God of the Oppressed
Discovering Black Liberation Theology

Study Guide
The purpose of our study of James Cone’s Black Liberation Theology is to invite the members at the Pinnacle of Praise to have a robust, theological world view of varying theological perspectives. Black Liberation Theology argues that God, as revealed in scripture, identifies with the oppressed. Its biblical foundation draws from Exodus 3 with the Hebrew slaves that God delivers from 430 years of Egyptian bondage; and continues in Matthew and Luke with Jesus’ birth into the marginalized Jewish community under the oppressive systems of Roman occupation.

Black Liberation Theology set in motion a global reconsideration of theological Spotlight that continues to this day. Through our intense study of Black Liberation Theology, our participating members are positioned to examine the connection between Jesus, the Christian faith and black communities in the United States.

Upon completion, our participating members will have examined the biblical foundation of Black Liberation Theology and have had an opportunity to grapple with its historical significance; broadening their theological perspective and developing them as strong apologetics, devout defenders, of the Christian faith, to influence the world, as Christian disciples, through the Word.
Table of Contents

 Pastor's Opening Letter
 Prologue
 ◦ Preface
 ◦ Biography of James Cone
 ◦ Contributor Bios
 ◦ Litany by Reverend Earle Fisher, PhD

 Putting First Things First
 Unit 1
 ◦ Lesson One “Now Is The Time”
 ◦ Lesson Two “We Come This Far By Faith”
 ◦ Lesson Three “The Truth Shall Set You Free”
 ◦ Activity
 ◦ Scholarly Spotlight by Christopher Hunt

 Unit 2
 ◦ Lesson Four “Whose Telling the Story?”
 ◦ Lesson Five “Let My People Go”
 ◦ Lesson Six “Let Freedom Ring”
 ◦ Activity
 ◦ Scholarly Spotlight by Matthew Charles

 Unit 3
 ◦ Lesson Seven “Who Is Jesus Christ For Us Today?”
 ◦ Lesson Eight “Break Every Chain”
 ◦ Lesson Nine “How Long , O’ Lord?”
 ◦ Activity
 ◦ Scholarly Spotlight by Reverend Nikia Robert

 Unit 4
 ◦ Lesson Ten “When The Lord Sets You Free”
 ◦ Lesson Eleven “Lest We Forget”
 ◦ Lesson Twelve “Where Do We Go From Here?”
 ◦ Activity
 ◦ Closing Poem by Oluwatomisin Oredein, ThD

 Supplemental Resources
 ◦ Glossary of Theological Terms

 Bibliography
More than a decade ago I encountered Rev. Dr. James Cone’s *God of the Oppressed* (1975) in my first Theology class at Vanderbilt University Divinity School in Nashville, TN. I was a young Black woman from the south side of Chicago (known as Black Chicago) who was raised in the Black Baptist Church and just completed undergraduate studies at Howard University in Washington, DC, the Mecca of Historically Black Colleges & Universities. By virtue of these designations, I was certain of my Blackness and assumed I needed no other affirmation—theological or otherwise. I was wrong. Though I was licensed to preach at a young age and a third-generation preacher, I spent most of my early days at Vanderbilt, a predominately-white theological institution, asking the question, “Why am I here?” When white colleagues denied my Black colleagues and I from their study groups, it became clear to me that I needed theological perspectives that fully engaged my Black body and particular religious experience. Undeniably, the writings of James Cone and the broader field of Black liberation theology arrested my Spirit, nurtured my theological yearnings, helped me to articulate my experience of faith, and motivated me to confront multidimensional oppression at every turn.

I heard of James Cone’s thought-provoking pronouncement “God is Black” and read a few short articles from Cone’s catalog in my college years. Yet and still, *God of the Oppressed* was my first full-length book introduction to James Cone, the father of liberation theology and one of the most significant theologians of the twentieth century. It amazed me in the early 2000s that a book first published in 1975 (before I was even born) resonated with my social and theological upbringing. *God of the Oppressed* whet my scholarly appetite to learn more from James Cone and about Black liberation theology. While the roots of Black theology trace back to the shores of Africa, James Cone, alongside other first-generation Black theologians like Albert B. Cleage, Jr., J. Deotis Roberts, Major Jones and Gayraud Wilmore, gave Black theology new meaning and relevance in the 1960s and 70s for an American society steeped in racism and whitewashed theology that had no concern for the oppressed people of this nation, most notably Black people. Cone sought to do theology from the bottom illuminating the gospel of Jesus Christ as a theology of liberation. As narrated in Scripture, Jesus came with a radical social and theological vision to set the captives free and liberate the oppressed (Luke 4:16-20). For Cone, there is no Christian theology without liberation.

A year after reading *God of the Oppressed* and engulfing my research and coursework in Black and later womanist theologies, I took an immersion trip to study Black religion in a “city called Heaven” also known as Harlem, NY. I was privileged to meet Professor Cone and sit in one of his classes at Union Theological Seminary in New York City—where he taught for a half a century. I expected to encounter a towering figure with a deep voice and instead I met a slim-framed man with sharp wit and high-pitched squeaky intonation. The memory of Professor Cone rigorously debating and challenging his students to convey theological claims from the unique particularities of their experience echoes the salient question “Who is Jesus Christ for us today?” presented in *God of the Oppressed*. 
Since that day, I witnessed more than a dozen public lectures from James Cone that will forever remain etched in my heart. Rev. Dr. Raphael Warnock, Senior Pastor of Ebenezer Baptist Church in Atlanta, GA and former doctoral student of Cone, said it best in Cone’s eulogy “If you went to Seminary, you were likely taught by someone who was taught by Cone.” I had no idea 10 years ago, but I know now that Cone’s legacy has a defining imprint on my scholarly formation and ministry to the Church.

When Cone’s first book *Black Theology and Black Power* (1969) was published, Cone’s fiery critiques of white supremacy as sin and white theology that ignored Black suffering as the Antichrist landed him the title as “the most hated theologian in America.” With each new publication, Cone met piercing critiques from his family, friends, colleagues and students that pushed him to become a first-rate scholar and evolve in his thinking. The emergence of #ConeWasRight following the publication of his most impressive work *The Cross and the Lynching Tree* (2011) give credence to the redemptive power of liberation. The recent passing of James Cone in April 2018 marked the culmination of a life well lived as well as a legacy and commitment to Black people and faith that will endure for ages. Cone fought the good fight, finished the race, and kept the faith (paraphrasing 2 Tim 4: 17-18).

Whenever I teach the works of James Cone at the collegiate and seminary levels, students often inquire, “What does Black theology mean for the Black Church?” Such a critical question was first initiated by his brother, Rev. Dr. Cecil Cone, who lamented Cone’s heavy use of white theologians to articulate Black theology in his early works. *God of the Oppressed* was Cone’s fourth book and a more refined version of his scholarly genius fully integrating the Black Church and the sacredness of the Black experience as norms and sources in his construction. Frankly, there is no Black theology without the Black Church. Similarly, I believe there ought not be a Black Church that does not engage Black theology seriously. I thank God for our Pastor Dr. Dante Wright I who values the study of theology as a core element of the work, witness and worship at Sweet Home Baptist Church. Reading *God of Oppressed* as a congregation demonstrates an intentional commitment to wrestle with the difficult questions of the faith and to form a community that values scholarship as a resource for spiritual and personal growth, which is at the heart of our motto “Discover Jesus, Discover Your Influence.”

In my role as Theologian-in-Residence, I am tasked with writing and developing the study guide for our congregational reading of *God of the Oppressed* that will be fully engaged at Wednesday “Nite’ Live this Spring 2019. This study guide entitled "God of the Oppressed: Discovering Black Liberation Theology" outlines each chapter of the book including a Summary Sketch, Historical Highlights, Theological Touchpoints, and Contemporary Connections. The scholarly spotlights feature a former student of James Cone and emerging scholars in the field of Black theology to share insight on the significance of *God of the Oppressed* for the Black Church in a contemporary era. The study guide offers conversation starters, reflective activities, and critical questions for congregants to ponder. I pray that this guide will be just as meaningful for you to engage as the preparation.

Let’s Discover! Reverend Melanie C. Jones, Theologian-In-Residence
James Hal Cone was born in Fordyce, Arkansas (about sixty miles southwest of Little Rock, Arkansas) in the late summer of 1939. In his infancy, Cone’s family uprooted to a small community called Bearden (14 miles from Fordyce) where he spent his childhood and teenage years along with his parents (Charlie and Lucy) and his brothers (Charles and Cecil). In the opening line of *God of the Oppressed* (1975), Cone writes “In Bearden, a small community with approximately eight hundred whites and four hundred blacks, two important realities shaped my consciousness: the black church experience and the sociopolitical significance of white people” (1).

Cone and his family attended Macedonia African Methodist Episcopal Church (A.M.E.) in Bearden where Cone’s encounter with the divine in the fellowship of this Black southern congregation filled his Spirit and moved his soul. At the age of ten, Cone committed himself to God and joined Macedonia. By the age of sixteen in his first semester of college, Cone accepted his call to ministry. Macedonia was a haven and a little touch of heaven, where Blacks were free to express themselves without white society’s interference and retribution. Macedonia prepared Cone to survive in an unjust world.

Cone grew up in the era of the Jim and Jane Crow South at the height of segregation. These were the days when Blacks were forced to attend “separate and unequal” schools, watch movies from the balcony, enter buildings from the back door, use “colored only” restrooms, and drink from “colored only” fountains. Cone and his brothers had to “wear the masks” in front of their white counterparts and keep their Black ideas, philosophies, and pain concealed to ensure their safety and survival. Back then, “white people did everything in their power to define black reality” (2). Thus, blacks were expected to enjoy being the underserved, marginalized and mistreated folks of Bearden while whiteness encroached upon their social, political, and economic interests. Cone asserted, “they tried to make us believe that God created black people to be white people’s servants” (2).
Cone earned two bachelor’s degrees, a Bachelor of Acts from Philander Smith College (1958) and a Bachelor of Divinity from the now Garrett-Evangelical Theological Seminary (1961). He continued his academic studies and earned his Master of Arts (1963) and Doctor of Philosophy from Northwestern University (1965) in Evanston, Illinois becoming its first Black Ph.D. graduate in systematic theology. Cone answered the vocational call to teach theology and religion at Philander Smith College in Arkansas, Adrian College in Michigan, and ultimately a 50-year longstanding tenure at Union Theological Seminary in New York City in 1969.

