



# ENDURING TRUTH

RESTORING SOUND THEOLOGY & RELEVANCE  
TO AFRICAN-AMERICAN PREACHING

AARON E. LAVENDER

“Dr. Lavender is a pastor committed to expository preaching. The information on the history of preaching and its failure to maintain the historic fundamentals is helpful and up to date, and the helpful solutions to the problems caused by poor preparation and training prove to be very valuable. The thought-provoking questions asked in the book will need an answer, and I believe that Dr. Lavender’s comments will benefit any preacher. I am happy to recommend this book to anyone interested in the faithful communication of God’s Word.”

—*Daniel J. Griffin Sr., international pastor and director of international training, Sanctuary Outpost*

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—*Kevin Jones, assistant professor of teacher education, Boyce College*

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—*Allen R. McFarland, senior pastor, Calvary Evangelical Baptist Church*

“This book is a candid, succinct, and needed treatise on why so many African-American pulpits are under-serving their congregants. As a teacher of church history, I heartily endorse this book. The author fearlessly names people and ministries that have contributed to the abuse and misapplication of God’s Word, even today. And while the emphasis is on African-American pulpits, the need to restore sound theology is universal. It is a must read!”

—*LeRoy Randolph Jr., president emeritus and director of institutional advancement, Carver Baptist Bible College, Institute, & Theological Seminary*

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Nashville, Tennessee

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## DEDICATION

*This book is dedicated to my lovely,  
devoted, and supportive wife, Ledora.*

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I thank my Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ, “who has enabled me, in that He counted me faithful, putting me into the ministry” (1 Tim 1:12 HCSB).



# Introduction

**E**VER since the catastrophic events in the garden of Eden, God's Word has been distorted. God explicitly forbade Adam from eating fruit from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, telling him, "But of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, thou shalt not eat of it: for in the day that thou eatest thereof thou shalt surely die" (Gen 2:17). God's Word to Adam was precise and well-defined. Adam presumably, in turn, was responsible for communicating God's Word to Eve in the same manner it had been communicated to him—word for word without any additions or subtractions.

Yet when the Tempter asked whether God's prohibition of eating from the forbidden tree was good and reasonable, Eve said, "We may eat of the fruit of the trees of the garden: But of the fruit of the tree which is in the midst of the garden, God hath said, Ye shall not eat of it, neither shall ye touch it, lest ye die" (Gen 3:2–3). Eve's response represents the first recorded instance of God's Word being distorted. God had not prohibited touching the fruit. He merely forbade eating it. For the very first time, mankind was faced with a crisis of authority. In response, Eve rendered God's Word inaccurately rather than trusting it as the authoritative revelation of her Creator.

Is God's Word authoritative? Can it be trusted? Should it be believed and accepted? Is it accurate and without error? Is it sufficient to meet humanity's emotional, intellectual, and spiritual needs? The Genesis incident ignited a flame of distortion and unbelief that has been burning out of control ever since.

The distorting of God's Word has worsened over the years. This is not to suggest a total absence of preachers and local churches that remain true to

God's infallible Word. There are many. I am suggesting, however, that God's Word is being undermined today by preachers who, for practical purposes, deny its sufficiency. Some feel they need to add to or subtract from what the Bible says. As James T. Draper suggests, "The doctrine of the sufficiency of the Scriptures is being undermined in our churches."<sup>1</sup> This undermining occurs, he argues, when Christians fall prey to three dangers:

The first danger is the error of adding to the Word of God . . . the latest craze among those searching for extrabiblical, private revelation. What is so misleading about this error is that its proponents acknowledge that the Bible is necessary for salvation and service, but they deny that it is sufficient. The replacing of the Word of God is the second danger facing churches today. When the clear teaching of the Bible is replaced with modern psychological theory, the purpose of the church is no longer salvation, but therapy. The third danger may be the most treacherous of all, because it is the least obvious. The displacing of the Word of God occurs when the preaching and teaching of the Bible are relegated to the periphery of the worship of the church. This misstep is harder to detect, because in order to commit this error it is not necessary to do anything to the Bible or to its teachings—just leave them out.<sup>2</sup>

Whether one agrees with Draper's specific observations or not, most Christians will probably concur that God's Word is under attack. It is being undermined by preachers across denominational lines. On any given Sunday, men stand in pulpits across our nation with open Bibles and mouths, muting God's words and inserting their own in its place. Countless thousands have been duped into believing that what is being preached is God's Word when it is merely the personal thoughts and opinions of the preacher. A great need exists to restore textual accuracy and relevance to biblical preaching, particularly in African-American pulpits.

The problem of misrepresenting God's Word is not restricted to African-Americans or white Americans; it transcends race and culture. It is a problem facing all Christians in all denominations. However, as an African-American, I am passionately concerned about the African-American pulpit and whether God's Word is treated with the utmost integrity there. African-American pulpits desperately need a revival of biblical fidelity and

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<sup>1</sup> James T. Draper Jr. and Kenneth Keathley, *Biblical Authority: The Critical Issue for the Body of Christ* (Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 2001), 109.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 109–10.

relevance in their approach to preaching. As Thabiti M. Anyabwile notes in *The Decline of African-American Theology*:

As a consequence of theological drift and erosion, the black church now stands in danger of losing its relevance and power to effectively address both the spiritual needs of its communicants and the social and political aspirations of its community.<sup>3</sup>

This book will address four topics related to textual accuracy and relevance in biblical preaching. The first topic to be considered is the crisis necessitating a reemphasis of textual accuracy and relevance in biblical preaching. Segregation and theological training, black liberation theology, and prosperity theology will be discussed. This chapter is not intended to be an exhaustive study of these subjects. Rather, it addresses them as they relate to the overall theme of this work. This chapter will build the foundation upon which the remainder of the book rests and will therefore be the longest.

The second topic to be considered will be the importance of exegesis for biblical and relevant preaching. The definition, importance, and crisis of exegesis will be discussed. An explanation about the building blocks needed to produce sound exegesis will also be explained.

The third topic to be considered is the theology of preaching. The nature of biblical preaching, the ethos of preaching in the African-American tradition, and the importance and value of expository preaching will be explained.

The final topic to be considered will be relevance in preaching. The subject of postmodernism will be delineated. In an effort to demonstrate why effectively communicating God's Word in an age of skepticism and relativism is important to all pulpits, input from seasoned Bible expositors will be cited.

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<sup>3</sup> Thabiti M. Anyabwile, *The Decline of African-American Theology* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2007), 18.

# 1

## The Crisis

### Erosion of Biblical Preaching in African American Pulpits

*Then the LORD said to me, The prophets prophesy lies in my name: I sent them not, neither have I commanded them, neither spake unto them: they prophesy unto you false vision and divination, and a thing of nought, and the deceit of their heart . . . I have not sent these prophets, yet they ran: I have not spoken to them, yet they prophesied. (Jer 14:14; 23:21)*

**P**REACHING has always been central to black church life, with the preacher regarded as a natural leader in the black community.<sup>1</sup> As Olin P. Moyd observes:

The [black] preachers have been the central figures in their churches. Preaching has been the primary element of their worship. And practical theology has been the content and essence in their preaching.<sup>2</sup>

Moyd adds, “Historic African-American preaching was both interpretation and proclamation.”<sup>3</sup> Even during slavery, black people found refuge and solace in the preaching they heard each Lord’s Day. Preaching provided emotional

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<sup>1</sup> Charles V. Hamilton, *The Black Preacher in America* (New York, NY: William Morrow & Company, 1972), 12.

<sup>2</sup> Olin P. Moyd, *The Sacred Art—Preaching and Theology in the African-American Tradition* (Valley Forge, PA: Judson, 1995), 1.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 2.

inspiration and was, in a sense, a survival mechanism.<sup>4</sup> While they awaited their emancipation, preaching helped slaves endure the hardships and unjust treatment imposed by their owners. This is why the black preacher was so essential to African-American Christians. Lewis V. Baldwin echoes these sentiments: “The single most important figure in the black Christian experience is the black preacher.”<sup>5</sup>

Preaching continues to be a mainstay in African-American churches. This should come as no surprise to any Bible student since preaching is the method God chose to convey his Word and will to lost humanity. Paul said regarding God’s use of preaching that “it pleased God by the foolishness of preaching to save them that believe” (1 Cor 1:21). It is this foolishness of preaching that African-Americans need.

However, preaching in some African-American pulpits has, over time, evolved and taken a less than conservative approach in its dealing with textual accuracy and relevance. This is a crisis which necessitates a change. Dale Andrews, in *Practical Theology for Black Churches* says, “Through the generations of black preaching, African-American folk religion has developed a ‘black hermeneutic’ for the interpretation and application of the Bible.”<sup>6</sup> This “black hermeneutic” has wreaked havoc on African-American churches because it manipulates the Bible’s intended meaning. The church in America today faces a crisis like no other time in its history. There is therefore a need for biblical accuracy and relevance to be restored to all pulpits, especially African-American ones. As we will see, at least three factors have precipitated the decline of biblical preaching among black churches: segregation, black liberation theology, and prosperity theology.

