeks to plumb the black condition in the light of God’s revelation in Jesus Christ, so that the black community can see that the gospel is commensurate with the achievement of black humanity” (Statement by the National Committee of Black Churchmen, June 13, 1969, quoted in James Cone and Gayraud Wilmore, eds., *Black Theology: A Documentary History*, 2 vols. [Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1998], 1:38).

come to an answer. Do we need a black theology? Do we need to speak theologically within the African-American context? Do we need to understand the African-American experience through a theological perspective that glorifies God and comforts his people? Emphatically and unfortunately, yes.

YES, EMPHATICALLY

I say “emphatically” on two accounts:

Considering the Alternative

We need a sound, biblical black theological perspective because an unsound, unbiblical black theological perspective is the alternative. A large constituency of Christianity—namely, those of African-American descent—believes the truth claims of God, Christ, and the Scriptures, but feels that the larger body of Christian theology has ignored their cultural context and circumstances. A theological perspective that fails to speak contextually to African-American life, whether orthodox or liberal, will not gain a hearing among people who have become skeptical of the establishment. The liberation theology that spawned the black theology of the sixties gained recognition and a measure of popularity not because it was biblically accurate, but because it sought to contextualize the gospel message to people who were being oppressed, marginalized, and disenfranchised.

During the socially turbulent fifties and sixties, America was forced to grapple with her own identity and how she was going to respond to the outcries of her disenfranchised. The voice that played the lead of those who yearned to be free and equal was the black voice. Black America, after years of degradation and inhumane treatment, was rising and demanding to be heard. The

black voice cried for justice, equality, and self-determination. It demanded an equal voice in the political and economic system. It demanded that this inclusion be brought about by any means necessary. The means of choice came to be known broadly as Black Power.

The phrase *Black Power* expressed the social and political struggle of black America. It was *Black* because blackness was no longer viewed as a liability but rather as an asset. Out of this change arose the expression “I’m Black and I’m Proud!” It was *Power* because blacks were historically castigated and their voice in society rendered impotent. Now, authority and power were not just requested, but demanded—and where not granted, taken. But because Black Power was a socioeconomic movement, it did not give power to the whole person. Something was lacking in the soul of black empowerment. Black theology developed in an attempt to fill that gap.

Black theology sought to give a spiritual and theological framework to the pressing and distressing blight of black Americans during that turbulent period. Whereas Black Power was the political expression of self-determinism among black Americans, black theology became the theological expression of Black Power. Ironically, black theology’s intent may have been noble, but its articulation and subsequent outcome has been less than noble. In fact, it has been theologically and biblically unacceptable. Yet without a solidly biblical voice setting African-American experience in a consistently redemptive and historical context, the black theology of the sixties and the subsequent ideologies based on it are the only alternatives.

Considering Cultural Contexts

We also need a sound black theology because theology in a cultural context not only has been permissible but has become

normative. The tendency, however, is for the majority culture to see only its own thinking as normative—that is, to view its perspective as neutral, without any cultural trappings. Honesty demands that we recognize the ease with which theology is distinguished by culture. Noted evangelical author David Wells acknowledges this tendency.

That American Theology has characteristics that are distinctly American should not be surprising. We readily see that the Germans and the British, the South Americans and Asians have ways of thinking about Christian faith that seem obviously German, British, South American, and Asian. In America, however, theology is apparently not affected by its context. It is not American in content or tone. It is simply theology! At least, that is what is commonly assumed.²

Whether it is German Lutheran, Dutch or Scottish Reformed, South American Liberation, British or American Puritanism, or even Northern and Southern Presbyterianism, theology has consistently had a distinct ethnicity or culture. To deny African Americans the right to formulate and sustain a biblical theology that speaks to the cultural and religious experience of African Americans is to deny them the privilege that other ethnic groups have enjoyed.

YES, UNFORTUNATELY

Nonetheless, I say that we “unfortunately” need a black theology. An African-American perspective on theology comes more as a reaction than as a theological initiative. It has been

2. David Wells, *No Place for Truth* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993), 137.

made necessary by conservative Christians' failure to grapple with issues of African-American history and consciousness. This is particularly evident in the areas of racism and discrimination. The sad yet irrefutable fact is that the theology of Western Christianity, dominated by white males, has had scant if any direct answers to the evils of racism and the detrimental effect of institutionalized discrimination. The major contributors to conservative theological thought over the centuries have, consciously or not, spoken predominantly to and for white people. In fact, the unfortunate reality is that the ideologies of racism and elitism that have marred the landscape of Western civilization have had a uniquely conservative Christian flavor. Those who advocated a caste system of slavery and racial superiority in places such as the United States, England, South Africa, and India have often done so with the consent of a church defined by conservative theologians. And even though many white theologians have refuted these erroneous positions, very few have sought to positively set forth God and his providential hand in the life and struggle of African Americans.