Cone’s racial experience in Bearden, religious experience at Macedonia, survival in a hostile political and social era for Black people, theological education, and witness of Black suffering shaped his world and theology. At Philander Smith College, Cone recognized through student dialogues and questions that his Euro-American theological training did not address Black lived experiences. The Detroit uprisings by Black students in 1967 while teaching at Adrian College and the assassination of Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. kindled fiery anger in Cone to explore the relationship between Black liberation and Christian theology.

Written in the summer of 1968 in the church office where his brother pastored in Arkansas, Cone’s first book *Black Theology and Black Power* (1969) addresses the question, “What has the biblical message to do with the black power?” Cone’s second book *A Black Theology of Liberation* (1970), further probes and investigates this question in relation to classical doctrines of Christian theology. As the founder of liberation theology in North America and Black liberation theology, in particular, Cone’s work answers critical theological questions about the Black community, God, Jesus, suffering, and liberation. Cone’s fourth book *God of the Oppressed* (1975) engages the question “What has the gospel to do with the black struggle for liberation?” Cone’s later works examine the Black experience in relation to God’s liberating power while answering his critics.

An award-winning author of more than twelve books and 150 articles, James Cone was awarded the Distinguished Charles A. Briggs Chair of Systematic Theology (1977) and later Bill & Judith Moyers Distinguished Professor of Systematic Theology (2017) at Union. Days before his passing, James Cone was selected as a fellow of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences in April 2018. Upon James Cone’s death on April 28, 2018, public theologian and *Sojourners* magazine founder and editor Jim Wallis wrote, “If racism was and is America’s original sin, and repentance is the only sufficient response to sin, James Cone was the most important theologian of his generation.”

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1 Jim Wallis, "Why James Cone Was the Most Important Theologian of His Time," *Sojourners*, May 02, 2018, accessed December 28, 2018, [https://sojo.net/articles/why-james-cone-was-most-important-theologian-his-time](https://sojo.net/articles/why-james-cone-was-most-important-theologian-his-time).
Sweet Home Baptist Church—Pinnacle of Praise extends a deep heartfelt thanks to every contributor who participated in the development of this study guide. Lindsey Ardrey, a first-year seminarian at Seminary of the Southwest in Austin, Texas, assisted with the background research. Reverend Dr. Annette Jones, mother of Reverend Melanie C. Jones, served as the copy editor who helped to make the words come alive. Emerging scholars Matthew Charles, Christopher Hunt, Dr. Oluwatomisin Oredein, and Reverend Nikia Robert, who represent the best of the future of Black and womanist liberation theologies, offered scholarly reflections on the legacy of James Cone and God of the Oppressed for the Black Church. Your labor is not in vain!

Contributor Bios

**Lindsey Ardrey** is a first-year seminarian at Seminary of the Southwest in Austin, Texas. She is sponsored by the Episcopal Diocese of Louisiana where she served as Children's and Youth Minister at St. George's Episcopal Church in the four years prior to attending seminary. Within the diocese, Lindsey was co-chair for the diocesan Commission on Racial Reconciliation and served on the national committee for Racial Justice and Reconciliation. Lindsey is passionate about books, reading, writing creatively, and living out God's call.

**Rev. Dr. Annette Jones** was ordained in 2006 as the co-pastor of South Suburban M.B. Church in Harvey, IL. Dr. Jones is a Certified Public Accountant and senior manager who has 35+ years of service in her field. Her gift is in leadership and teaching. Dr. Jones earned a bachelor’s degree in Accounting from the University of Illinois, Urbana, IL, a master’s degree in business administration from Keller Graduate School of Management, and a master’s and doctorate in Ministry from Midwest Christian College and Seminary.

**Matthew Charles** is a 2nd year Ph.D. candidate in Systematic Theology at Fordham University. His theological interests include the dialogue between Christology and Popular Culture with specific interests in value of “Pop Culture Christologies” for theological knowledge and interpretation for the Christian tradition. He holds an M.T.S. from Vanderbilt Divinity school as well as an M.Ed. from Grand Canyon University.
Contributor Bios

Christopher Hunt is a PhD candidate in theological and ethical studies at the Garrett-Evangelical Theological Seminary. He holds a bachelor of arts degree from Anderson University and a master of arts degree from the Iliff School of Theology. Hunt’s research is located at the intersection of multiple discourses, including contemporary theology (particularly black, womanist, and queer theologies), religious studies, black studies, literary criticism, and queer theory. These diverse academic disciplines converge in the life and literature of James Baldwin, who serves as both the subject of Hunt's dissertation and the model for his broader theological methodology. His dissertation is entitled: “‘I Know I’ve been Changed:’ James Baldwin’s Queer Praxis of Disidentification as Grounds for a Black Post-Christian ‘Religion of Love’.” Hunt has received doctoral fellowships from the Forum for Theological Exploration and the Elizabeth Iliff-Warren fellowship from the Iliff School of Theology at Denver University.

Oluwatomiisin Oredein is a Louisville Institute postdoctoral fellow and Visiting Assistant Professor of Christian Theology and Ethics at Memphis Theological Seminary in Memphis, TN. Her work engages articulations of African feminist, womanist, postcolonial, and black theologies with particular attention to women’s voices within the African diaspora.

Rev. Nikia Smith Robert earned a Bachelor of Science degree in Information Systems and Finance from Fairfield University. She earned a Master of Divinity degree in Systematic Theology and Social Ethics from Union Theological Seminary. Her master thesis, “Penitence, Plantation and the Penitentiary – A Liberation Theology for Lockdown America,” received a mark of distinction and published in the Harvard Graduate Journal. Rev. Robert is a Doctor of Philosophy student at Claremont School of Theology. Her research focuses on the religious and political intersections of race, gender and class as it pertains to Black women and mass incarceration. Rev. Robert lives in California with her Husband and three children.
A LITANY OF BLACK (LIBERATION) THEOLOGY
IN HONOR OF REV. DR. JAMES HAL CONE
Litany authored by Rev. Earle J. Fisher, PhD

ONE: God of Darkness and Light; the One who calls for the liberation of dark skinned peoples, draw us nearer to You through our worship and witness. Teach us of the bountiful blessings bestowed upon us by a Black Messiah, Black Theology and Black Power.

MANY: You have called us out of Egypt and West Africa. You have sustained us through slavery, the middle passage, Jim and Jane Crow and the current manifestations of evil and oppression. Remind us of the blood of our ancestors and the beauty of our blackness.

ONE: God of the Oppressed, who dwells with those who are crucified by public policy and social indifference, deliver us from the impotency of religion without righteousness, spirituality without sacrifice, and prosperity without prophesy.

MANY: Through our risks of faith, help us to mature in mind and ministerial Movement. Grow us in your grace towards a more radical vision of black love and liberation.

ONE: God of Martin and Malcolm; God of Miriam and Martha; convict us when we’ve become well-adjusted to injustice. Help us to see the mob of our own market-driven mentalities. Redeem us from the lynching trees of apathy, greed, imperialism, colonialism, and white evangelicalism.

MANY: And when we feel feeble and pale, remind us of the strength found in black spirituals. Let not our harvest past. Let not our Mary’s weep. When we can’t hear nobody pray, sing “Freedom” over us.

ONE: When our souls look back, may we find ourselves having fought the good fight for our people – true to our God; true to our native land.

ALL: Make our Black Faith more real. Make our Black Churches more relevant. Make our Black preachers more prophetic. And make our Black scholars forever sensitive to the plight, pain, promise, and power of black people. Amen and Ashe.
**COURSE OBJECTIVE**

The aim of this study is to increase understanding of how the Black experience has shaped our concepts of God and language about our Christian faith. Students should bring their lived experiences with an open mind to explore how these experiences inform their thinking, way of living, survival, and views about God. We will explore theological terms and address such questions as: What is Theology? What is Black Liberation Theology? Who is Jesus Christ for us today? What is the meaning of Liberation? Where do we go from here?

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**COURSE DESCRIPTION**

This study explores Black Liberation Theology, Truth and the Black experience in relation to God’s liberating power for oppressed people. We will explore Scripture exegetically, the theology of James Cone, and sacred expressions of Black experience of yesterday and today.

**COURSE METHODOLOGY**

The study will be taught in a Discussion/Lecture format engaging chapters in *God of the Oppressed* weekly. There are four units, each comprised of three chapters from Cone’s book. The lesson titles will be the focus of the discussion and reflect sections from Cone’s book to examine and answer related theological questions concerning liberation.

Each section includes a Pinnacle of Praise (POP) methodology:

**Pre-Class Exploration** – Take-off by reviewing the following sections to prepare your hearts and minds for an open and vigorous discussion.

- Scripture
- Synopsis
- Reading
- Theological Terms
- Devotion/Prayer

**On-the-Journey** – Buckle up as we explore each section to gain a deeper understanding and rise to the pinnacle of the study.

- Summary Sketch
- Historical Highlights
- Theological Touchpoints
- Contemporary Connections

**Putting it all together** – Prepare for a sweet landing as we establish a firm footing that brings abstract theological ideas to the ground for ongoing dialogue and engagement.

- Critical Questions
- Activities
- Scholarly Spotlights
- Supplemental Resources

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**COURSE MATERIALS**

- The Holy Bible
- “God of the Oppressed: Discovering Black Liberation Theology” Study Guide

**SUPPLEMENTAL RESOURCES**

- Glossary of Theological Terms
Unit 1

God of the Oppressed: Discovering Black Liberation Theology
## Lesson One

**Title**

Now Is The Time

**Subject**

Pre-Class Exploration

**Scripture**

*Mark 1:14-15, Ecclesiastes 3:1-8*

**Synopsis**

Welcome to the Opening week of our *God of the Oppressed* study. The goal of this week’s lesson is to remember the civil unrest and height of Black resistance half a century ago that motivated theologian James Cone’s formation and development of Black liberation theology. Use this week to familiarize yourself with the preface of the book and prologue of the study guide.