## SEGREGATION AND THEOLOGICAL TRAINING

From the beginning of our nation’s history, African-Americans have endured racism and racial segregation. Racial segregation is born out of an attitude of superiority. A race that considers itself dominant claims the legal and moral right to discriminate against a race it considers inferior. As racial segregation continued its evolution in America, the dominant white race felt duty-bound to discriminate against black people.

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<sup>4</sup> Hamilton, *The Black Preacher in America*, 37.

<sup>5</sup> Lewis V. Baldwin, “Black Christianity in the South in the Nineteenth Century: It’s Development and Character,” in *Religion in the South Conference Papers* (Birmingham, AL: Alabama Humanities Foundation, 1986), 19.

<sup>6</sup> Dale P. Andrews, *Practical Theology for Black Churches* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2002), 16.

Behind racial segregation and discrimination was the idea that black people were not fully part of the human race.<sup>7</sup> This idea was especially popular during the days of slavery when blacks inherited at birth a status that excluded them from many privileges normally associated with being human.<sup>8</sup> Generally, slaves were prohibited from learning to read or write for fear they might become intelligent enough to stand up against their masters. A body of laws known as the Slave Codes<sup>9</sup> was enacted to keep slaves in a position of subservience. These laws covered every aspect of life for slaves and inhibited especially their social and intellectual development.

The Slave Codes also affected the religious life of slaves. They were permitted to hear the Bible preached each Lord's Day but only under the strict guardianship of slave owners. They were allowed to attend their owners' churches but had to sit in segregated sections, oftentimes in the upper balconies. Slave owners often encouraged their slaves to attend preaching services because it was thought such religious experiences would make them more docile and cooperative. To nurture cooperation, white preachers would admonish the slaves to obey their masters. Scripture passages like Ephesians 6:5<sup>10</sup> were distorted in an attempt to teach slaves that disobedience to their owners was equivalent to disobeying God himself and would result in severe chastisement.

On occasion slaves were permitted to conduct their own separate worship services held in their slave quarters. The slaves worshiped with singing, praying, and preaching. Since the majority of black preachers could not read or write, their knowledge of the Bible and theology was restricted. Consequently, most of what they preached was based on memory of what they heard from white preachers. They would sometimes even imitate the words and actions of white preachers. Pastor and educator William Banks notes, "The Blacks copied what they saw and heard. Basically, the religion of the plantation Black was a faithful copy of the White man's religion."<sup>11</sup> The messages from these black preachers were emotional, energetic, and connected with the daily struggles, frustrations, and burdens carried by slaves.

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<sup>7</sup> Peter J. Paris, *The Social Teaching of the Black Churches* (Philadelphia, PA: Fortress, 1985), 4.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> John Hope Franklin, *From Slavery to Freedom: A History of Negro Americans* (New York, NY: Alfred A. Knopf, 1974), 140.

<sup>10</sup> "Servants, be obedient to them that are your masters according to the flesh, with fear and trembling, in singleness of your heart, as unto Christ" (Eph 6:5).

<sup>11</sup> William L. Banks, *The History of Black Baptists in the United States* (Philadelphia, PA: The Continental Press, 1987), 36.

The worship experience of slaves was always scrutinized by the slave owners. The black preacher had to be extremely careful not to anger the slave master by the subject matter he preached. As James Harris states,

During much of slavery, especially during the nineteenth century, black preachers were forbidden by law and custom to preach the gospel, presumably because of the increase in rebellion and insurrections of religious radicals.<sup>12</sup>

Charles Hamilton adds:

Where the black preacher was permitted to serve the slaves, he was expected by the slaveholders to pacify the slaves and to reconcile them to their lowly lot here on earth. Those who performed that function well, were rewarded by the whites for it.<sup>13</sup>

With the abolition of slavery came a new approach to racism: Jim Crow laws.<sup>14</sup> To protect white rights and interests, laws were passed that encouraged white dominance and kept whites separated from blacks. This legalized racial discrimination in America. The result was the continued repression of black people in a society that measured superiority and inferiority solely on the basis of pigmentation.

In childhood, African-Americans learned that the differences between themselves and white people amounted to more than skin color. As William Chafe, Raymond Gavins, and Robert Korstad note:

Jim Crow meant confronting bitter truths about human nature. . . . Among the most poignant of these realities emerged when African-American children came to understand that blacks and whites were different in the eyes of society. Walking to school, going to

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<sup>12</sup> James H. Harris, *Preaching Liberation* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1995), 41.

<sup>13</sup> Hamilton, *The Black Preacher in America*, 37.

<sup>14</sup> Linda Barrett Osborne, *Miles To Go For Freedom – Segregation and Civil Rights In The Jim Crow Years* (New York: Abrams Books, 2012), 21; *The World Book Encyclopedia* (Willard, OH: RR Donnelley, 2014), 11:126. The term “Jim Crow” came into common use in the 1800s, when racial segregation was legal in many parts of the southern United States. The term originally referred to a black character in a popular song composed in the 1830s. Thomas “Daddy” Rice, a white actor, had created a song and dance that he performed while pretending to be a black man—Jim Crow. The character Jim Crow embodied popular stereotypes about African Americans. He wore ragged clothes and shoes with holes in them. He was lazy, comical, not too bright, and spoke with an exaggerated accent. “Jim Crow” described the race-based way of life in the South and quickly came to mean “second-class citizen.” The idea of “separate but equal” status was intended to pacify the black community while protecting white interests and bolstering the discriminatory practices of whites toward blacks. Most Jim Crow laws were nullified by Supreme Court decisions in the 1950s and 1960s, and the Civil Rights Acts of 1964 and 1968.

the store, playing on rural farms and city sidewalks, black children confronted racial differences in the taunts of white children, in the degrading treatment of black adults, and in their own observations of who was better off than whom. Under such circumstances you just automatically grew up inferior and you had the feeling that white people were better than you.<sup>15</sup>

Discrimination against black people extended to social interactions, housing, employment, and education. Nowhere was the oppression more apparent than in the realm of religious education. Both liberal and conservative institutions resisted integrated classrooms, but some schools closed their doors to blacks altogether. Even after the Supreme Court's 1954 *Brown v. Board of Education* decision, schools like Bob Jones University in Greenville, South Carolina, and Tennessee Temple University in Chattanooga, Tennessee, enforced admission restrictions based on race. The idea that whites were superior to blacks was the accepted norm and white supremacy triumphed in America.

## PROBLEMS CREATED BY RACIAL SEGREGATION

Racial segregation led to at least four major problems: degradation of black communities, bitterness toward America, a propensity to embrace the social gospel, and devaluation of human life.

### Effect on Black Communities

The first problem created by racial segregation was the degradation of black communities. Due to their denial of the access and opportunity afforded most white Americans, African-Americans were relegated to poverty, illiteracy, and a "ghetto" mind-set where hopelessness and despair prevailed. African-Americans had to endure, at times, horrendous living conditions just to survive. In the majority of predominantly African American neighborhoods, crime, drug trafficking, gang violence, unemployment, and deplorable living conditions prevailed. Many of these neighborhoods had little if any public transportation and few grocery stores or hospitals. It is a sad reality but fifty years after the civil rights race riots in Watts, Chicago, Detroit, and Cleveland, many urban neighborhoods are still in disarray and people still live in hopelessness.

To make matters worse, the response of government officials to the pressing needs of black neighborhoods typically was slower and less enthusiastic

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<sup>15</sup> William H. Chafe, Raymond Gavins, and Robert Korstad, eds., *Remembering Jim Crow: African-Americans Tell About Life in the Segregated South* (New York, NY: The New York Press, 2001), 2–3.



then their repose to white communities. Even today, in the majority of white communities, government officials don't tolerate dilapidated buildings or vacant lots. Not so in the majority of African-American neighborhoods. Many of those neighborhoods look strikingly similar to the way they did the morning after the riots of the 1960s.

## **Bitterness toward America**

The second problem created by racial segregation was bitterness toward America. Many African-Americans believed the Founding Fathers' claim that "all men are created equal" was intended only as a statement about whites. African-Americans theorized that when our nation's forefathers fashioned that statement, black people were probably not included in their thought processes. As evidence, they noted that several men who signed the Declaration of Independence owned slaves. Frustration with the racism that apparently informed the writing of America's founding documents became the impetus for creating cultural genres that represented African-Americans. Disappointed with their suppressed surroundings, African-Americans often fell into despair, which generated bitterness.