Since the initiation of Africans to the shores of America, the destinies of white and black Americans have been inextricably intertwined. The question now is this: To what extent was this relationship destined to be that of the oppressor against the oppressed? The answer to this question, and similarly others, may not lie only in traditional American (white) theology. Rather, these questions are more satisfactorily answered in and from the context in which they are asked—thus providing a mandate for an African-American perspective on theology.

But this mandate is not without qualification. Even though there is a need for a distinctly African-American perspective on theology, the parameters of that theology must be observed: Scripture, history and tradition, and Christian experience.

Scripture, History and Tradition, and Experience

Scripture

The primary source of any sound theology is the special revelation of God contained in the Bible. Therefore, the Bible must be our ultimate authority. Whether black or otherwise, our theology is correct only insofar as it is derived from sound exegesis of the Word of God. At the foundation of this exegesis is our submission to the text of Scripture.

As faithful theologians we must approach our text humbling ourselves to its divine inspiration and submitting to its inerrancy and infallibility.³ Because we recognize the frailty of human reason and understanding, it is incumbent upon us to assume a posture of humility and submission as we seek to pronounce ideologies about God and his creation.

Unfortunately, when we seek to prove the trustworthiness and reliability of the Bible, we often become unwitting skeptics. That is, we insist that the Bible come under the same scrutiny as any other piece of literature from antiquity. Consequently, the Bible is taken as true and reliable only after it has been shown to be the most objectively verifiable and attested-to literature we have from antiquity. While the Bible surely is verifiable and well attested, these findings do not independently prove the Bible's divine inspiration. If they did operate independently, they would essentially deny the Bible's authority. Human authorities would in effect delegate authority to the Bible after having examined it and found it worthy.

3. An accurate understanding of what I mean by inerrancy and infallibility can be found in the Chicago Statement on Biblical Inerrancy drafted in 1978 by the International Congress on Biblical Inerrancy.

We must not come to the Bible as skeptics, demanding that it satisfy our independent judgment. Rather, we must submit to the Bible as *our* examiner, which reveals our inadequacies of understanding. If we do otherwise, we make the Bible submit to our authority and reason, as if it receives its authority and validation from us. This must not be. Even as the people of God, we *receive* the Word. We do not authenticate the Word and thereby grant it authority. It comes to us from the source of all authority—God himself. Wilhelmus à Brakel, the much-respected seventeenth-century divine, summed it up well:

If the Word derived its authority from the church, then we would have to hold the church in higher esteem than God Himself, for whoever gives credence and emphasis to someone's words is superior to the person who speaks them. God has no superior and therefore no one is in a position to give authority to His words.⁴

In other words, “The authority of the Word is derived from the Word itself.”⁵

Furthermore, the faithful theologian is a biblical theologian. That is, he seeks to speak only where the Bible speaks and is satisfied to sit silent where the Bible is silent. As the Scriptures remind us, “The secret things belong to the Lord our God, but those things which are revealed belong to us” (Deut. 29:29). That there are issues on which the Bible does not appear to speak does not invalidate the Scriptures. On the contrary, this silence is a faithful and humbling reminder that God is God and we are not, that his ways are above our ways and his thoughts above our thoughts (Isa. 55:8).

4. Wilhelmus à Brakel, *The Christian's Reasonable Service* (Grand Rapids: Reformation Heritage Books, 1992), 30.

5. *Ibid.*, 29.

History and Tradition

Theology must be presented with the help of history and tradition. The role of a people's heritage and tradition must never be underestimated. In many ways we are products of the theological stances and circumstances that have historically defined our communities. And though it may sometimes be necessary to broaden our perspectives and question the status quo of theological thinking, we must do so in such a way as to carefully consider that the foundations of our communities are at stake. We are not called to reinvent the theological wheel.