**Reading**

Study Guide Prologue

*God of the Oppressed “Preface,” pgs. ix-xxi.*

**Theological Terms**

- Black Theology
- Liberation Theology/ies
- Oppression
- Systematic Theology
- Theology
- Whiteness

**Devotion/Prayer**

“O God, we thank you for the lives of great saints and prophets in the past, who have revealed to us that we can stand up amid the problems and difficulties and trials of life and not give in. We thank you for our foreparents, who’ve given us something in the midst of the darkness of exploitation and oppression to keep going. Grant that we will go on with the proper faith and the proper determination of will, so that we will be able to make a creative contribution to this world. *In the name and spirit of Jesus we pray. Amen*” ~ Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.
Scripture

Mark 1:14-15 (NRSV)

14 Now after John was arrested, Jesus came to Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God, 15 and saying, “The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news.”

Summary Sketch

It is timely that we begin our reading of James Cone’s God of the Oppressed near the birthday of Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. and as we anticipate Black History Month, which commemorates the heritage of a resilient people with a rich legacy of resistance and innovation. When asked who motivated his writings and the development of Black liberation theology, Cone identifies at the end of his life three seminal figures: Civil Rights Leader Martin Luther King, Jr., Black Muslim nationalist Malcolm X, and Black novelist James Baldwin. King taught Cone what it meant to be a Christian through a love ethic of nonviolence. Malcolm taught Cone what it meant to Black through his fiery nationalist rhetoric that affirmed the dignity and pride that was denied to Black people in a hostile world. James Baldwin wrote with eloquence about both Blackness and love while confronting white supremacy as America’s sin. In his memoir Said I Wasn’t Gonna Tell Nobody, Cone writes

Nobody could preach love like Martin; nobody could talk black like Malcolm; and nobody could write with eloquence about love and blackness like Baldwin. When I want to know what it means to speak with power, I listen to recordings of Martin or Malcolm….But when I want to know what it means to write with power, I turn to James Baldwin.1

Historical Highlights

The year of 1963 marked a monumental moment for America when the Civil Rights Movement launched non-violent protest against segregation in Birmingham, Alabama led by the young Black preacher and scholar, Martin Luther King, Jr. From the prison cell in Birmingham where King was arrested for his resistance efforts, King penned the “Letter from Birmingham Jail” to confront Alabama clergymen who claimed the efforts of the protestors were “unwise” and “untimely.” Later that year, in his famous “I Have A Dream” speech at the 1963 March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom, King spoke of
the “fierce of urgency of now” and why Black Americans could no longer wait for justice and equality with the refrain “Now Is The Time.” King proclaimed,

Now is the time to make real the promises of democracy. Now is the time to rise from the dark and desolate valley of segregation to the sunlit path of racial justice. Now is the time to lift our nation from the quicksands of racial injustice to the solid rock of brotherhood. Now is the time to make justice a reality for all God’s children.²

King’s prophetic charge influenced the book Why We Can’t Wait (1964) that recounted the pivotal year while reflecting on the legal maxim “justice delayed is justice denied.” Similarly, James Baldwin, one of the most prolific writers of the 20th, spoke about what it means to be Black in America. Baldwin wrote in Nobody Knows My Name (1961), “There is never a time in the future in which we will work out our salvation. The challenge is in the moment, the time is always now.”³

Theological Touchpoints

Theology in its simplest definition is talk about God. Since the Middle Passage, Africans in America, both enslaved and free, have struggled with how to talk about God in a strange America that exists as a place of both terror and triumph. “How can we sing the Lord’s Song in a strange land?” (Psalm 137:4) Through a gloomy past of enslavement, segregation and mass incarceration in America, Black people nurtured by faith continue to find resounding courage to “lift every voice and sing.” Though Cone is identified as the leading voice in Black theology, Cone asserts “Black theology is not something I invented; rather it derives from nearly four hundred years of black struggle for dignity and justice.”⁴ Black liberation theology places at its center the liberating presence of Jesus Christ. It is Jesus who proclaims, “The time has come; The kingdom of God has come near; repent and believe in the good news” (Mark 1:15) announcing that the coming of God’s kingdom will spawn both repentance and radical faith. Cone’s development of Black liberation theology is/was a response to “white teaching about the meek, long suffering Jesus” (xvi). Cone believed white theology and white theologians could in no way articulate who Jesus is for Black people nor encourage Black people to settle for “passivity as a Christian response to white supremacy” (xvi). Now is always the Time for Black people to engage in talk about God from the particular experiences of Black triumph and suffering in the quest for liberation!
Contemporary Connections

On April 4, 1968, a 39-year-old dreamer was killed at the hand of a lethal concoction: whiteness and gun violence. At the time of his death, King was marked by the Federal Bureau of Investigation as the “most dangerous man in America” and likely regarded as the “most hated man in America” especially by white Americans. For the last 30 years because of the persistence of the late Coretta Scott King, many Americans remember and commemorate the life, ministry, and public witness of King. Today, Martin Luther King, Jr. is the only non-president and person of color whose memorial “The Stone of Hope” stands on the National Mall steps away from where he delivered his famous speech. King’s story of being hated for speaking the truth about justice in America resonates with Cone also being identified as the “most hated theologian in America” facing harsh critiques in his early years for calling out any theology that ignores the Black struggle for liberation in America. Exactly 50 years following King’s assassination, James Cone died in his jubilee year on April 28, 2018 with a full body of work and a 50-year-old enduring legacy of Black liberation theology. Both narratives bear witness to the revelation of Scripture that “The last shall be first” (Matthew 20:16) and the “lowly will be lifted up” (Matthew 23:12).

Critical Questions

1. James Cone believed “I am black first—and everything else comes after that,” which supported his reading of Scripture through the lens of Black struggle (xi). Moreover, “Because I am a Christian, my theological reflections start with Jesus” (xiii). At the core of Black theology lies an important question to consider:

What does it mean to be Black and Christian?

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2. James Cone identified three important figures who shaped his writing and development of Black Liberation Theology: Martin Luther King, Jr., Malcolm X, and James Baldwin.
Can you identify the top three (historical or everyday folk) who have shaped your theological worldview and influenced your thinking about God and humanity? What did you learn from these influencers?

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3. While only a small number of Black Churches participated, The Civil Rights Movement was largely a Black Church movement led by Black Christian leaders and clergy. More than 50 years after the assassination of Martin Luther King, Jr. in the age of mass incarceration, ongoing police brutality, and the killing of Black people, the struggle for Black liberation continues.

Where is the Black Church today in the continuing movement toward Black liberation? What is the Christian response to Black liberation in a contemporary era?

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Lesson Two

We’ve Come This Far By Faith

Pre-Class Exploration

Scripture

Ephesians 4:11-13

Synopsis

Lesson Two traces the experiences of Cone’s early life in the Black South and Black Church upbringing that shaped his theological concern for the liberation of the oppressed. Cone asserts, “I do think it is impossible to do Christian theology with integrity in America without asking the question, What has the gospel to do with the black struggle for liberation?” (6). The aim of this lesson is to engage the call of Black theology and the five-fold tasks of Black theologians.

Reading

God of the Oppressed Chapter One “Introduction,” pgs. 1-14

Theological Terms

Black Church
Discourse
Ethos
Exegesis/Exegete
Homousius/Homoousia
Survival

Devotion/Prayer

“Once more and again, O Lawd, we come to thee, with bowed heads and humble hearts, thankin’ thee for watchin’ over us last night as we slept and slumbered, and gave us the strength to get up and come to church this mornin’. I thank thee, Lawd, because you have been with me from the earliest rockin’ of my cradle up to this present moment. You know my heart, and you know the range of our deceitful minds. And if you find anything that shouldn’t be, I ask you to pluck it out and cast it into the sea of forgetfulness where it will never rise to harm us in this world” (3-4). ~ Brother Elbert Thrower
Ephesians 4:11-13 (NRSV)

11 The gifts he gave were that some would be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, some pastors and teachers, 12 to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ, 13 until all of us come to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to maturity, to the measure of the full stature of Christ.

Summary Sketch

James Cone sets the scene in his “Introduction” by beginning with his birth and childhood communities in Fordyce and Bearden, Arkansas, his upbringing in a segregated environment where there was a 2:1 ratio of whites to black, and his Black Church experience at Macedonia African Methodist Episcopal Church (A.M.E.). Cone shares that there were two social realities that shaped his consciousness: “the black Church experience and the sociopolitical significance of white people” (1). For Cone, the Black Church experience taught him how to deal with the “contradictions of life and provided a way to create meaning” in a society determined by whiteness (2). Given this, Cone argued that his theology, as a perspective of Black theology, differs from theologies of white theologians, who have not lived his experience as a youth and adolescent growing up in Bearden and at Macedonia A.M.E. or encountered the “Black Spirit of God” that visited his community during the gatherings of black folks (3). Cone could not separate his Black lived experience from his theological perspective. Not all theologians accepted Cone’s position at the time of his writing. In Cone’s response to white theologians who believed that Scripture and Christian theology should not be explored with the experience of Black people at the center, Cone redefines the meaning of Christian Theology as more than just language about God, but “language about the liberating character of God’s presence in Jesus Christ as he calls his people into being for freedom in the world” (7-8). Cone suggests that the theologian must clarify “what the Church believes and does in relation to its participation in God’s liberating work in the world” (8). Cone ends this chapter with the central thesis of the book that “one’s social and historical context decides not only the questions we address to God but also the mode or form of the answers given to the questions” (14).
Historical Highlights

More than 400 years ago, many enslaved Africans were evicted from their lands, separated from their communities, and trafficked to a New World. Some historians mark 1619 as a landmark year with the arrival of a group of enslaved Africans to Jamestown, Virginia. While human civilizations have practiced slavery in various forms throughout the ages, scholars mark American slavery as one of the most brutal, oppressive manifestations in terms of labor, property, (re)production, and race. Through it all, the story of Black people and faith did not begin in chains. While toiling in the fields, some enslaved Africans sang about their pain and suffering as a call to God for liberation or a recognition of divine freedom. Songs like “Oh, Mary Don’t You Weep,” “Oh Freedom,” and “Didn’t My Lord Deliver Daniel” point to an eschatological belief in a God who will deliver. Cone asks, “How was it possible for black people to keep their humanity together in the midst of servitude, affirming the God of Jesus is at work in the world, liberating them from bondage?” (10). The spirituals, prayers, sermons, stories from the Black experience give a glimpse of a resilient people with resounding faith who knew that the God of the slaveholder was not the God of the oppressed.