From the root of this bitterness, the Nation of Islam and the Black Panther Party emerged. Both groups were extreme in their separatist ideologies and sought retaliation against white segregationists. Their members were willing to become modern-day martyrs if that's what it took to thwart the segregationist agenda. Yet neither group was able to accomplish its intended goals. Hatred and violence only begat more hatred and violence.

Other groups sprung up which had the same goal of liberation but a different philosophical approach. Groups like the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC), Congress of Racial Equality (CORE), Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), and the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) were all organized to advocate racial equality while placating a growing number of black people demanding immediate justice by any means necessary. The philosophical approach of these groups centered on achieving liberation through non-violence. There were obvious merits to the approach of these groups. If nothing else, they provided African-Americans a heightened sense of expectation for personal liberties. Negatively, these groups at times fostered an "us versus them" mentality that helped justify racial separation and contributed more to racial segregation than desegregation.

## Educational Disparity and Political Activism

The third problem was a propensity among black preachers to seek social justice through political activism. These preachers believed the gospel's transformative power can—indeed . . . must—be applied to contemporary social, cultural, and political structures. Victimized by racism, the black church in America was set on a course that led it into heretical teachings. Even after African-Americans began attending white institutions, many still looked to political activism as a means to genuine equality. Sadly, the gospel occasionally got lost in the shuffle.

The church offered African-Americans solace from racial suppression as activism became the focus of much preaching. The message was one of liberation and reform as proponents focused on transforming society. To leave the persecuted and underprivileged paddling upstream against their demoralizing conditions without any hope of reaching the safe shores of liberation was unconscionable. Consequently, activist preachers focused on alleviating racism, sexism, and poverty without stressing traditional Christian teaching about repentance and faith in Christ as Lord and Savior.

There were, of course, some African-American preachers who looked for other ways to address their grievances. Consider John McNeal Jr., founder and pastor of the Atlanta Bible Baptist Church. In 1964 McNeal became the first African-American male to graduate from Grace Theological Seminary in Wynona Lake, Indiana. Following his graduation, Grace Seminary made intentional efforts to attract and admit African-American men. Other schools like Dallas Theological Seminary in Dallas, Texas; Baptist Bible College in Springfield, Missouri; and The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary in Louisville, Kentucky, have for several decades been proactive in recruiting African-Americans. Still, racial segregation prevented many black ministers from receiving adequate theological training needed to fulfill their God-given call to “preach the word” (2 Tim 4:2). The results were devastating.

Consider the theology of our nation's most prolific liberation preacher. The late Martin Luther King Jr. King received his theological training from three liberal institutions: Morehouse College in Atlanta, Georgia (where in 1948 he received his bachelor of arts in sociology), Crozer Seminary in Chester, Pennsylvania (where he received his bachelor of divinity in 1951), and Boston University's School of Theology in Boston, Massachusetts (where in 1955 he received his doctorate in systematic theology).

As a result of his training, King's theology was liberal in nature. It bears repeating that in the minds of many black people, conservative theologians

were suspect because they appealed to God's Word to defend slavery, promote white supremacy, and champion racial segregation. Thus, the writings of Reinhold Niebuhr<sup>16</sup> and Karl Marx<sup>17</sup> helped shape King's theological convictions.

Of course, King's theology also drew from traditional Christian orthodoxy. He appealed to the Sermon on the Mount and its emphasis on practically demonstrating Christian love. This became the foundation for his philosophy of nonviolence. King summarized this philosophy by saying, "It was Jesus of Nazareth that stirred the Negroes to protest with the creative weapon of love."<sup>18</sup> According to King's interpretation of Christianity, every Christian was duty bound to love all people regardless of race or national origin. This unshackled people from the chains of hatred, racism, and retaliation, and it essentially set them free to do what God had called them to do. This practical side of Christianity is what philosopher Cornel West called "being free to love across the board."<sup>19</sup> King became the champion of nonviolent resistance, which many believed was the most potent weapon available to African-Americans in their struggle for freedom.

Along with the Sermon on the Mount, however, King was influenced deeply by the father of the social gospel, Walter Rauschenbusch—particularly his book *Christianity and the Social Crisis*. As King noted:

I came early to Walter Rauschenbusch's *Christianity and the Social Crisis*, which left an indelible imprint on my thinking by giving me a theological basis for the social concern which had already grown up in me as a result of my early experiences. It is my conviction ever since reading Rauschenbusch that any religion that professes concern for souls of men and is not equally concerned about the slums that damn them, the economic conditions that strangle them, and the social conditions that cripple them is a spiritually moribund religion only waiting for the day to be buried. It well has been said: A religion that ends with the individual, ends.<sup>20</sup>

King's concept of the gospel of Jesus Christ dealt with the whole person—not only his soul but his body also, not only his spiritual well-being but also

<sup>16</sup> Karl Paul Reinhold Niebuhr (1892–1971) was an American theologian and seminary professor. He was neo-orthodox in his theological convictions and a Christian realist in his ethics.

<sup>17</sup> Karl Heinrich Marx (1818–1883) was a German philosopher who furthered the causes of socialism and communism. His theories about the development of societal life became known as "Marxism."

<sup>18</sup> Clayborne Carson, ed., *The Autobiography of Martin Luther King, Jr.* (New York, NY: Grand Central, 1998), 67.

<sup>19</sup> Cornel West, *Hope on a Tightrope* (New York, NY: Smiley, 2008), 84.

<sup>20</sup> Carson, *The Autobiography of Martin Luther King, Jr.*, 18.

his material well-being. The whole idea of social change intrigued King. He quickly embraced the social gospel movement even though many of its supporters deemphasized salvation, declared traditional Christian orthodoxy outdated, and instead focused on helping the poor apart from gospel preaching.<sup>21</sup> One can only imagine the impact King might have had on the African-American church had he been strongly influenced by theological conservatism. King's brilliant mind, grasp of the English language, and oratory skills, would have made him an excellent expository preacher.

## Devaluing Human Life

The fourth problem created by racial segregation is the most destructive of all: It distorts God's Word and devalues human life. If someone believes one race is superior to another, then Genesis 1–11 must be distorted or disregarded because these chapters are crucial in laying the foundation for the Christian's convictions about creation and the equality of all men regardless of ethnicity.

When God said, "Let us make man in our image, after our likeness" (Gen 1:26), to whom was he referring? Was he referring to a specific ethnic group? Is it plausible that in the Genesis record, God was referring exclusively to one particular race of people? Of course not! It would be ludicrous to even suggest such a thing. As an African-American preacher, the author has encountered people who, by their racist attitudes and actions, seem to have been taught that God created whites to dominate all other races and cursed blacks to be subservient. This teaching is perhaps derived, in particular, from poor exegesis of Genesis 9, the biblical account of Noah's drunkenness and the disgraceful act perpetrated by his son Ham, the father of Canaan.

And Noah began *to be* an husbandman, and he planted a vineyard: And he drank of the wine, and was drunken; and he was uncovered within his tent. And Ham, the father of Canaan, saw the nakedness of his father, and told his two brethren without. And Shem and Japheth took a garment, and laid *it* upon both their shoulders, and went backward, and covered the nakedness of their father; and their faces were backward, and they saw not their father's nakedness. And Noah awoke from his wine, and knew what his younger son had done unto him. And he said, Cursed be Canaan; a servant of servants shall he be unto his brethren. And he said, blessed be the Lord God of Shem; and Canaan shall be his servant. God shall enlarge Japheth,

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<sup>21</sup> Jessica McElrath, *The Everything Martin Luther King Jr. Book* (Avon, MA: Adams Media, 2008), 34.

and he shall dwell in the tents of Shem; and Canaan shall be his servant. (Gen 9:20–27)

This narrative has been debated by theologians for centuries. Questions have arisen such as, “Why did Noah curse Canaan when Ham had committed the sin?” and “Is the black race cursed by God?” Is a correct understanding of this narrative possible? The obvious answer is yes. Several observations contribute to a correct understanding. First, it should be noted that Ham’s actions probably were not homosexual in nature. If Ham had engaged in sexual relations with his father, we might expect the Hebrew to be translated “he uncovered his father’s nakedness.”<sup>22</sup>

Second, Noah spoke prophetically of the nation of Canaanites that would come from Ham through his son Canaan. This was a prediction that the Canaanites would be servants to the Shemites and Japhethites. Looking through the lens of his omniscience, God knew the Canaanites would be characterized by idolatry, immorality, and drunkenness. He therefore judged them.

