

**On Being Black and Reformed (A new perspective on the African-American Christian experience)** by Anthony J. Carter, PR Publishing, Philipsburg, NJ, 2003  
(21 Quotes selected by Doug Nichols)

**1. Preface**

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. (Page IX, X)

**Chapter One – Do We Need a Black Theology?**

**2. Do we need a black theology?**

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. (Page 3)

**3. Yes, – 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. (Page 3)

**4. Yes, – Considering Cultural Contexts**

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. (Page 6)

## **5. White Theology Does Not Answer Racism**

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.

## **6. Theology Parameters Followed**

Even though there is a need for a distinctively African-American perspective on theology, the parameters of that theology must be observed: Scripture, history and tradition, and Christian experience. (Page 7)

## **7. Scripture Is the Primary Source of Sound Theology**

The primary source of any sound theology is the special revelation of God contained in the Bible. (Page 7)

## **8. The Bible Is Our Examiner**

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. Wilhelms a'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. [Wilhelms a'Brakel, *The Christians Reasonable Service* (Grand Rapids: Reformation Heritage Books, 1992), Page 30]

In other words, “The authority of the Word is derived from the Word itself.” [Ibid., Page 29] (Page 8,9)

## **9. God is God and We Are Not**

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). (Page 9)

## **10. African-American Theology and Tradition**

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. (Page 10)

## **11. Our History Is Church History**

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. (Page 12)

## **Chapter Two – A Case for Reformed Theology**

### **12. A Case for Reformed Theology**

The truth is that Reformed theology is intensely biblical theology. In fact, it was Charles Spurgeon, the famous nineteenth-century Baptist preacher in England, who unashamedly stated that Reformed theology is merely a nickname for biblical Christianity. It is a biblical theology in that it maintains a high view of Scripture and the need for a consistently God-centered approach to interpreting Scripture. The admirable desire to interpret Scripture consistently and clearly has led those in the Reformed strain to formulate the essential qualities of Reformed thinking in a way that is readily grasped. Therefore, what is popularly known as Reformed theology can be summarized in the five points of Calvinism. (Page 19)

### **13. Chapter Three – The Church from Chains**

#### **14. The Church from Chains**

The African-American church is a case study in the Reformed, biblical understanding of truth. We see in the development of the African-American church a testimony to the sovereignty of God. He orchestrates and conducts the affairs of human history so as to accomplish his determined plan in bringing a people to himself. We see the sinfulness of humanity. The existence of the African-American church is also an indictment upon those who engaged in the Atlantic slave trade and those who refused to openly welcome their newly converted African brothers and sisters into their fellowships. Also, we see demonstrated the sufficiency of Christ. He alone is able to work graciously within the context of such sinful and inhumane treatment to bring about a redeemed people for his praise and glory. The African-American church is a poignant reminder that our understanding of doctrinal truth must never be divorced from our understanding of history and how our God reveals himself. It demonstrates that African-American Christians' very existence is without a doubt the supernatural work of God's providence. (Page 45,46)

#### **15. Slaves Followed Same God as Oppressors**

The African-American church is an enigma. It is an institution whose existence is unlikely and unpredictable. How could African-American men and women embrace the same Christ that their oppressors professed? Despite the worst intentions of many and because of the best intentions of others, the African-American church, as an institution, is arguably the most indomitable in American history. God literally raises his church up from chains. (Page 46)

#### **16. Slavery Was Monetary, Not Missions-minded**

Though evangelical pronouncements spewed from the mouths and pulpits of

colonial America, the true and abiding determinant for slavery was not missionary, but monetary. The intent of the planters and slave traders was not evangelistic, but the increase of their earthly treasure. Anything, even the propagation of the gospel, that interfered with the primary objective was either rationalized away or denounced. (Page 50)

### **17. Cotton Mather Promoted Black Evangelism**

Cotton Mather, a Puritan divine, wrote a tract entitled *The Negro Christianized* (1706). In it he argued for the inclusion of Negroes among those favored by God to receive the good news of the gospel. He exhorted the slaveholders among his readers:

Show yourselves men and let rational arguments have their force upon you, to make you treat, not as brutes but as men, those rational creatures whom God has made your servants...Yea, if though dost grant that God hath made of one blood, too. [Raboteau, *Slave Religion*, Page 99.] (Page 53)

### **18. Few Blacks Christians Before Revolutionary War**

Despite the missionary zeal of some, few African-Americans, whether slave or free, were Christians prior to the Revolutionary War. Not until the revival movements in the last quarter of the eighteenth century did the growth of Christianity among the African-Americans really take off. Specifically, it was the unfettered zeal of the Baptists and the Methodists that produced the greatest and longest-lasting results. During the years immediately following the War of Independence, the church in America experienced great growth, much of it among the slave population. (Page 53,54)

### **19. Baptists and Methodists Welcomed Slaves in Their Congregations**

...the Baptists and Methodists of the eighteenth century welcomed slaves into their communions and condemned the practice of slavery (though their attitudes would change dramatically in the nineteenth-century as the slavery debate intensified). [Nathan O. Hatch, *The Democratization of American Christianity* (New Haven, Conn: Yale University Press, 1989), Page 102.] Unlike men such as Samuel Davies and George Whitefield, who sought the conversation of slaves but did not speak for their freedom, [Arnold Dallimore, biographer of George Whitefield, relates: "In those days it was frequently asked, 'Does the Negro have a soul?' and Whitefield gave the first widely-heard positive reply that the black man was basically no different from the white man. Nevertheless, we cannot but regret that he did not come to the conviction that slavery was utterly evil and demand in his powerful eloquence that 'liberty and justice' be granted to all men, black as well as white" (George Whitefield [Wheaton, Ill.: Crossway, 1990], Page 81) Methodists such as Freeborn Garrettson and Francis Asbury not only displayed zeal for slave conversation, but spoke forthrightly of their equality and

right to freedom. According to one historian, “After freeing his own slaves in 1775, Garrettson, a native of Virginia, faced regular threats because he laced his evangelistic preaching with attempts to ‘inculcate the doctrine of freedom.’” [Hatch, *Democratization*, Page 103] Furthermore, the sermons coming from the Methodists excited a yearning for freedom and a sense of equality in the slaves. According to one slave, “I had recently joined the Methodist Church and from the sermon I heard, I felt God had made all men free and equal, and I ought not to be a slave.” [ Hatch, *Democratization*, Page 102] (Page 54)

## **20. The Black Preacher “Uncle Jack”**

The emergence of the African-American preacher is not to be considered lightly. Before the Revolution, the African-American preacher was virtually nonexistent. Yet following the war, the Baptist and Methodists recognized the invaluable role that the African-American preacher could play in the conversion of slaves. The inability of some to read or write was not a hindrance for the Baptists and Methodists. These denominations “prized spiritual vitality more than education in clergy, so if a converted African-American showed a gift for preaching, he was encouraged to preach, even to unconverted whites.” [Mark Galli, “Defeating the Conspiracy,” *Christian History*, 62 (Page 18, no. 2): 13. In fact, so impressed were some whites with the preaching of “Uncle” Jack, an African-born slave and Baptist convert, that they purchased his freedom and settled him on a farm, where he preached for 40 years and even saw the conversion of his former master's son (Raboteau, *Slave Religion*, Page 135).] (Page 55,56)

## **21. Sunday Morning Church Time Segregated**

Someone has said that the most segregated time in America is at 11 o'clock on Sunday morning. The evidence for this unfortunate reality is all around us. The issues that racially divide Christians in America today are complex and multifaceted, existing on several levels (political, economic, social as well as religious). But without question the segregation we witness each Sunday had its root cause in the refusal of white Christians to welcome their brothers and sisters of a darker hue at a time when these brothers and sisters had no alternative. Undoubtedly, it was through the missionary zeal of colonial America that African-Americans were introduced to the gospel and through God's grace brought into the kingdom of God. Yet once in the kingdom, these same African-Americans found segregated seating and second-class citizenry. Inevitably, it became necessary to leave such abuse so that worship could be experienced unimpeded. Ironically, the segregation we witness today is in fact the segregation that segregation itself produced. (Page 59)