Theological Touchpoints

The starting point of theology from a liberation framework begins with the particularities of human experiences that cultivate human language about God. Cone identifies the task of Christian theology is to illuminate the liberating character of God in Jesus Christ through his ministry and witness of freedom in the world. Christian theologians must act in the roles of exegetes, prophets, teachers, preachers, and philosophers to address human experience and God’s liberating power. The writer of Ephesians identifies the five-fold ministry of the church for equipping the saints and building up of the body of Christ. Similarly, Cone’s five-fold task of Black theologians models this Scriptural teaching. First, theologians are exegetes who critically interpret Scripture and the meaning of Black existence. “The task of the theologian is to probe the depths of Scripture exegetically for the purpose of relating the message to human existence” (8). Second, theologians are prophets who speak the truth in love as they help to announce the reign of God. “As prophets they must make clear that the gospel of God stands in judgement upon the existing order of injustice” (8). Third, theologians are teachers who help to write the vision and make the gospel plain for all believers. “As teachers, theologians are instructors in the faith, clarifying its meaning and significance for human
Fourth, theologians are preachers who make the Word flesh through embodied speech. “As preachers, theologians are proclaimers of the Word, the truth of Jesus Christ as the Liberator of the poor and the wretched of the Land” (8). Fifth, theologians are philosophers who continue to discern the right questions to expand understanding rather than confine it. “As philosophers, theologians are keen observers of the alternative interpretations of the meaning of life” (8). As with the five-fold ministry identified in Ephesians, all five aspects of the theologian’s tasks that Cone presents matter for the edification of the body of believers.

**Contemporary Connections**

Sweet Home members of old exercised remarkable faith to organize the second Black Baptist Church at the turn of the twentieth century during the Reconstruction era. Today, Sweet Home Baptist Church, one of the fastest growing churches in Williamson county, celebrates 114 years. Our heritage is rich. Our legacy is strong. The history of Sweet Home resonates with the song “We’ve Come this Far By Faith,” which illuminates faith as a journey that requires that we lean and depend on someone greater than ourselves. God is our source and sustainer who does not fail. Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. once said, “Take the first step of faith. You don’t have to see the whole staircase. Take the first step.” Faith and fear have no place together. Faith helps us to take risks when we remember that we serve a God who is able to deliver us. Faith has brought us from a mighty long way and faith will lead us on.

**Critical Questions**

1. James Cone believed that “two important realities shaped his consciousness: the black Church experience and the sociopolitical significance of white people” (1).

   What two most important realities have shaped your life and being? How?

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   ________________________________________________________________

2. James Cone learned about God at the Macedonia A.M.E Church. He shares that “the Black Church taught him how to deal with the contradictions of life” and the “art of survival” (2).
What Black Church experiences do you recall that helped shape your view about God? What did you learn in Church that helped you to survive the struggles of life?

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What experiences of faith do you keep and draw upon when times get heavy and your way gets burdened with the struggles of life?

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3. Many songs, hymns, and spirituals, old and new, point to our struggle for liberation. Songs like “We’ve Come this Far By Faith” offer encouragement to trust God with the journey ahead. What are your song(s) of liberation? What moves you, gives you hope and renews your faith in freedom?

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Lesson Three

**Title**
The Truth Shall Set You Free

**Subject**
Pre-Class Exploration

**Scripture**
John 8:31-38, 18:28-38

**Synopsis**
If theology is God talk, then people of faith ought to be truth-telling. Cone queries, "What does it mean to speak the truth from a black theological perspective, that is, what are the sources and the content of theology?" (16). Lesson three identifies the sources of Black theology found in Scripture, the sacred dimensions of the Black experience, and the Truth of “Who is Jesus Christ?”

**Reading**
God of the Oppressed Chapter Two “Speaking the Truth,” pgs. 15-35

**Theological Terms**
- Apocalyptic
- Incarnation
- Theological Praxis
- Truth
- Servitude

**Devotion/Prayer**
“Lord, Lord, open unto me. Open unto me, light for my darkness. Open unto me, courage for my fear. Open unto me, hope for my despair. Open unto me, peace for my turmoil. Open unto me, joy for my sorrow. Open unto me, strength for my weakness. Open unto me, wisdom for my confusion. Open unto me, forgiveness for my sins. Open unto me, tenderness for my toughness. Open unto me, love for my hates. Open unto me, Thy Self for myself. Lord, Lord, open unto me!” ~ Howard Thurman
Scripture

John 8:31-32 (NRSV)

31 Then Jesus said to the Jews who had believed in him, “If you continue in my word, you are truly my disciples; 32 and you will know the truth, and the truth will make you free.”

Summary Sketch

Cone explores the Truth of Black Theology that cannot be perceived outside of human existence. The truth must be investigated in the socioreligious and sociopolitical context of the Black experience and “God’s dealings with black people in the struggle of freedom” (15). Cone defines the affirmation of truth that must be realized not just in our present history, but in our present struggle as Black people. For “we do not struggle in despair but in hope, not from doubt but from faith, not out of hatred but out of love for ourselves and for humanity” (16) Cone explores “What does it mean to speak the truth from a black theological perspective, that is, what are the sources and the content of theology?” (16). Cone offers two key sources Black theologians must use to speak the truth: The Black experience and Scripture. First, “there can be no Black Theology which does not take the black experience as a source for its starting point” (16). Truth is defined in the movement of the language of songs, prayers, the narratives of slaves and ex-slaves and the personal triumphs, defeats and struggles of Blacks. “Truth is divine action” that “enables us to dance and live to the rhythm of freedom in our lives as we struggle to be who we are” (28). Second, Cone asserts, “the black experience requires that Scripture be a source of Black Theology. For it was scripture that enabled slaves to affirm a view of God that differed radically from that of the slave masters” (29). The God of the slaveholder is not the God of the enslaved. “There is no truth in Jesus Christ independent of the oppressed of the land – their history and culture” (31). Jesus Christ is the Truth! Therefore, Cone boldly declares, “any interpretation of the gospel in any historical period that fails to see Jesus as liberator of the oppressed is heretical” (35).

Historical Highlights

William Edward Burghardt DuBois, a prolific scholar, sociologist, and the first African American to earn a Ph.D. from Harvard University, in his classic text Souls of Black Folk (1903), points to the troubling experiences of Black people in this nation. DuBois’ opening line articulates it plainly, “Between me and the other world there is ever an
unasked question: unasked by some through feelings of delicacy; by others through the difficulty of rightly framing it. All, nevertheless, flutter round it. How does it feel to be a problem?² DuBois addresses something beyond facing difficult problems, but rather living in a nation where the being of Black people is cast as a problem. For DuBois, Black people navigate a “double consciousness” or an inner feeling of being caught between two warring identities: African and American. Dubois speaks the truth of the sociohistorical conditions facing America because of its racism. Dubois suggests “The problem of the twentieth century is the problem of the color line—the relation of the darker to the lighter races of men in Asia and Africa, in America and the islands of the sea.”³ Almost 70 years later, Cone calls Black theologians to “investigate anew ‘the problem of the color line’” by doing theology while making connections with the “social existence of African peoples” (15). Theology cannot be done outside of human experience but must be engaged within the social realities that shape the experiences of Black people.

**Theological Touchpoints**

The sources of Black theology emerge from the sacred dimensions of the Black experience: sermon, prayer, shout, song, stories, humor, art, etc. The sermon is one of the pinnacle moments of the Black Church worship experience that makes the text come alive and the gospel true for believers. Cone writes, “The sermon makes clear that the Word and its proclamation in the black Church is more than the conceptualization of theological doctrine” (17). Prayers of the black believers open the heart of God as “the soul is laid bare before the Lord” (20). Music pierces the soul to "sing the truth as it is lived by the people" (20). Cone continues, “Truth is found in shout, hum, and moan as these expressions move people closer to the source of their being. The moan, the shout, and the rhythmic bodily responses to prayer, song, and sermon are artistic projections of the pain and joy experienced in the struggle of freedom.” Yet and still, truth is beyond Black church worship and is present in the everydayness of Black people. In humor, there is healing as Black people come to terms with their existence. “Humor is an important element in Black survival, and it is often related to the theme of freedom” (23). Folk tales and stories like High John the Conqueror “deal with the absurdity of existence” and provide new ways of living “without using Jesus Christ as their central focal point” (24). The blues, in particular, makes space to “sing about the tragic side of life and use the artistic expression of tragedy as the means for transcending it” (25). Art speaks the truth about life for Black people “creating values
based on their own experience and affirming a willingness to invent new definitions and life-styles commensurate with their struggle to be free” (26). While these elements of the Black experience represent the sources of Black theology, the subject of Black theology is Jesus Christ. Jesus Christ is the ultimate bearer of truth for Black Christians. Being Christian means to do what Jesus did. For Cone, the gospel of Jesus Christ is a message of liberation to the oppressed. Therefore, any theology that fails to address liberation of the oppressed cannot be Christian.

Contemporary Connections

*The Great Debaters* (2007) tells the story of a college professor, Melvin B. Tolson (Denzel Washington) who led the debate team at Wiley College, a historically Black college in Marshall, Texas, during the 1930s. The movie re-constructs the racial experiences of Blacks living in the Jim Crow South during Reconstruction and the haunting terror of lynching. Tolson seeks to cultivate the sharpest minds, which ultimately helps to lead the team to debate an all-white University team and win. At every practice session, Tolson rallied debaters to craft their best arguments with the call and response mantra.