Whether Reformed or Arminian, Baptist or Pentecostal, Covenantal or Dispensational, theology is always best presented within a framework of heritage and tradition. A biblical African-American perspective on theology is no different. African Americans have a rich and expressive tradition from which to draw. The deeply moving spirituals forged in the cotton and tobacco fields of the antebellum South, the protestations of Richard Allen and Absalom Jones, the devotionally mystic writings of Howard Thurman, the theological expediency of Martin Luther King Jr.—our heritage is both diverse and compelling. Preachers, teachers, and books from the past that serve to enrich our study have now enriched African-American Christianity, like most other Christian communities. Yet the beauty of a biblical African-American approach to theology is that the wellspring of heritage from which to draw is not limited to African-American Christian tradition.

As much as any other segment of Christianity, the predominantly black church in America has an acute sense of its heritage. The songs we sing and the special days we celebrate are a continual reminder of the stony road trod during seemingly endless years of suffering and pain. Our songs spoke to our understanding of our worth as children of God in spite of the oppressor's attempts at dehumanization:

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I been rebuked and I been scorned,
I been rebuked and I been scorned,
Chillun, I been rebuked and I been scorned,
I'se had a hard time, sho's you born.

Talk about me much as you please,
Talk about me much as you please,
Chillun, talk about me much as you please,
Gonna talk about you when I get on my knees.

Although recognition of our history is vitally important, this recognition often does not extend far enough. We must realize that as African-American Christians our history, as much as anyone else's, is church history. We must see that our church fathers are not just Richard Allen, Absalom Jones, and Andrew Bryan. Our fathers are also Augustine, Tertullian, and Ignatius. The songs we sing, "Were You There?" and "Swing Low, Sweet Chariot," rightly belong to us, but so do the Apostles' Creed and the Nicene Creed. We must see that our history does not begin on the Ivory Coast of Africa, but that we, like all other Christians, are the sons and daughters of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. Our history is church history and as such should be reflected in our theology and our preaching. As faithful theologians we must draw upon that history to ensure that we maintain a faithful course, though we chart new territory.

Making this connection with the historic Christian faith is the beauty of seeing the African-American experience within a Reformed theological framework. The Reformed understanding sees a continuity of God's work among his people. It demonstrates redemptive history not as a collection of disjointed dispensations, but rather as a continuum of covenants whereby the

history of redemption is one, belonging to all the redeemed—red and yellow, black and white.

Experience

We must recognize the significant role that Christian experience plays in our understanding of theology. All human beings are, to one degree or another, a product of their experiences. These experiences over time develop into lenses through which we view the surrounding world. The opinions, ideas, biases, and prejudices that we employ at various times are in actuality the working out of our life's most impressive experiences. This is true when we formulate theology as well.

We must be honest and admit that we come to theological study with biases and prejudices. These biases, however, are not inherently a negative. In fact, the danger is not that we look at the Scriptures with a jaundiced eye, but that we think we can look at them without one. If we recognize our biases and the impact of our experiences, we can become more capable and insightful teachers. The Holy Spirit can use our experiences in our interpretation of Scripture and formulation of theology that is relevant and effective.

Experience has always been a key determiner in formulating our understanding of theology. For example, the impact of Martin Luther on Western civilization cannot be overstated. When he, in the most unassuming yet magnanimous gesture of the last millennium, nailed his 95 theses on the church door in Wittenberg, he was beckoning the church to return to the light of truth from which it had drifted so far. Yet Luther was not simply asserting theological propositions and biblical exposition; in fact, his experience as a monk frustrated with his inability to come to grips with the holy character of God in light of his own moral inadequacies caused him to delve into the biblical and

theological dogma of the church. Having peered so deeply into these things, he came away with an understanding that would change the course of human history.

Our experiences, like Luther's, can be instruments for the discovery of divine truth. God is not averse to using our experiences in order to reveal his will for us and drive us to confirm these experiences through his Word, the Bible. Unfortunately, with any conduit of knowledge, too much dependence on one element leads to a distortion of the truth. An overemphasis on God's communicating with our rational faculties leads to a rationalistic Christianity that is void of emotional content. Likewise, an overemphasis on God's communicating through our experiences leads to an experiential Christianity that is void of rational boundaries. The unfortunate errors of nascent black theology were rooted in the assumption that experience should be the primary source of truth. The result of this experience-driven approach is that church history and even the Scriptures are relevant only insofar as they coincide with and corroborate my experience as an African American. In other words, that which does not validate my experience and indeed empower me against the oppressive white establishment is of no use in communicating the revelation of God to me.