Third, nothing in the text makes reference to skin color. Some proponents of white supremacy believe the curse entailed, in part, having dark skin. However, Canaan was not a black man and neither were any of his descendants. For countless African-Americans who have been taught to hate themselves because their lips are too broad or their hair too textured, a correct interpretation of Genesis 9 is liberating.<sup>23</sup>

Racial segregationists’ attempts to use God’s Word to justify their claims have all proven futile. Faulty exegesis can breed racism and belief in evolution, both of which demean human life. God is the originator of all human existence. He created all men equal. No man is better than another man, and no race is superior to another. Races, cultures, backgrounds, and people are different, not superior or inferior. For any preacher to stand before God’s people and attempt to biblically justify racial superiority, hatred, or segregation, is mishandling God’s Word. Those who have done so should either repent of their sin or vacate their pulpits.

## A BIBLICAL VIEW OF RACE

Relevant, biblical preaching can restore to Christ’s body a theology and practice that exalts God as the creator of all men. It can also promote proper

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<sup>22</sup> John F. Walvoord and Roy B. Zuck, eds., *The Bible Knowledge Commentary: Old Testament* (Colorado Springs, CO: David C. Cook, 1985), 41.

<sup>23</sup> Wallace Charles Smith, *The Church in the Life of the Black Family* (Valley Forge, PA: Judson, 1985), 54.

race relations in the church. Psalm 139 is an excellent resource for cultivating a biblical worldview regarding race relations. The entire chapter is devoted to God's omniscience, omnipresence, and omnipotence. In verses 13–18, David extols God's power in creating man by saying,

For thou hast possessed my reins: thou hast covered me in my mother's womb. I will praise thee; for I am fearfully and wonderfully made: marvelous are thy works; and that my soul knoweth right well. My substance was not hid from thee, when I was made in secret, and curiously wrought in the lowest parts of the earth. Thine eyes did see my substance, yet being imperfect; and in thy book all my members were written, which in continuance were fashioned, when as yet there was none of them. How precious also are thy thoughts unto me, O God! How great is the sum of them! If I should count them, they are more in number than the sand: when I awake, I am still with thee. (Ps 139:13–18)

These verses provide a basis for a biblical worldview as it relates to race discrimination, and two truths in this passage are noteworthy for thinking about race.

## God Is Responsible for Man's Creation

God established the natural processes of reproduction and created each man in his mother's womb. This is such an amazing phenomenon that it prompted David to break out in praise that he was "fearfully and wonderfully made" (v. 14). This truth imparts dignity and worth to each person's life. Regardless of ethnicity, background, or setting, every person is uniquely hand-crafted by God, and to suggest otherwise is equivalent to suggesting that God is incompetent.

There is unity and diversity in God's creation. Humankind was created as a diverse population. Each person *looks, thinks, and acts different from every other*; and yet humankind was also created with unity. Every human shares the same anatomical and spiritual structure. Regardless of ethnicity, each person's material body and spiritual makeup is like that of every other. All men have indeed been created equal. And all mankind is in need of God's love and forgiveness offered through his Son Jesus Christ.

## God Is Responsible for Man's Ethnicity

The second noteworthy truth is closely associated with the first. In verse 16 David exclaims, "Thine eyes did see my substance, yet being imperfect;

and in thy book all my members were written, which in continuance were fashioned, when as yet there was none of them.” The psalmist is teaching his readers that God superintends every aspect of every person’s creation. God has preordained all the days of each person’s life before they are even born.

This truth serves as a reminder that a person’s ethnicity is determined by God. It is also a reminder that body structure, hair texture, and facial features are determined by God. This functions as a great equalizer. Segregation and racism would be eliminated if everyone accepted the fact that everyone has been “fashioned” according to God’s good pleasure.

African-American pulpits must return to the accurate interpretation and application of God’s Word. It is from the Bible that African-Americans learn they were created in the image and likeness of God. It is in the Bible that they find reason to applaud and appreciate their rich heritage and existence as black people.

## BLACK LIBERATION THEOLOGY

The second topic to examine and evaluate is the dangerous teaching known as black liberation theology. Since its inception, black liberation theology has challenged the white racism rooted throughout American public and private realms. It has held white society accountable and exposed cultural, political, and economic injustice.<sup>24</sup>

Proponents of this theology saw the traditional white-oriented church as a racist institution that was only concerned with the status quo. Emphasis was therefore placed on the black church as a means of liberating black people from the injustices they were being forced to endure.

James H. Cone<sup>25</sup> is regarded as the chief progenitor of the black liberation theology movement. Cone suggests that “unlike white theology, which tends to make the Jesus-event an abstract, unembodied idea, black theology believes that the black community itself is precisely where Jesus is at work.”<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> Dale P. Andrews, *Practical Theology for Black Churches* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2002), 83.

<sup>25</sup> Anyabwile, *The Decline of African-American Theology*, 48–49. James H. Cone grew up during the 1940s and early ’50s—the age of Jim Crow. The faith he acquired from attending Macedonia AME Church in Bearden, Arkansas, provided the impetus for his stand against the prevailing belief that blacks were less than whites. Cone struggled with the seeming hypocrisy and contradiction of white churches that claimed to love the Lord and welcome all people but practiced segregation. Cone’s theology was developed from the struggle for racial freedom among black people in America. Cone found Christian inspiration in the activist theology of Martin Luther King Jr., and a renewed appreciation of his blackness in the critique of Malcolm X and the Black Power movement he spawned.

<sup>26</sup> James H. Cone, *A Black Theology of Liberation* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1990), 5.

From its inception, black liberation theology has viewed the Jesus-event<sup>27</sup> as a black event, an event of liberation from white oppressors and their inhumane treatment of black people. For Cone and his colleagues, liberation is the sole content of biblical theology. Cone says quite unapologetically that Christian theology is a theology of liberation. It is a rational study of the being of God in the world in light of the existential situation of an oppressed community, relating to forces of liberation to the essence of the gospel, which is Jesus Christ.<sup>28</sup>

Black liberation theology originated from the oppression experienced by African-Americans. Created to emphasize the liberation of people from adverse sociopolitical and economic conditions, black liberation theology is, as Cone described it, “that theology which arises out of the need to articulate the significance of Black presence in a hostile white world.”<sup>29</sup> Cone viewed the black experience as dominated by humiliation and suffering, conditions from which all blacks needed to be liberated.

Cone’s philosophy of liberation does not denote the liberation of a person’s soul from sin’s curse as God’s Word clearly explains in Galatians 3:13.<sup>30</sup> Rather, he is referring to people being liberated from their social, economic, and racial suppression. It is Cone’s premise that “Christian theology can only mean black theology, a theology that speaks of God as related to black liberation.”<sup>31</sup> Cone adds:

If we agree that the gospel is the proclamation of God’s liberating activity, that the Christian community is an oppressed community that participates in that activity, and that theology is the discipline arising from within the Christian community as it seeks to develop adequate language for its relationship to God’s liberation, then black theology is Christian theology.<sup>32</sup>

Black liberation theology holds that to be authentic, the gospel of Jesus Christ must relate to the pain and suffering of being black in a white racist society. In service of this goal, black liberation theologians reinterpret two key Christian doctrines: revelation and the person and work of Christ.

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<sup>27</sup> The “Jesus-event” the Bible speaks of is his coming to “seek and to save that which was lost” (Luke 19:10).

<sup>28</sup> Cone, *A Black Theology of Liberation*, 1.

<sup>29</sup> James H. Cone, “Black Consciousness and the Black Church,” *Christianity and Crisis* 30, no. 18 (November 1970): 23.

<sup>30</sup> “Christ hath redeemed us from the curse of the law, being made a curse for us: for it is written, cursed is everyone that hangeth on a tree” (Gal 3:13).

<sup>31</sup> Cone, *A Black Theology of Liberation*, 9.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*



## Revelation and Black Liberation Theology

For these theologians, revelation is more than divine self-disclosure. It is specifically God's self-disclosure to humankind in the context of liberation.<sup>33</sup> Because white racists can accept the historic view that revelation is God's self-disclosure, black liberation theologians revise the doctrines of general and special revelation in light of their emphasis on black liberation. For black liberation theologians, the self-disclosure of God signifies that he identifies with and will eventually emancipate African-Americans from death-dealing political, economic, and social structures.<sup>34</sup> Any supposed revelation of God that does not reference his work of liberating oppressed people is to be considered as anti-biblical. Cone states: "[I]n the zeal to be biblical, we cannot lose sight of the contemporary situation and what this situation means to the oppressed of the land."<sup>35</sup>

The exodus paradigm becomes essential to black liberation theology. It becomes the exegetical lens for understanding God's liberating message for the oppressed that can be traced throughout the entire Old Testament and corroborated by the New Testament. In the exodus narrative, God revealed himself as Israel's warrior liberator. Through a series of miracles, God emancipated his people from oppression and suffering at the hands of the Egyptians. Then God established an eternal covenant with Israel thus expressing his continual identification with them as their liberator. To remind his people that he was their eternal liberator, God repeatedly said, "I am the LORD thy God, which brought thee out of the land of Egypt, from the house of bondage" (Deut 5:6, 15; Lev 26:13).