Leader: Who is the judge?
Team: The judge is God.
Leader: And why is he God?
Team: Because, he decides who wins or loses, not my opponent.
Leader: And who is your opponent?
Team.: He doesn't exist.
Leader: And why doesn't he exist?
Team.: Because, he is a dissenting voice to the truth I speak.

This dramatic exchange reminds us of why speaking the truth enacts freedom and liberation. When we speak the truth about injustice, racism, sexism, classism, etc. throughout the land we become less concerned about who or what opposes us. As Cone suggests, “…There is no truth in Jesus Christ independent of the oppressed in the land—their history and culture. And in America, the oppressed are the people of color—black, yellow, red, and brown. Indeed, it can be said that to know Jesus is to know him as revealed in the struggle of the oppressed for freedom. Their struggle is Jesus’ struggle, and he is thus revealed in the particularity of their cultural history—their hopes and dreams of freedom” (32). Speak the truth because the truth will set you free!
Critical Questions

1. James Cone stated that “Truth cannot be separated from the people’s struggle and the hopes and dreams that arise from that struggle (16). What does it mean to speak your truth? How do you understand the struggles of oppressed people today and the need for liberation? What are your hopes and dreams that arise from such struggles?

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2. In his critique of the white Christ, James Cone asks, “Can the Church of Jesus Christ be politically, socially, and economically identified with the structures of oppression and also be a servant of Christ?” (21). “Can the Church of Jesus Christ fail to make the liberation of the poor the center of its message and word, and still remain faithful to its Lord?” (21).

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3. “What has the gospel of Jesus, as witnessed in Scripture, to do with the humiliated and the abused?” (30). What is the relationship of the Black experience to the Bible?

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Match the correct definition with its meaning. Place the appropriate letter in front of each term.

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<td>1.</td>
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<td>A. State of Bondage</td>
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<td>2.</td>
<td>____ Oppression</td>
<td>B. Characteristic Spirit of a Community</td>
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<td>3.</td>
<td>____ Servitude</td>
<td>C. Study of God, Humanity and Creation</td>
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<td>4.</td>
<td>____ Systematic Theology</td>
<td>D. Study of Black Faith, Suffering, and Triumph</td>
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<td>____ Apocalyptic</td>
<td>E. Critical Interpretation of a Text</td>
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<td>F. How the Church Lives in the World</td>
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<td>____ Theological Praxis</td>
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<td>9.</td>
<td>____ Theology</td>
<td>I. Transcendent Reality</td>
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<td>10.</td>
<td>____ Discourse</td>
<td>J. Unjust Treatment</td>
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<td>K. God Who Became Human</td>
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<td>12.</td>
<td>____ Exegesis</td>
<td>L. Verbal Exchange of Ideas</td>
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<td>____ Incarnation</td>
<td>M. Remaining Alive Under Oppression</td>
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**Answers:**

1. D, I, J, L, M, K, N, O
Unbeknownst to many, one of the most important figures in the formation of James Cone’s black theological project was none other than author, playwright, and activist James Baldwin. On more than one occasion, Cone claimed that alongside Martin Luther King Jr. and Malcolm X, James Baldwin was part of the “trinity” of figures who most directly influenced his thought, and that it was Baldwin specifically who taught Cone “how to write.”\(^1\) However, even beyond King and X, Cone went so far as to claim that he was “most like Baldwin”\(^2\) and came to “embrace” him as his “theological mentor.”\(^3\) In light of Cone’s centering of Baldwin as one of the most important figures in the creation of black theology, anyone engaging Cone’s *God of the Oppressed* must consider Baldwin an essential conversation partner. In briefly exploring Baldwin’s scathing critique of the “whiteness” of God, one can more readily recognize the continued power and contemporary relevance of James Cone’s theological response to that white God—the black God and black Christ found in *God of the Oppressed*.

Baldwin’s influence in the formation of black theology might seem curious if not scandalous, for Baldwin was a skeptic and agnostic who famously rejected Christianity and its God, both in his personal life and through his literary creations. However, Cone states that it was in fact Baldwin’s “relentless and devastating criticism of the Christian church” that drew him to Baldwin’s work, stating that “[Baldwin] spoke to me like no other writer.”\(^4\) Part of that relentless critique is found in Baldwin’s work *The Fire Next Time*. In this text, Baldwin recounts his conversion to the Christian faith, a moment of intense pain and “anguish” as his teenage body was brought under the power of God on the floor of his Pentecostal church.\(^5\) However, even in the midst of his conversion experience, Baldwin could not shake the suspicion that the God of the Christian church was in fact “white.” Baldwin’s understanding of the “whiteness” of God was twofold. First, the historic and continued reality of black suffering caused Baldwin to ask: “If His love was so great, and if He loved all His children, why were we, the blacks, cast down so far?”\(^6\) In other words, if God does not work to alleviate the suffering of black people, perhaps God is in fact white. Secondly, Baldwin came to understand God as white through an examination of the “historical role of Christianity in the realm of power.” For Baldwin, Christianity no longer reflects the loving vision of the “sun-baked Hebrew” from which it received its name, but through the missionary enterprise, which was in fact a smokescreen for European colonialism and imperialism, “Christianity has operated with an unmitigated arrogance and cruelty,” with God serving as the justification for that cruelty.\(^7\) In other words, Europeans (re)created God as they conquered new lands. Baldwin states: “God, going north, and rising on the wings of power, had become white.”\(^8\) This white God, the God whom Baldwin rejected, is the God of transatlantic slavery, the God of violent capitalism, the God of racism, and the God of cis-heteropatriarchy. In essence, this is a God wed to power.

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2 Ibid.
4 Cone, *Said I Wasn’t Gonna Tell Nobody*, 146.
6 Baldwin, *The Fire Next Time*, in *The Price of the Ticket*, 344
7 Ibid., 351.
8 Ibid., 352.
In light of Baldwin’s critique, one can see with clear focus the brilliance of James Cone’s analysis which brings to the fore the liberating God of black faith. Cone kicks the legs out from under the white God of European imperialism, claiming that the God of Christianity is not a God who is wed to power, but a God who is “partial toward the weak” (ix). However, the language of partiality doesn’t capture the depths of what Cone is signifying, for God is not only partial to the weak, but is also radically in solidarity with those who are suffering. God and God’s Christ are indeed a black. Cone states:

Because God became human in Jesus Christ, God disclosed the divine will to be with humanity in our wretchedness. And because we blacks accept God’s presence in Jesus as the rue definition of our humanity, blackness and divinity are dialectically bound together as one reality. This is the theological meaning of the paradoxical assertion about the primacy of the black experience and Jesus Christ as witnessed in Scripture (33).

Therefore, God’s nature is not one of coercion and violent political power. But the black Christ, reflective of the blackness of God, is in radical solidarity with the “wretched,” those who are despised and menaced in the world. God is a God of the oppressed.

The prophetic voices of Cone and Baldwin, particularly their “God-talk,” are truly relevant in our contemporary political moment. In the age of emboldened white supremacy, right-wing political resurgence in Washington, environmental degradation, death-dealing immigration policies, and violence on persons of color and queer persons, we continue to see the machinations of the white God on full display. Cone’s theological claims resound with fury, as the proverbial gauntlet has been thrown in naming God as completely and utterly on the side of the downtrodden and dispossessed. However, Baldwin provides a word of warning. Let us not forget that the white God Baldwin rejected was not found in a white evangelical church, but in a black church! Thus, people of faith cannot rest, and must continually assess and ask, who is the God we serve? Is our God the white God of power and prosperity (no stranger to black worship spaces), or is our God one of liberation and justice? May we continue to ponder the voice of Jesus: “Who do you say that I am?”
Unit 2

God of the Oppressed: Discovering Black Liberation Theology
Lesson Four

**Title**

Whose Telling The Story?

**Pre-Class Exploration**

**Scripture**

Matthew 16: 13-20; Luke 24:32

**Synopsis**

The lesson for this week discusses storytelling wherein white theology and Black theology narrate different accounts and reveal opposing social realities. Cone introduces the relationship between social context and theology. Let’s explore together Cone’s argument that “what people think about God cannot be divorced from their place and time in definite history and culture” (37).

**God of the Oppressed**

Chapter Three “The Social Context of Theology,” pgs. 36-56

**Theological Terms**

Anthropology
Axiological
Dialectic
Idealism
Social A Priori
Tyranny

**Devotion/Prayer**

“O! save us, we pray thee, thou God of Heaven and of earth, from the devouring hands of white Christians!!! Oh! Thou Alpha and Omega! The Beginning and the end. Enthron’d thou art, in Heaven above surrounded by Angels there. From whence thou seest the miseries to which we are subject. The whites have murder’d us, O God! And kept us ignorant of thee. Not satisfied with this, my Lord! They throw us in the seas: but pleas’d we pray, for Jesus’ sake to save us from their grasp. We believe that, for thy glory’s sake Thou wilt deliver us; but that thou may’st effect these things. Thy glory must be sought.” ~ David Walker
**Scripture**

Matthew 16:13 (NRSV)

13 Now when Jesus came into the district of Caesarea Philippi, he asked his disciples, “Who do people say that the Son of Man is?”

Luke 24:32 (NRSV)

32 They said to each other, “Were not our hearts burning within us while he was talking to us on the road, while he was opening the scriptures to us?”

**Summary Sketch**

Cone centers his conversation on the social context of theology and the social conditioning that shapes one’s ideas and speech about God. Cone links theology with one’s social existence. Cone states that “Theology is not universal language; it is interested language and thus is always a reflection of the goals and aspirations of a particular people in a definite social setting...What people think about God cannot be divorced from their place and time in a definite history and culture” (36-37). Cone discusses the work of philosophers Ludwig Feuerbach and Karl Marx pertaining to human knowledge and one’s social structure. “By limiting humanity to its nature, Feuerbach asserted the social and psychological limitations of all human knowledge” and “theology is anthropology” (37). Such an argument suggests there is no difference between white and Black theology because all theology comes from human thoughts and ideas. Marx agreed with Feuerbach’s philosophy and further asserted that “thought has no independence from social existence” and “consciousness is a social product” (39-40). Cone departs from the philosophers and asserts that Black theology and white theology do differ because they emerge from different social conditions, interests and “mental grid” (41). Cone contends that white theology was socially limited in three main forms: 1) ignoring slavery as a theological issue, 2) justifying slavery, and 3) only a few speaking out against slavery (43). Thus, Cone suggests that white theologians have missed the theological understanding of black people’s suffering because of their limitations and presumably their identity with the dominant power structure. Because white theologians belong to the inheritors of dominance and are not the sons and daughters of the enslaved and lynched people of color, Cone argues their social matrix and mental grid limit them from engaging the problem of the color line. Cone
concludes that the story of Black suffering must be told and when the truth is told the oppressed are transformed.