We see that experience overemphasized is fraught with error, potential and realized. Nevertheless, though experience has been erroneously overemphasized in traditional black theology, in attempting to formulate a more scriptural approach to the African-American perspective on theology we must be careful not to underemphasize the role of experience.

No theologian can directly influence the black church more effectively than a black theologian. His experiences as a black man in America provide him with a credible and sympathetic voice. Yet his awareness of his cultural existence must be tempered with

the more immediate reality of his existence in the kingdom of God, which is not bound by cultural and social categories. His identity as a Christian must inform his identity as an African American, not vice versa. A black theology that is both biblical and culturally credible will take the experiences of black people seriously and address a theology in which experience is viewed not above but concomitant with Scripture and community. I am convinced that such theology is best articulated and maintained within the Reformed theological tradition. Thus, I suggest that “reforming” the black theological experience is not only possible but also, more importantly, necessary.

My goal in *Black and Reformed* is to redeem and reform our perspective on the black American experience through the most legitimate lens available, theology—in particular, biblically based and historically grounded Reformed theology. The term *Reformed* is meant to identify with the theological formulations of the Reformed theological tradition. The Reformed understanding of God, man, sin, salvation, and the Scriptures is the most coherent and veritable of all views. It provides the most comprehensive, biblically consistent paradigm for interpreting a providentially orchestrated history.⁶

In reflecting on my theological experiences, I respectfully give deference to those men who bravely paved the way for black

6. For a brief introduction to Reformed theology and history, I suggest reading Ronald H. Nash, *The Meaning of History* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1999); J. I. Packer, *Knowing God* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1973); David G. Hagopian, ed., *Back to Basics* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 1996); David N. Steele and Curtis C. Thomas, *The Five Points of Calvinism* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1963); Michael S. Horton, *Putting Amazing Back in Grace* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1991); R. C. Sproul, *Grace Unknown* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1997); James R. White, *Potter's Freedom* (Amityville, NY: Calvary Press Reformed Publishing, 2000).

theology. Yet the forerunners of this theology, though noble in their intentions, failed to maintain a faithful and high view of Scripture. These failures led to a nebulous view of man, sin, history, Christ, God, and the Scriptures. Men like James Cone, James Washington, Deotis Roberts, Gayraud Wilmore, while sincerely seeking to articulate their faith in an African-American context, failed to maintain the integrity of scriptural doctrines that are pivotal and indispensable to the historic Christian faith.⁷ And though we are indebted to these men for awakening the Christian theological community to its neglect of black America, we must not let that cloud our primary goals as theologians—to glorify God and to comfort the saints.

The black theology birthed in the sixties did provide a temporary balm for souls at a time when black people needed it most. It not only shook the conscience of mainstream theology and forced it to see that it had taken a myopic view, but also awakened the conscience of black people and gave them the assurance that they were created in the image of God and that he had a design for their existence. But by denying the essentials of the historic Christian faith and divine inspiration of Scripture, that salve became toxic, infected with nationalism and a self-destructive humanism. In fact, it became little more than a mirror of much of the racist white theology against which it posited itself. Black theology not only failed to give lasting comfort to souls, but also by default failed to glorify God. Ultimately, a theology that fails to reach one of these goals inherently fails to reach either of them.

A black Reformed theological perspective on history has the primary goal of glorifying God. We are confident that as it

7. You can see their positions on these doctrines in James Cone's sentient work *A Black Theology of Liberation* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1990) and the two-volume documented analysis of the development of black liberation theology, edited by James Cone and Gayraud Wilmore, *Black Theology: A Documentary History*.

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does so, it will in turn be a comfort to the people of God. The Reformed black theologian's prayer is an echo of the psalmist's:

Let the words of my mouth
and the meditation of my heart
Be acceptable in Your sight,
O LORD, my strength and my Redeemer. (Ps. 19:14)

Discussion Questions

1. What is the relationship between theology and cultural context?
2. Why is it important to formulate an African-American perspective on theology?
3. What is the significance of Scripture, history, tradition, and experience in formulating any theology?

AFRICAN AMERICANS HAVE A RICH

and compelling Christian heritage that stretches back to foundational church figures such as Augustine and Tertullian. Yet too often they are expected to embrace a Eurocentric theology that marginalizes their unique experiences and traditions.

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JOHN PIPER, Founder and Teacher, desiringGod.org

Anthony J. Carter (MA, Reformed Theological Seminary) is lead pastor of East Point Church in East Point, Georgia, as well as an author, conference speaker, and guest lecturer.

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