In similar fashion, black liberation theology asserts that God's covenant with African-Americans is his identification with them as their great emancipator. As the Bible reveals God as Israel's liberator from oppression and slavery, it also reveals him as liberator of all the oppressed. As Cone states, "There is no revelation of God without a condition of oppression which develops into a situation of liberation."<sup>36</sup>

In black liberation theology, God becomes the warrior liberator of African-Americans. This is the pivotal point for black liberation theology. Warren H. Stewart Sr. says, "No other point in black theology has been so central to all

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<sup>33</sup> Ibid., 45.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid.

of its noted advocates.”<sup>37</sup> Black liberation theology is therefore a theology of freedom, a theology where oppressed black people can find hope and strength to endure, knowing that God had been actively involved in the liberation of the Hebrew children, and thus, more than likely, he would take an active part in the liberation of black people from their oppression.<sup>38</sup>

## Jesus and Black Liberation Theology

Jesus is essential to the belief system of black liberation theology. As Cone states,

To speak of the Christian gospel is to speak of Jesus Christ who is the content of its message and without whom Christianity ceases to be. Therefore the answer to the question “What is the essence of Christianity?” can be given in the two words: Jesus Christ.<sup>39</sup>

With the growth of racial discrimination and segregation in America, a new approach to Christology ensued. Black liberation theologians argued that racism in America had pre-conditioned people to suppose Jesus was a white man with blonde hair and blue eyes. How can a white Jesus relate to the struggles, pain, and agony of black people, they asked? The answer was clear: He can’t. To contest the preposterous notion of a white Jesus, black liberation theologians emphasized the humanity of Jesus. A new Christology emerged highlighting the relational side of Jesus.

Since the Jesus being preached by most white preachers had little relevance to black people and their condition, a Jesus who could relate to the racial, cultural, and social context of black people was required. A Jesus who knew firsthand about people’s struggles was necessary. Jesus needed to be portrayed as a friend to whom African-Americans could turn during their times of distress. Liberation theologians proposed that Jesus must be presented as personally identifying with the disinherited.<sup>40</sup> It was also proposed that for people to understand Christianity, they must “see it through a black perspective.”<sup>41</sup>

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<sup>37</sup> Warren H. Stewart Sr., *Interpreting God’s Word in Black Preaching* (Valley Forge, PA: Judson, 1984), 17.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid., 18.

<sup>39</sup> Cone, *A Black Theology of Liberation*, 110.

<sup>40</sup> Anyabwile, *The Decline of African-American Theology*, 152, 158. “Disinherited” was the term used by Howard Thurman (1900–1981) to promote his view of Jesus’s work on earth as standing with all the downtrodden of every generation. Thurman argued that the historical Jesus and his context resembled the context of American Negroes of his day. See Thurman, *Jesus and the Disinherited* (Boston, MA: Beacon, 1976).

<sup>41</sup> Hamilton, *The Black Preacher in America*, 147.

Over time, some African-Americans became enamored with the thought of a “black Jesus,” a “black Messiah,” or a “black God.” Cone attempted to substantiate his claim that God is black by saying,

The blackness of God, and everything implied by it in a racist society, is the heart of Black Theology’s doctrine of God. There is no place in Black Theology for a colorless God in a society when people suffer precisely because of their color. The black theologian must reject any conception of God which stifles black self-determination by picturing God as a God of all peoples. Either God is identified with the oppressed to the point that their experience becomes his or he is a God of racism. The blackness of God means that God has made the oppressed condition his own condition. This is the essence of the biblical revelation.<sup>42</sup>

United Church of Christ preacher Albert Cleage defended his participation in the civil rights movement by stating, “Jesus was a revolutionary black leader, a Zealot, seeking to lead a Black Nation to freedom.”<sup>43</sup>

Black liberation theologians believed that preaching Jesus was equivalent to preaching liberation. Jesus was the oppressed one whose entire earthly existence was bound up with the oppressed. When preaching about Jesus the liberator, much emphasis was placed on his life and ministry and his identification with what Roberts called “the least, the lonely, and the lost.”<sup>44</sup>

Luke 4:18–19<sup>45</sup> emerged as a proof text of black liberation theologians. The setting in Luke’s gospel is Jesus in the synagogue, standing and reading from the prophet Isaiah. Jesus defines his earthly ministry as being divinely energized by God’s Spirit to work among the downcast and downtrodden of his day, thus bringing God the Father into people’s minds and hearts. Black liberation theologians use this text to portray Jesus as a revolutionary leader focused on confronting the problems that afflict humanity.

To further demonstrate Jesus’s affinity for the disinherited, black liberation theologians emphasized that Jesus was born a Jew. By training, background, and religion, Jesus belonged to the Jewish minority. As a racial minority, he

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<sup>42</sup> Cone, *A Black Theology of Liberation*, 120–21, 124.

<sup>43</sup> Albert B. Cleage Jr., *The Black Messiah* (New York, NY: Sheed and Ward, 1968), 4.

<sup>44</sup> J. Deotis Roberts, *Africentric Christianity: A Theological Appraisal for Ministry* (Valley Forge, PA: Judson, 2000), 63.

<sup>45</sup> “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he hath anointed me to preach the gospel to the poor; he hath sent me to heal the brokenhearted, to preach deliverance to the captives, and recovering of sight to the blind, to set at liberty them that are bruised” (Luke 4:18).

knew firsthand what it was like to be viewed as unequal by the dominant group. Jesus was therefore fully qualified to relate to the needs of black Americans.<sup>46</sup>

But Jesus was not only a Jew; he was a “poor Jew.”<sup>47</sup> Jesus’s earthly parents’ inability to provide a lamb for the sacrifice has been used to demonstrate the impoverished conditions of his earthly life (Luke 2:22–24).<sup>48</sup> Thurman, though not himself a black liberation theologian, noted, “The economic predicament with which he was identified in birth placed him initially with the great mass of men on earth. The masses of people are poor.”<sup>49</sup> Jesus’s life was of such deprivation that the prophet Isaiah could say of him, “He is despised and rejected of men; a man of sorrows, and acquainted with grief” (Isa 53:3). From this new Christology came messages of hope in the midst of despair, and African-Americans felt Jesus could fully identify with their plight.

### Problems Associated with Black Liberation Theology

At least three problems associated with black liberation theology necessitate a reemphasis on biblical preaching among black churches. First, it is a threat to biblical Christianity. It twists, distorts, and ultimately denies the gospel of Jesus Christ. It ignores man’s spiritual need by concentrating exclusively on his social or physical needs. It takes the simple message of biblical salvation and mixes political and social ideologies into it.

Second, black liberation theology deemphasizes the person and work of the Lord Jesus Christ. While stressing Jesus’s humble background and association with the least, the lonely, and the lost, His true mission to earth is eclipsed. Without question, Jesus loves society’s social, economic, and political outcasts. However, as he states, His primary mission was “to seek and to save that which is lost” (Luke 19:10).

The message of black liberation theology, though inspiring to some and challenging to hatemongers, lacks spiritual gravitas. When divorced from Jesus’s mission of redeeming sinners, his compassion for society’s outcasts loses much of its significance. Jesus never claimed his mission was to liberate

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<sup>46</sup> This idea was drawn from Howard Thurman, though Thurman himself was not a black liberation theologian. See Thurman, *Jesus and the Disinherited* (Boston, MA: Beacon, 1976), 32.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, 17.

<sup>48</sup> “And when the days of her purification according to the law of Moses were accomplished, they brought him to Jerusalem, to present him to the Lord; (As it is written in the law of the Lord, Every male that openeth the womb shall be called holy to the Lord;) And to offer a sacrifice according to that which is said in the law of the Lord, A pair of turtledoves, or two young pigeons” (Luke 2:22–24).

<sup>49</sup> Thurman, *Jesus and the Disinherited*, 17.

mankind from social, economic, or political injustices. Rather, his mission was to liberate man from the penalty and power of sin. Once liberated from his sin, a man's entire outlook is transformed. He now has the capacity, through the indwelling Holy Spirit, to obey the second greatest commandment which is to "love thy neighbor as thyself" (Matt 22:39).