**Historical Highlights**

In West African traditions, the storyteller plays a critical role as the keeper of sacred traditions and culture but also the translator with the task of passing down the tradition. Storytellers also known as Griots, Jali, or Jeli preserve the oral histories, genealogies, and stories of the community. In fact, some Griots play instruments like the kora, a harp with 21 strings, to accompany their storytelling. Other Griots may hold high-ranking positions in the community as advisors, sages, elders, or ambassadors. Griots and storytellers are well-respected and praised within the tradition. Jesus represents a gifted storyteller and faith leader who uses parables to illuminate spiritual meaning. On the walk to Emmaus, Jesus appears to two who are gathered and begins breaking down the Scriptures and compelling their hearts. Both testified after Jesus had left that their hearts burned within from Jesus’ fulfillment of the Scriptures. When Cone writes, “In black churches, the one who preaches the Word is primarily a storyteller. And thus, when the black church community invites a minister as pastor, their chief question is: ‘Can the Reverend tell the story?’” (52). The congregation desires a preacher who knows God’s story and possesses the gifts to tell the story to diverse generations. A skillful preacher weaves God’s story with the experience of the community. Liberation found in accounts of Scripture that connects historical and contemporary realities of human experience is the essence of Black theology.

**Theological Touchpoints**

The story of the victor is different from the story of the victim. Cone discerns the core aspects that mark the difference between white American theology and Black liberation theology in America. First, white theologians take up the relationship of faith and history with no concern about what DuBois called, “the problem of the color line.” Second, white theologians fail to acknowledge the socialization and social history that inform their theological constructions. Third, white theologians belong to the Ivory Tower with the ability to focus on the abstract and ignore the concrete. In other word, “Because white theologians are well fed and speak for a people who control the means of production, the problem of hunger is not a theologian issue for them” (48). Black theology as a witness to the experience of struggle and triumph speaks the truth and tells the story about the extreme oppression facing the Black community as it calls for liberation.
Contemporary Connections

In December 2016, the world awakened to the remarkable story of Black women as the frontrunners of America’s journey to the moon through the major motion picture film and text. *Hidden Figures* tells the stories of three extraordinary Black women, Katherine Johnson, a physicist and mathematician known as the human computer who made possible the first flight to space, Mary Jackson, the first Black female NASA engineer, Dorothy Vaughn, first Black female supervisor at NASA, played in the movie by stars in their own right, Taraji P. Henson, Janelle Monae, and Octavia Spencer. Though their bold and courageous efforts during the mid-twentieth century, *Hidden Figures* retrieves and reclaims, exhumes and exalts, excavates and mines the ignored and undertold narratives of Black women who made the American space story possible. As the author of *Hidden Figures: The American Dream and the Untold Story of the Black Women Mathematicians Who Helped Win the Space Race* Margot Lee Shetterly makes clear, “For too long, history has imposed a binary condition on its black citizens: either nameless or renowned, menial or exceptional, passive recipients of the forces of history or superheroes who acquire mythic status not just because of their deeds but because of their scarcity. The power of the history of NASA’s black computers is that even the Firsts weren’t the Onlies.” The story of America’s space project continues to be told, but it is not until Margot Lee Shetterly tells this story that we learn of the true Hidden Figures behind the nation’s success at NASA. Who tells the story matters when discovering the truth!

Critical Questions

1. James Cone says that “Theology is subjective speech about God, a speech that tells us far more about the hopes and dreams of certain God-talkers than about the Maker and Creator of heaven and earth (38). Similarly, Jesus affirm Peter’s witness after he answers Jesus’ question “Who do you say that I am?” in Matthew 16: 13-20.

What’s your story about God? Who do you say Jesus is? With whom (family, friends, co-workers, non-Christians, neighbor, strangers, etc.) do you share your story about God?

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________________________________________________________________
2. Griots are preservers of the tradition who pass the stories of struggle and faith to generations that follow them.

What stories have been passed on to you from your fore parents about the suffering and resilience of Black people? How have these stories shaped your views about God or nurtured your faith?

3. The Israelites were told to share their stories throughout history with future generations so that they would not lose sight of what God did to liberate them from oppression. Cone suggests that the story of Black suffering must be told and when the truth is told the oppressed are transformed.

What stories have you passed on to your children or younger generations about the social conditions of Black people and God’s liberating power?

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## Lesson Five

**Title**  
Let My People Go

**Subject**  
Pre-Class Exploration

**Scripture**  

### Synopsis
The Exodus story is the central narrative of the Old Testament wherein the God of Israel delivers the oppressed Hebrew people out of the enslavement of Egyptian rule. Black theology looks to Exodus as a primary source for identifying God’s involvement in history and the present in relation to the social and political affairs of God’s people. Let’s talk about liberation and the biblical story this week.

### Reading
God of the Oppressed Chapter Four “Biblical Revelation and Social Existence,” pgs. 57-76

### Theological Terms
- Hermeneutics
- Covenant
- Sine qua non
- Ipso Facto
- Demythologization
- Yahweh

### Devotion/Prayer
Lord, how many are my foes! How many rise up against me! Many are saying of me, “God will not deliver me.” But you, Lord, are a shield around me, my glory, the One who lifts my head high. I call out to the Lord, and he answers me from his holy mountain. I lie down and sleep; I wake again, because the Lord sustains me. I will not fear though tens of thousands assail me on every side. Arise, Lord! Deliver me, my God! Strike all my enemies on the jaw; break the teeth of the wicked. From the Lord comes deliverance. May your blessing be on your people. (Psalm 3)
Exodus 3:7-8 (NRSV)

7 Then the LORD said, “I have observed the misery of my people who are in Egypt; I have heard their cry on account of their taskmasters. Indeed, I know their sufferings, 
8 and I have come down to deliver them from the Egyptians, and to bring them up out of that land to a good and broad land, a land flowing with milk and honey, to the country of the Canaanites, the Hittites, the Amorites, the Perizzites, the Hivites, and the Jebusites.

Summary Sketch

God is the subject of the biblical story, which illuminates that “God’s revelation is inseparable from the social and political affairs of God’s people” (57). The Bible points to God’s position, God’s acts and God’s presence in the lives of those who were oppressed and struggled for justice. Two stories are told of God in Scripture: 1) as the Yahweh of the Old Testament; and 2) as the incarnate Jesus Christ in the New Testament. God shows up for the Israelites as “Yahweh, the God of the Exodus, the Protector of the poor and Establisher of the right for those who are oppressed” (57). Yahweh is the God of the oppressed whose revelation identifies with liberation from bondage. Simply put, “if theology does not side with the poor, then it cannot speak for Yahweh who is the God of the poor” (65). Cone suggests that the theologians who speak of a liberating God must become interested in the social, political and economic conditions of the oppressed. The same Yahweh that existed in the Old is revealed through Jesus Christ in the New. “The New Testament writers believe that the God present in Jesus is none other than the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob” (66). Jesus Christ continues the story as the liberator to announce good news to the poor and proclaim the year of the Lord. Therefore, “the cross and the resurrection stand at the center of the New Testament story, without which nothing is revealed that was not already known in the Old Testament” (73-74). Cone contends “any starting point that ignores God in Christ as the Liberator of the oppressed or that makes salvation as liberation secondary is ipso facto invalid and heretical” (75). Thus, “the hermeneutical principle for an exegesis of the Scriptures is the revelation of God in Christ as Liberator of the oppressed from social oppression and political struggle, wherein the poor recognize that their fight against poverty and injustice is not only consistent with the gospel but is the gospel of Jesus Christ” (74).
Historical Highlights

On New Year’s Eve December 31, 1862, Blacks living in northern Union states gathered at churches while Blacks in the South assembled on plantations at midnight in anticipation of President Abraham Lincoln’s signing of the Emancipation Proclamation, the legal document and presidential edict putting an end to chattel slavery and declaring enslaved Africans in America as free. The freedom many free and enslaved expected was not the freedom they received as some Union border and rebellion states did not comply to Lincoln’s order and the Civil War continued. The Negro spiritual “Go, Down Moses” that calls for a leader like Moses to go down to Egypt and tell Pharaoh to “Let My People Go” illustrates enslaved Africans finding their story of enslavement within the pages of the biblical story of the Exodus and Hebrew slavery under the Egyptians. Harriet Tubman known as the “Black Moses” transported more than 300 members of the enslaved as the conductor of the Underground Railroad in approximately 19 trips to and from slave country. Harriet Tubman “walked to Canada” for herself and for her people on numerous occasions without a map or a trail, but with the Spirit as a divine compass. The end of the Civil War in 1865 did illegalize slavery, but the experience of oppression for Black people endured. More than 150 years later, some Black churches still gather for Watch Night service at the turn of the New Year to join with the ancestors in prayer, worship, and thanksgiving for God’s continuing liberation.

Theological Touchpoints

The story of liberation in the Bible begins with the Exodus. According to Cone, “The Exodus was the decisive event in Israel’s history, because through it Yahweh was revealed as the Savior of an oppressed people” (58). The Exodus marks both the deliverance of Israel and the establishment of a covenant with Yahweh at Sinai. God’s liberating presence does not leave Israel as the nation progresses but continues even with the divine messages of the prophets. As generations passed, Yahweh had to remind the Israel people of the covenant and God’s deliverance of Israel from Egypt. “The prophets were messengers of Yahweh who gave God’s Word to the people, reminding them of God’s deliverance and covenant which brought the community into existence” (60). It was a reminder that God’s message of liberation spoke to the conditions of the weak and the poor not the rich and the powerful. For Cone, “There is no divine grace in the Old Testament (or in the New Testament that is bestowed on oppressors at the expense of the suffering and the poor” (62). In the New Testament,
Jesus through the Incarnation embodies the liberating activity of God. Cone writes, “God in Christ comes to the weak and the helpless, and becomes one with them, taking their condition of oppression as his own and thus transforming their slave-existence into a liberated existence” (71). Cone invites us to interpret Scripture through the lens “wherein the poor recognize that their fight against poverty and injustice is not only consistent with the gospel but is the gospel of Jesus Christ” (75).