The third problem associated with black liberation theology is that it contributes to the segregation of Christian churches. It has alienated black Christians from their white brothers and sisters in Christ. The reality that the eleven o'clock hour on Sunday morning is the most segregated hour of the week cannot be contested. In contrast, heaven is racially desegregated, and God has commanded his people to pray, "Thy kingdom come. Thy will be done in earth, as it is in heaven" (Matt 6:10). All Christians should be praying for and promoting unity in the body of Christ. When Jesus Christ established the church, which is his body, his desire was that racial and social barriers be eradicated and all Christians become one in Him irrespective of race or national origin. Writing to the churches in the Galatian region, Paul insists:

For as many of you as have been baptized into Christ have put on Christ. There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither bond nor free, there is neither male nor female: for ye are all one in Christ Jesus. And if ye be Christ's, then are ye Abraham's seed, and heirs according to the promise. (Gal 3:28)

Accurate portrayal of the biblical text in preaching is necessary for the true gospel of Christ to be understood. It is also necessary so that Christians can experience a little heaven on earth by engaging in desegregated worship. God is spirit and we are commanded to worship him "in spirit and in truth" (John 4:24). Theological oneness is a prerequisite to worshipping according to truth. There can be no genuine unity without it.

## PROSPERITY THEOLOGY

Another impediment to biblical preaching in black churches is the heretical teaching known as "prosperity theology." This teaching has also been called the "Word of Faith" movement. Its basic teaching is that God rewards faithfulness with good health and material wealth. This has quickly become one of the most captivating messages in churches across our nation, with an impact transcending racial and denominational lines. Advocates such as Joel Osteen of Lakewood Church in Houston, Texas, T. D. Jakes of the Potter's House in Dallas, Texas, Frederick K. C. Price of Crenshaw Christian Center in

Inglewood, California, and Creflo Dollar of World Changers Ministries near Atlanta, Georgia, all expound this message.

Admittedly, these preachers say financial wealth is not the only blessing God brings to his children.<sup>50</sup> Still, their ideology maligns the person and work of our Lord Jesus Christ and distorts the gospel. While they claim to preach the full gospel, in reality their message is what God condemns as being “a different gospel.”<sup>51</sup>

The belief system of this movement varies to some extent among its proponents. But there seems to be some uniformity among their teachings on physical health and economic wealth.

### Physical Health and Sickness

The movement’s philosophy of health was influenced by metaphysical mind science groups such as Christian Science, the Unity School of Christianity and the Church of Religious Science.<sup>52</sup> The prosperity gospel’s view of health was summarized by Benny Hinn, one of the movement’s most outspoken preachers:

The healing power of God is present in us; God, the source of life, the creator, is with us forever. In Him we live, in Him we have eternal life; God’s greatest desire for the Church of Jesus Christ is that we be in total and perfect health.<sup>53</sup>

Some supporters of this teaching believe any acknowledgment of sickness opens the door to satanic control and medicine is a crutch for the spiritually immature. They also claim the atoning work of Jesus Christ yielded physical healing, and that all diseases are healed by Christ’s supposed atonement in hell, not his physical death on the cross. To validate these claims, prosperity gospel preachers appeal to three key Scriptures: Isaiah 53:5 (“The chastisement of our peace was upon him; and with his stripes we are healed”), 1 Peter 2:24 (“by whose stripes ye were healed”), and Matthew 8:17 (“That it might

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<sup>50</sup> Jeffery B. Bowens, *Prosperity Gospel: Prosperity Gospel and Its Effect on the 21st Century Church* (Bloomington, IN: Xlibris, 2012), 42.

<sup>51</sup> When rebuking the Galatian believers for quickly deserting the true message of the gospel Paul said, “I marvel that ye are so soon removed from him that called you into this grace of Christ unto another gospel: Which is not another; but there be some that trouble you, and would pervert the gospel of Christ” (Gal 1:6–7). Paul makes it known that “another gospel” is in reality “another gospel of a different kind,” and therefore not the true gospel.

<sup>52</sup> D. R. McConnell, *A Different Gospel* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1995), 166, quoted in Richard Abanes, “The Word Faith Movement,” and in Walter Martin’s, *The Kingdom of the Cults* (Minneapolis, MN: Bethany House, 1977), 279.

<sup>53</sup> Benny Hinn, *Rise and Be Healed* (Orlando, FL: Celebration, 1991), 44.

be fulfilled which was spoken by Esaias the prophet saying, Himself took our infirmities, and bare our sicknesses”).

Again, Hinn’s explanation is representative of the movement:

The Bible declares that the work of Christ (healing) was done 2,000 years ago. God is not going to heal you today: He healed you 2,000 years ago. All you have to do today is receive your healing by faith.<sup>54</sup>

Closely linked to healing is what this movement calls “positive confession,” the belief that words have creative power and what people say determines, to some extent, what happens to them. In positive confession, healing and material prosperity are generated by right thinking, right believing, and right confession. It is supposed that people are not being healed because they are thinking wrongly. Three reasons are given for this: first, sickness and disease supposedly are spiritual, not physical; second, a true believer allegedly should never be sick; and third, negative confession purportedly produces sickness.

Positive confession promoters appeal to a portion of Ephesians 5:23 to justify their claims: “and he is the savior of the body.” In order for Christians to receive their healing, prosperity gospel preachers say they must positively confess that Christ is the savior of their bodies. When Christians worry or complain about an illness, they forfeit their right to the perfect healing redemption of Christ. The so-called “granddaddy of the Faith teachers”<sup>55</sup> Kenneth Hagin once said:

I believe that it is the plan of God our Father, that no believer should ever be sick. It is not the will of God my Father that we should suffer with cancer and other dreaded diseases, which bring pain and anguish. No! It is God’s will that we be healed.<sup>56</sup>

Hagin, ironically, died from cardiovascular disease in 2003.

## Economic Wealth

In addition to their teaching about physical healing, prosperity gospel preachers have much to say about economic wealth. As Hagin put it:

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<sup>54</sup> Ibid.

<sup>55</sup> Sherry Andrews, “Kenneth Hagin: Keeping the Faith,” *Charisma* (October 1981), 24.

<sup>56</sup> Kenneth Hagin, *The Father’s Provision* (Word of Faith, August 1977), 9, as quoted in D. R. McConnell’s *A Different Gospel*, 157, 168.

Jesus Christ's atonement has redeemed us from the curse of poverty. This is made a reality because of God's promises to Abraham. Abraham's blessings belong to us. It doesn't belong only to the physical descendants of Abraham; it belongs to us! God promised Abraham that He was going to make him rich. Do you mean that God is going to make us all rich? Yes, that's what I mean. By rich I mean having a full supply. Praise God, there is a full supply in Christ.<sup>57</sup>

Prosperity theology argues that wealth is the divine right of all Christians, accessible in proportion to their level of faith. The believer's faith connection to Abraham puts all the spiritual and physical blessings promised him at their immediate disposal. As T. D. Jakes notes, "Faith is the catalyst that accelerates the divine transfer of wealth to us as believers in Christ Jesus. . . . It motivates God to release His resources on our behalf, and conditions us to receive them."<sup>58</sup>

Two Scriptures commonly used to support the prosperity gospel teaching on wealth are 3 John 2 ("Beloved, I wish above all things that thou mayest prosper and be in health, even as thy soul prospereth") and Luke 6:38 ("Give, and it shall be given unto you; good measure, pressed down, and shaken together, and running over, shall men give into your bosom. For with the same measure that ye mete withal it shall be measured to you again"). Both verses are interpreted as guaranteeing economic prosperity to those who follow God's law.

Nowhere is the heretical nature of the prosperity movement more apparent than its teaching on Christ's incarnation. Many prosperity preachers present a Jesus who looks remarkably like themselves. John Avanzia, for example, presents a Jesus who "is decked out in designer clothes, lives in a big house, has a huge donor base, and has so much money that He needs a treasurer."<sup>59</sup> Another noted supporter of this teaching, Frederick Price, falsely teaches that since Jesus was financially wealthy, believers should be wealthy as well. Price stated:

The whole point is I'm trying to get you out of the malaise of thinking that Jesus and His disciples were poor, and then relating that to your thinking that you, a child of God have to follow Jesus. The Bible says that he left us an example that we should follow His

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<sup>57</sup> Kenneth Hagin, *Redeemed from Poverty, Sickness and Spiritual Death* (Tulsa, OK: RHEMA Bible Church, 1997), 9–12.

<sup>58</sup> T. D. Jakes, *Life Overflowing: 6 Pillars for Abundant Living* (Minneapolis, MN: Bethany House, 2008), 15.