**Contemporary Connections**

“Oh, Say Can You See?” As the National Anthem played, Colin Kaepernick, an N.F.L. player, made a silent, yet, powerful gesture to sit rather than stand. Only a few saw his gesture and paid little to no attention. After several games of no protest Kaepernick, took a knee. Kaepernick took a stand against the oppression and injustices toward Black and brown people in this nation by kneeling during the National Anthem in a pre-game season. Some considered his actions “un-patriotic” for America and perceived his actions as an affront to veterans. Others believed it was a liberating act and an active stance against the injustices done to black people. Many NFL players joined in solidarity with Colin and in support of a necessary change. “I am not going to stand up to show pride in a flag for a country that oppresses black people and people of color,” Kaepernick said.¹ The fight against oppression requires that we side with the powerless, resist, and take a knee in solidarity to tell the Pharaohs of this world to let God’s people go.

**Critical Questions**

1. The revelation of God’s liberation can be seen in Exodus narrative when God delivers the Hebrew people from Pharaoh. The 400-year-old oppression of the enslaved Hebrews in Egypt seemed to have no end or no way out. Yet, the people’s groanings were heard by God and God remembered the covenant agreement with their forefathers Abraham, Isaac and Jacob and delivered them.

   Have you ever cried out to the Lord and God heard your cry? Can you identify a moment in your life when you have experienced divine deliverance?

   ____________________________________________________________
   ____________________________________________________________
   ____________________________________________________________

¹ **Note:** Kaepernick's actions were seen as a form of protest against police brutality and systemic racism, particularly in the context of the Black Lives Matter movement.
2. James Cone tells of two stories as told of God in Scripture: 1) as the God of liberation of the Old Testament; and 2) as the incarnate Jesus Christ who liberates the poor and weak in the New Testament. We, too, have a story to tell.

What is your story about your life in Christ?

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3. James Cone points to four major tasks of theology: theology must be political, prophetic, recognize tradition, and always a word about liberation of the oppressed (75-76).

What four things can you point to in your life that shows that God has been a steady and constant liberator for you?

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What is your testimony about God and God’s acts of liberation today?

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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th><strong>Lesson Six</strong></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Title</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Subject</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Scripture</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Synopsis</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Reading</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Theological Terms</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Devotion/Prayer</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Scripture

Exodus 6:5-7 (NRSV)

5 I have also heard the groaning of the Israelites whom the Egyptians are holding as slaves, and I have remembered my covenant. 6 Say therefore to the Israelites, ‘I am the LORD, and I will free you from the burdens of the Egyptians and deliver you from slavery to them. I will redeem you with an outstretched arm and with mighty acts of judgment. 7 I will take you as my people, and I will be your God. You shall know that I am the LORD your God, who has freed you from the burdens of the Egyptians.

Summary Sketch

Cone challenges Black theologians to define and distinguish the difference between white theology and Black Theology and between divine revelation and human aspirations to distort the views that black theology is mere radical black politics or heresy. Although Cone agrees in part with Christian ethicist H. Richard Niebuhr’s analysis in “Christ and Culture,” Cone points out that Niebuhr failed to address a crucial biblical portrayal of Christ. Jesus Christ’s identity with the oppressed must be at the starting point of any theological analysis. Cone defines ideological thinking from other thinking and calls it “deformed thought, or ideas that are nothing but the function of an individual” (83). It is Cone’s belief that white theology is an ideological distortion of the gospel of Jesus because it has transcended the white cultural perspective. Biblical thinking is liberated thought which is in stark contrast to white culture. Cone theorizes that theology is not “determined by social interest, but rather, whose social interest, the oppressed or the oppressors?” (87). Therefore, “the task of theology is to show the significance of the oppressed’s struggle against inhumane powers, relating the people’s struggle to God’s intention to set them free” (90-91).

Historical Highlights

In 2008 and again in 2012, the 44th President of the United States became the President of the Free World. From the top of Mount Everest (the highest mountain on Earth) to Death Valley Zone (the lowest place), happy, gleeful, ecstatic, exuberant and celebratory expressions of praise heralded. The news lines blazoned the shouts, cries, yells, and screams of the victory on that great gettin’ up morning. From every nation, every hilltop, every valley low, the World had new liberated hope in the political and
social struggles of our society. The International Herald Tribune said that "America had "leaped" across the color line, calling Obama, a 47-year-old black man who made history both because of his race and in spite of it." Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr, spoke of this hope in his speech "I have a dream."

And if America is to be a great nation this must become true. So, let freedom ring from the prodigious hilltops of New Hampshire. Let freedom ring from the mighty mountains of New York. Let freedom ring from the heightening Alleghenies of Pennsylvania! Let freedom ring from the snowcapped Rockies of Colorado! Let freedom ring from the curvaceous slopes of California! But not only that; let freedom ring from Stone Mountain of Georgia! Let freedom ring from Lookout Mountain of Tennessee! Let freedom ring from every hill and molehill of Mississippi. From every mountainside, let freedom ring. And when this happens, when we allow freedom to ring, when we let it ring from every village and every hamlet, from every state and every city, we will be able to speed up that day when all of God's children, black men and white men, Jews and Gentiles, Protestants and Catholics, will be able to join hands and sing in the words of the old Negro spiritual, 'Free at last! free at last! thank God Almighty, we are free at last!'

Theological Touchpoints

H. Richard Niebuhr, a leading 20th century theologian and Christian ethicist, sought to narrate the relationship between faith and the daily lives of believers. Niebuhr's Christ and Culture (1951) explored ways Christian principles have shaped American culture in five primary types: Christ against culture, Christ of culture, Christ above culture, Christ and culture in paradox, and Christ transforming culture. The first two categories may represent the two extremes. The sectarians who adopt the "Christ against culture" position reject culture as fallen and identify separation as necessary to give absolute loyalty to Christ. Sectarian positions stand in sharp contrast to the culture. The opposing culturalist "Christ of culture" type finds in Christ an affirmation of all that is good in culture. The culturalist sees little to no difference between loyalty to Christ and the best a particular culture has to offer. The next three types Niebuhr calls, "the church of the middle." Of these, the synthesis "Christ above culture" type seeks a synthesis of culture with Christ so that grace perfects or builds upon culture. This type sees that the
good in culture is perfected by Christ. The duality "Christ and culture in paradox" type finds less continuity between culture and the Christian life. It keeps a critical distance from culture, and yet sees it as useful in the Christian life when kept within appropriate bounds. This type sees a dichotomy, in which culture has a legitimate place in Christian life, but that place is not the Christian's heart or church; in those places Christ must reign. Niebuhr's conversionist type, "Christ transforming culture," remains critical of culture yet also enters into relationship with what it finds in culture that is capable of becoming part of ongoing work toward the kingdom of God. This category sees culture as the raw material that can be shaped by Christians according to the Christian vision of human life. In Cone’s view, Niebuhr misses an adequate assessment how the biblical portrayal of Christ relates to these positions and fails to engage the power dynamics at work within the five typologies that distinguishes the views of the dominant and the oppressed in America.

**Contemporary Connections**

King’s “I Have A Dream” (1963) speech and clarion call to Let Freedom Ring was not accepted by everyone, including white America’s pastor, Christian evangelist Billy Graham. Graham who held public opposition to King’s beloved community and refused to attend the March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom in 1963 after receiving an invitation from King. In a public response to King’s Speech at the March, Graham said, “Only when Christ comes again will the little white children of Alabama walk hand in hand with little black children.” Graham’s theology marks a certain complacency with the status quo and a sense that theology should not be engaged in social and political struggles. James Cone calls out white academic theologians who failed to address the experiences of Black people in their theological constructions, white preachers like Graham were no exception. As faith counsel to Presidents and a leading white evangelical voice in 20th century America, Graham would not acknowledge the most important social issue of his time: racism and racial segregation. This is the fire from where Cone speaks about the Black story and its lens to interpret the truth of the Jesus' story as a man who brought “freedom to the weak and helpless” was killed because of his “threat to the order of injustice” (97). Following the recent death of Graham in 2018, it is clear that the Christ of Billy Graham is not the Jesus of Black theology.
Critical Questions

1. James Cone says we are obligated to ask: “How do we distinguish our words about God from God’s Word, our wishes from God’s will, our dreams and aspirations from the work of the Spirit?” (77). How do you respond?

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2. In Niebuhr’s work, *Christ and Culture*, he offered five types or attitudes from which the Church engages with the culture and provides insight into the Christ-culture problem (78-82). What do you think is Christ’s relation to human culture?

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________________________________________________________________

3. Cone states “the white story of black enslavement may be a ‘valid’ story, but from the perspective of the victims it is a tale of terror and bloodshed” (94). Have you tell your story without destroying other people’s stories?