<sup>59</sup> John Avanzia, *Praise the Lord* program on TBN (September 15, 1988) and *Believer's Voice of Victory* program on TBN (January 20, 1991).



steps. That's the reason why I drive a Rolls Royce. I'm following Jesus' steps.<sup>60</sup>

Prosperity theology thrives on the idea that wealth is gained in proportion to one's giving to prosperity gospel ministries. This is referred to as "seed planting." Based on the agricultural system of seeding, the concept is an unbiblical extension of the principle that a person reaps what he sows: the more "seed of faith" money a person gives, the greater the return. Promoters of this teaching believe that when a person sows his "seed of faith" money, God creates an atmosphere of perpetual blessing for that person. If people will give their money to the church, the televangelist, or to certain preachers, God supposedly will multiply it back to them 30, 60, or 100 times. This teaching feeds upon a prevailing covetous mentality.

The prosperity theology movement has swept across our nation like a hurricane, leaving in its path broken hearts, broken dreams, and, worst of all, distrust in God. It appears the only ones profiting from this movement are the preachers who endorse and expound on it, with their fabulous homes, designer clothing, fancy automobiles, and enormous bank accounts.

Sad to say, many African-American preachers propound the baseless rhetoric of prosperity theologians. Thankfully though, God's Word explains why biblical preaching needs to be restored.

## False Assumption Regarding Physical Health

First, the assumption that physical health is guaranteed by Christ's atoning work contradicts biblical teaching. Kenneth Copeland's remarks summarize the movement's beliefs on sickness and health. Copeland said:

Adam's sin not only got God thrown off planet earth, but also resulted in a satanic nature for Adam. Ever since then, mankind has been susceptible to sin, sickness, suffering, and death; however, the basic principle of the Christian life is to know that God put our sin, sickness, disease, sorrow, grief and poverty on Christ at Calvary. For Him to put any of this on us now would be a miscarriage of justice. Jesus was made a curse for us so that we can receive the blessing of Abraham.<sup>61</sup>

But what exactly does the Bible teach on the subject of sickness? First, it should be noted first that prosperity gospel preachers are correct regarding the

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<sup>60</sup> Frederick K. C. Price, *Ever Increasing Faith* program on TBN (December 9, 1990).

<sup>61</sup> Kenneth Copeland, *The Troublemaker* (Fort Worth, TX: Copeland Ministries, 1970), 6.

origin of sickness and death. Due to Adam's sin in the garden of Eden, mankind has been inflicted with a curse. According to Romans 8:22–23,<sup>62</sup> this curse has affected the entire creation, which now groans and suffers. This groaning includes our physical bodies, which experience sickness, suffering, and death due to Adam's willful disobedience. Both the righteous and unrighteous share this reality.

Second, and to an extent in keeping with the teaching of prosperity gospel advocates, some sickness is directly related to personal or corporate sin. The apostle Paul reminded the Church at Corinth that their misplaced values, pride, and unconfessed sins had physical consequences for their bodies. With reference to the Corinthians' flippant attitude regarding the Lord's Supper Paul said:

For he that eateth and drinketh unworthily, eateth and drinketh damnation to himself, not discerning the Lord's body. For this cause many are weak and sickly among you, and many sleep. (1 Cor 11:29–30)

Partaking of the Lord's Supper with unconfessed sin brought severe judgment upon the guilty parties. Paul's encouragement to them was, "But let a man examine himself, and so let him eat of that bread, and drink of that cup" (1 Cor 11:28). The alternative would be God's discipline in the form of sickness and physical death.

Third, godly people experience sickness and suffering. Obviously, this biblical teaching is diametrically opposed to the prosperity gospel. Hank Hanegraff, in *Christianity in Crisis*, cites several examples that verify this reality.<sup>63</sup>

Job, who is affirmed by Scripture as a great man of faith, was covered with painful sores from the soles of his feet to the top of his head (Job 2:7, "So went Satan forth from the presence of the LORD, and smote Job with sore boils from the sole of his foot unto his crown").

The great apostle Paul confessed to the Galatian believers that because of a bodily illness, he preached the gospel to them for the first time (Gal 4:13, "Ye know how through infirmity of the flesh I preached the gospel unto you at the first").

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<sup>62</sup> "For we know that the whole creation groaneth and travaileth in pain together until now. And not only they, but ourselves also, which have the first-fruits of the Spirit, even we ourselves groan within ourselves, waiting for the adoption, to wit, the redemption of our body" (Rom 8:22–23).

<sup>63</sup> Hank Hanegraff, *Christianity in Crisis* (Eugene, OR: Harvest House, 1993), 252–53.

Timothy, Paul's son in the faith, suffered from frequent stomach problems. Instead of telling Timothy to "positively confess" his healing, Paul gave him some practical advice. Paul told Timothy to "Drink no longer water, but use a little wine for thy stomach's sake and thine often infirmities" (1 Tim 5:23).

Elisha the prophet was blessed with a double portion of God's anointing, and yet suffered and died a sick man (2 Kgs 13:14a, "Now Elisha was fallen sick of his sickness whereof he died").

Paul left Trophimus sick in Miletus (2 Tim 4:20, "Erastus abode at Corinth: but Trophimus have I left at Miletum sick"), and Epaphroditus fell ill and nearly died (Phil 2:25–30, especially verse 27, "For indeed he was sick nigh unto death: but God had mercy on him; and not on him only, but on me also, lest I should have sorrow upon sorrow").

Fourth, God has, at times, used affliction for his glory. Again, this principle stands in contrast to the prosperity gospel. God's Word records at least two instances when this transpired. One of these instances is King David's declaration that God's chastening him was an act of covenant faithfulness. David exclaimed, "It is good for me that I have been afflicted; that I might learn thy statutes . . . I know, O LORD, that thy judgments are right, and that thou in faithfulness hast afflicted me" (Ps 119:71, 75). A second instance is in John 9, where Jesus states emphatically that a man's blindness was not the result of inherited or personal sins. Rather, his blindness, and subsequent healing, was for the glory of God. When asked by his disciples whose sin caused the man's blindness, Jesus said, "Neither hath this man sinned, nor his parents: but that the works of God should be made manifest in him" (John 9:3). The healing of the man born blind was a public display of God's glory that would not have been possible had God not allowed the man to be born blind. While Christ's atonement will lead to the healing of our bodies in heaven, Christians should agree with Hanegraff when he says, "We will continue to suffer the effects of the fall (such as sickness and disease) until God establishes a new heaven and a new earth wherein dwells righteousness."<sup>64</sup>

## False Assumption Regarding Wealth

The idea that God desires all his children to be rich is the second false assumption of prosperity theology. If it is God's will that all Christians be rich, how does one explain the impoverished conditions of faithful believers living in third world countries? On five separate occasions it was this writer's

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<sup>64</sup> Hanegraff, *Christianity in Crisis*, 252.

privilege to do missionary work in Ghana, West Africa. The Christians in Ghana were genuine in their faith, exuberant in their worship, and hungry for God's Word. And yet the vast majority of them live in abject poverty.

What is the biblical teaching on wealth? While there is inherently nothing wrong with wealth, people sin when they allow money to become an object of affection and devotion. The Bible reveals at least three dangers of pursuing money.

First, those who focus on material wealth are prone to forget the giver of their wealth. All material blessings are the result of God's mercy and grace. In Deuteronomy 8:10–14, God warned Israel about the spiritual amnesia of emphasizing blessings above him:

When thou hast eaten and art full, then thou shalt bless the LORD thy God for the good land which he hath given thee. Beware that thou forget not the LORD thy God, in not keeping his commandments, and his judgments, and his statutes, which I command thee this day: Lest when thou hast eaten and art full, and hast built goodly houses, and walt therein; And when thy herds and thy flocks multiply, and thy silver and thy gold is multiplied, and all that thou hast is multiplied; Then thine heart be lifted up, and thou forget the LORD thy God, which brought thee forth out of the land of Egypt, from the house of bondage.

Second, the pursuit of money often stems from covetousness, which generates insensitivity toward God and others. This is what happened with the rich man in Luke 12, whose improper attitude toward material prosperity was revealed in his self-absorbed statements:

What shall I do, because I have no room where to bestow all my fruits and my goods? And he said, This will I do: I will pull down my barns, and build greater; and there will I bestow all my fruits and my goods. And I will say to my soul, Soul, thou hast much goods laid up for many years; take thine ease, eat, drink, and be merry. (Luke 12:17–19)

But God says to him, "Thou fool, this night thy soul shall be required of thee: then whose shall those things be, which thou hast provided?" Jesus concludes the parable, "So is he that layeth up treasure for himself, and is not rich toward God" (Luke 12:20–21). The pursuit of money often stems from covetousness.

Third, the love of money leads to snares and temptations. As Paul reminded Timothy,

But they that will be rich fall into temptation and a snare, and into many foolish and hurtful lusts, which drown men in destruction and perdition. For the love of money is the root of all evil: which while some coveted after, thy have erred from the faith, and pierce themselves through with many sorrows. (1 Tim 6:9–10)

As shoots grow out of a root, all sorts of evil things grow out of the love of money. It produces hurts, worries, pangs of conscience, and hurtful temptations which reveal an ungodly, discontent spirit. “But godliness with contentment is great gain. For we brought nothing into this world, and it is certain we can carry nothing out. And having food and raiment let us be therewith content” (1 Tim 6:6–8).

Prosperity theology makes money the top priority in life. Its preachers guarantee vast riches if their hearers will do two things: (1) believe God wants them to be rich and (2) plant seeds of faith (i.e., money) back into prosperity gospel ministries, knowing that people reap in proportion to what they sow. Why is this movement so popular in churches today? Perhaps because it feeds off society’s disillusionment and desires.

Vast numbers of African-Americans are disillusioned with their present economic status. Barely making ends meet, most of them want more. Prosperity theology becomes the welcomed solution to their problems. Packaged neatly with biblical catchphrases and success stories, the prosperity message is presented with excitement and enthusiasm. Like a desert mirage, this false gospel proffers life and health but only delivers to the disillusioned mouthfuls of dry, empty promises. Unfortunately, their hopes are dashed to pieces when at the end of the day their economic status hasn’t changed.

## SUMMATION OF THE CRISIS

### **An Open Attack on the Gospel**

To say the gospel is under attack is an understatement. Some African-American preachers have bought into Satan’s plan of watering down God’s truth with the social gospel, black liberation theology, and the prosperity gospel. While these men claim to be preaching the gospel of Christ, they are, in reality, preaching a different gospel. The messages projected from their pulpits are anything but the “good news.” Instead they are bad news messages that keep people enslaved to their sin with no prospect of escape.

The prosperity movement is especially threatening to African-American churches. By adding a health and wealth feature to their message, prosperity

preachers distort God's truth and leave people in a quandary, not knowing what is meant by "gospel." Pulpits in general and African-American pulpits in particular should maintain the purity and integrity of the gospel of Jesus Christ. As God's Word is correctly analyzed, explained, and applied, the preacher exalts its integrity.

Paul's admonition in Galatians 1:6-9 applies well to the contemporary African-American church:

I marvel that ye are so soon removed from him that called you into the grace of Christ unto another gospel: Which is not another; but there be some that trouble you, and would pervert the gospel of Christ. But though we, or an angel from heaven, preach any other gospel unto you than that which we have preached unto you, let him be accursed. As we said before, so say I now again, if any man preach any other gospel unto you than that ye have received, let him be accursed.

Expressing his concerns over false teachers who were troubling the Galatian Christians, Paul exposes the danger of tampering with the gospel message. This is the same situation that many African-American churches currently find themselves in. How can accuracy and relevance in biblical preaching be restored to African-American pulpits? What can African-American churches do to maintain the purity of the gospel? Paul outlines three ways God's people can protect the integrity of Christ's gospel.

First, African-American churches must acknowledge the existence of a counterfeit gospel. Paul says, "I marvel that ye are so soon removed from him that called you into the grace of Christ unto *another* gospel" (Gal 1:6, emphasis added). The Greek word translated as "another" in this verse is *heteros*, which means "another of a different kind."<sup>65</sup> Paul says the Judaizers were teaching a different gospel altogether. What made this different gospel so appealing was that it resembled, to some extent, the true gospel. It was presented with theological and practical terminology that enticed gullible Christians. The Galatians needed to recognize this different gospel for what it was and reject it. Likewise, the African-American church must come to understand that an entirely different gospel exists today; one that is man-made, self-induced, and false.

Second, African-American churches must affirm the one and only true gospel of Jesus Christ. Paul adds, "But there be some that trouble you, and

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<sup>65</sup> Herman Wolfgang Beyer, *TDNT*, vol. 2, ed. G. Kittel (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm B. Eerdmans, Co, 1964), 702-4.

would pervert the gospel of Christ” (Gal 1:7). Paul refers to the gospel as the “gospel of Christ,” which is the good news about Jesus Christ. It is the good news that Jesus Christ, “died for our sins, according to the scriptures; and that he was buried, and that he rose again the third day according to the scriptures” (1 Cor 15:3–4). The message presented by the agitating Judaizers in Galatia was diametrically opposed to the gospel of Christ. It had perverted, twisted, or distorted the true gospel message.

Christ himself had previously exhorted his disciples about this very truth. Is it possible there is more than one true gospel? Is it possible there are many ways of becoming a child of God? When comforting his disciples just prior to his death and resurrection, Jesus said, “I am the way, the truth and the life: no man cometh unto the Father but by me” (John 14:6). There is only one way to God the Father, and that is through his Son, Jesus Christ. There exists but one true gospel.

Third, African-American churches must declare that God judges those who distort his Word. Paul further states, “But though we, or an angel from heaven, preach any other gospel unto you than that which we have preached unto you, let him be accursed” (Gal 1:8). Paul is not asserting that he or an angel is likely to preach heresy. Rather, he uses a hypothetical possibility to illustrate his point. An “anathema” is pronounced on anyone who preaches a false gospel. That means false preachers will be turned over to God as accursed objects and judged accordingly. Any preacher who manipulates the gospel of Christ by altering or misinterpreting it will be severely disciplined by God. This serves as a warning to all who have been commissioned by God to communicate his Word.

## The Seriousness of Mishandling God’s Word

Jeremiah’s warning to Israel underscores the seriousness of mishandling God’s Word. In Jeremiah 23, the prophet goes to great lengths to warn Israel while also rebuking the pseudo-prophets. Jeremiah’s warnings about Israel’s impending doom were met with mockery from the false prophets who had replaced Jeremiah’s message of warning with their own words of peace.<sup>66</sup> God intervened by giving Jeremiah words of reproof to communicate to the lying prophets. If these lying prophets had only listened to God’s Word, they would have known Israel’s judgment was inescapable. Instead, they altered and exploited God’s Word. God said of these lying prophets,

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<sup>66</sup> See Jer 6:13–14; 8:10–11; 14:14–16; 28:1–4, 10–11; 29:8–9, 20–23, 31–32.

And I have seen folly in the prophets of Samaria; they prophesied in Baal, and caused my people Israel to err. I have seen also in the prophets of Jerusalem an horrible thing: they commit adultery, and walk in lies: they strengthen also the hands of evildoers, that none doth return from his wickedness: they are full of them unto me as Sodom, and the inhabitants thereof as Gomorrah. . . . Thus saith the LORD of hosts, Hearken not unto the words of the prophets that prophesy unto you: they make you vain: they speak a vision of their own hearty, and not out of the mouth of the LORD. They say still unto them that despise me, the LORD hath said, Ye shall have peace. . . . I have not sent these prophets, yet they ran: I have not spoken to them, yet they prophesied.<sup>67</sup>

God exposed the lying prophets for what they really were: charlatans, rip-off artists, deceivers, peddlers of lies. They spoke without being appointed by God. Their message was not God's words but words they had invented themselves. They claimed God had given them their message, but in reality their words had no substance to them or power behind them. As a consequence, God said,

Is not my word like as a fire? saith the LORD: and like a hammer that breaketh the rock in pieces? Therefore, behold, I am against the prophets, saith the LORD, that steal my words every man from his neighbor. Behold, I am against the prophets, saith the LORD, that use their tongues, and say, He saith. Behold, I am against them that prophesy false dreams, saith the LORD, and do tell them, and cause my people to err by their lies, and by their lightness; yet I sent them not, nor commanded them: therefore they shall not profit this people at all, saith the LORD.<sup>68</sup>

The messages expounded by the false prophets resulted in the spiritual downfall of the nation. As a result of listening to lies, the people's spiritual and moral standards were lowered. Further, they misunderstood the nature of God, living under the false assumption that he would never allow them to be overwhelmed by their enemies. Instead of encouraging the people to love, honor, and obey God, the false prophets incited rebellion. African-American churches would do well to heed Jeremiah's warning and reject false preachers of the social gospel, black liberation theology, and the prosperity gospel. If they don't, black congregations, like Israel before them, may experience God's discipline.

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<sup>67</sup> Jeremiah 23:13–14, 16–17a, 21.

<sup>68</sup> Jeremiah 23:29–32.



## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Have you or any member of your family ever experienced racial discrimination? If so, explain.
2. What are your thoughts regarding racism in America? Does it even exist?
3. List and explain four problems created by racial segregation.
4. What is the basic premise of black liberation theology?
5. List and explain some problems associated with “black liberation theology.”
6. Are there any benefits to having segregated churches or worship experiences? If so, what are they?
7. How is Psalm 139 an excellent resource for cultivating a biblical view of race?
8. How does biblically accurate and relevant preaching contribute to proper race relations in the body of Christ?
9. What are some false assumptions of prosperity theology?
10. How can local churches guard against mishandling God’s Word?