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5 Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture*, 83.
6 Ibid., 116.
7 Ibid., 149.
8 Ibid., 190.
Solve the Cryptograms below to reveal a phrase from *God of the Oppressed* by James Cone.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Cryptogram 1</th>
<th>XMZIVICU DN MHORB NJZZPM RYIHX CIE, VDODXZE YU MDNXIFU RBE XDOZ.</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Hint:</td>
<td>F = R</td>
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**Answer:** Theology is human speech about God, limited by history and time.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Cryptogram 2</th>
<th>XSZJIJWP GC UINUPC U NJMA UFJTX IGFZMUXGJD JR XSZ JVVMZCCJA</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Hint:</td>
<td>T = U</td>
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**Answer:** Theology is always a word about liberation of the oppressed and a judgment for the oppressors.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Cryptogram 3</th>
<th>EHEOHSPW NGOUGHQJR HV OHENZPWNY WGBCRGW FGHSG HV HQ VWPZJ SBQWZPVV WB FGHWN SCOWCZN.</th>
</tr>
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**Answer:** Biblical thinking is liberated thought which is in stark contrast to white culture.
Cone’s God of the Oppressed, as one of my first introductions to Liberation theology, breathed new life into my Christian practice and offered tools to address a yet to be identified hole in my theological identity: It taught me that I could speak of and to God as a Black man. This is significant given my Christian and theological formation: a first-generation American raised in the Brethren Christian tradition. I was taught Jesus; I knew Jesus; but I never knew that Jesus knew me in my particularity, from my social location and context. My introduction to Cone in my first year of Divinity school gave me this; it gave me a Jesus who was not only concerned with the salvation of my eternal soul, but the liberation of my humanity here and now. With Cone, I could finally acknowledge that I too, am a black theologian! This interpretation of Jesus is of immeasurable significance to the church because it takes the experience of Black people and the Black church seriously as grounds for knowing and naming Jesus as “the liberator,” as “freedom” and, “the reality who invaded their history from beyond and bestowed upon them a definition of humanity that could not be destroyed by the whip and the pistol” (31). Indeed, not only must the church continue to affirm this and their own experience of Jesus, but also wrestle with who Jesus is and how Jesus, through the church, is fighting with and for the oppressed during our contemporary moment of mass incarceration, police and judicial violence and economic/social injustice towards people of color.

With this acknowledgment, I remain compelled by Cone’s questioning of the significance of the gospel for the oppressed and their fight for liberation. His question offers both a caution and condemnation to mine and any theological production if it fails to place the question of liberation, “the essence of the gospel” at the center of our work. As such, Cone’s axiom: “Jesus is who he was,” challenges my Christian upbringing and theological training to ask who is and how is Jesus for the oppressed in my work and interest in Christology’s relation to popular culture. “Jesus is Black” reverberates through my soul as I know and affirm that Jesus takes on our oppression and has made us his people. Indeed, with Cone, the academic and “everyday” theologian is invited to participate in two activities: 1. To reflect on the reality of Jesus as “as event of liberation, a happening in the lives of oppressed people struggling for political freedom.” 2. To live out and act upon the reality of Jesus’ ongoing liberation of the oppressed.

What does Cone’s invitation entail? Firstly, in order to know Jesus, the church must look to Scripture and the experience of those battered in our community. It must look at the plight of immigrants fleeing to this country, the pain of those recently returned to the community from prison, the discrimination against our Muslim brother and sisters, and all other oppressive ills and know that it is here where Jesus’ liberation is to be found—where, through Jesus, humanity is affirmed to those whom society would deny. Secondly, because of this affirmation, the church is called to action—to fight against suffering and oppression, to be “a liberator of Christ” in its communities. God of the Oppressed calls for the church to live in and live out the reality of God’s liberation through Jesus Christ and it is a challenge and call that we must be attentive to.
Unit 3

God of the Oppressed: Discovering Black Liberation Theology
# Lesson Seven

## Who Is Jesus Christ For Us Today?

### Pre-Class Exploration


### synopsis

This lesson addresses the age-old question, “Who is Jesus?” We will explore who Jesus was, who Jesus is, and who Jesus will be, to address “Who Jesus Christ is for us today”? We will examine why Cone says that “Jesus is Black” and explore how Jesus is the Oppressed one, who came to liberate the poor and the weak.

### Reading

- **God of the Oppressed** Chapter Six “Who Is Jesus Christ For Us Today?”, pgs. 99-126

### Theological Terms

- Christology
- Docetism
- Soteriology
- Eschatology
- Paradox

### Devotion/Prayer

“Eternal and everlasting God, who art the Father of all mankind, as we turn aside from the hurly-burly of everyday living, may our hearts and souls, yea our very spirits, be lifted upward to Thee, for it is from Thee that all blessing cometh. Keep us ever mindful of our dependence upon Thee, for without Thee our efforts are but naught. We pray for Thy divine guidance as we travel the highways of life. We pray for more courage. We pray for more faith and above all we pray for more love. May we somehow come to understand the true meaning of Thy love as revealed to us in the life, death and resurrection of Thy son and our Lord and Master, Jesus Christ. May the Cross ever remind us of Thy great love, for greater love no man hath given. This is our supreme example, O God. May we be constrained to follow in the name and spirit of Jesus, we pray." ~ Coretta Scott King
Scripture

Luke 4:18 (NRSV)

18 “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, 19 to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.”

Summary Sketch

At the crux of this chapter is a Christological issue. Christian theologians must attempt to answer the question and “investigate the connection between Jesus’ word and deeds in first century Palestine and our existence today” (99). “How do we see Jesus today in our everyday lives?” is a question that must be addressed in the here and now. Cone points to the bible to address “Who is Christ?” a question many have asked. Cone suggests that understanding who Jesus is cannot be decided on the Bible alone, nor on one’s social context alone; but needs to be seen in “dialectical relation” (103). The two are dependent on one another and have an interrelatedness. If so, Cone contends that there is a paradox that exists and a truth that must be explored otherwise the Black experience is distorted. “The Jesus of the Black experience is the Jesus of Scripture” (103). The cross and resurrection reveal God’s willingness to suffer so that humanity may be liberated and show that the “divine freedom revealed in Israel’s history is now available to all” (124). This, in conjunction with Jesus’ Jewishness, allows Black theology to assert that “Jesus is black” (124).

Historical Highlights

As early as the late nineteenth century, Bishop Henry McNeal Turner first declared God is a Negro. The mid-twentieth century theological claims of social justice in Martin Luther King, Jr. and protest in Malcolm X along with the voice of the National Conference of Black Churchmen reconciled that “Christ affirmed humanity, but it did not clarify whether Christ was actually Black.”3 The Blackness of Christ became more apparent in the Black theology of liberation among first generation theological voices Albert Cleage, Jr., J. Deotis Roberts, and James Cone (as you read in this lesson).
While all three affirmed that Christ was Black, each thinker held a unique position on the Blackness of Christ and its relationship to liberation and reconciliation. Cleage aligned Jesus’s African heritage as an ancestor of Black Americans based in part on Matthean Theology to suggest Blacks are direct descendants of Jesus. Roberts made the case that Christ can be any color because Jesus identified with all humanity. However, a white Christ rejects Jesus’ signification with the oppressed. Thus, Jesus can be Black, but Jesus is not exclusively Black, white or any other color. Cone affirmed, “It is only within the context of Jesus’ past, present and future as these aspects of his person are related to Scripture, tradition, and contemporary social existence that we are required to affirm the blackness of Jesus Christ” (122). Cone further maintained Christ is Black “…because and only because Christ really enters into our world, where the poor, the despised, and the black are, disclosing that he is with them, enduring their humiliation and pain, and transforming oppressed slaves into liberated servants” (126).

Theological Touchpoints

In order to assess the Incarnate freedom revealed in Jesus Christ, James Cone addresses three central Christological aspects: Who Jesus Was, Who Jesus Is, and Who Jesus Will Be. First, Jesus is who he was. For Cone, the starting point for Christology is Jesus’ humanity as revealed in Scripture. “For without the historical Jesus, theology is left with a docetic Christ who is said to be human but is actually nothing but an idea-principle in a theological system” (109). Jesus’ identity as a Jew links Jesus to the Exodus-Sinai event and God’s covenant with the Hebrew people. The Jesus of history makes real that Jesus’ “coming bestows upon us the courage and the wisdom to struggle against injustice and oppression” (110). Second, Jesus is who he was. “While the wasness of Jesus is Christology’s point of departure, thereby establishing Christ’s inseparable relationship with the historical Jesus, the isness of Jesus relates his past history to his present involvement in the struggle” (110). Black people relate to a Jesus who walks with us, talk with us, and suffers with us in this life. The affirmation of Jesus as Lord is a political designation that speaks to Jesus’ present kingship (115). Third, Jesus is who he will be. Cone argues, “He is not only the crucified and risen one but also the Lord of the future who is coming again to fully consummate the liberation already happening in our present” (116). Jesus embodies hope that “the coming Jesus “will establish divine justice among people” (121).
Contemporary Connections

On February 26, 2012, a seventeen year old Black male, Trayvon Martin was brutally murdered by George Zimmerman, a multi-racial community watchman of a gated community, in Sanford, FL. Martin returning to his father’s fiancée’s residence after making a short trip to the local store for a pack of skittles and a bottle of iced tea was gun down by a defensive Zimmerman who made claims to the Sanford Police Department that Martin “looked suspicious.” After a physical exchange between the two men, Martin was left dead with a single gunshot to his chest by Zimmerman. On the night of the murder, Zimmerman was treated by EMS for minor scrapes and bruises and then sent to the Department for questioning, where he was soon released on the grounds of self-defense and later acquitted. Since 2012, faith leaders continue to ponder the question, “What is the relationship between Jesus and Trayvon?”

Theologian Kelly Brown Douglas, argues in her book *Stand Your Ground: Black Bodies and the Justice of God*, “That Jesus was crucified affirms his absolute identification with the Trayvons, the Jordans, the Renishas, the Jonathans; and all the other victims of the stand-your-ground-culture war.” When remembering the violent crucifixion of Jesus, we cannot forget who Jesus Christ is today reflected in the Trayvon Martins of the world who are victims of human terror that suffer death at the hand of violence.

Critical Questions

1. Each of the Gospel writers tell a version or similar stories of their account of Jesus, what they seen or heard. The Gospel of Matthew calls Jesus the Messiah, while the Gospel of Luke says Jesus is the Son of Man. The Gospel of Mark speaks of Jesus as the Son of God, while John’s Gospel says that God came down himself, Jesus incarnate, became flesh, and dwelt among us.

What is your story about “Who Jesus Is?”

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2. Enslaved Blacks wrote songs, sang negro spirituals, crafted poems, and spoke in coded language to mask others understanding of their thoughts of who Jesus was, the Liberator of the oppressed.

What songs or poems move you or connect you with the liberating Christ? Who introduced you to Jesus? What story helped you believe?

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# Lesson Eight

## Title
**Break Every Chain**

## Subject
**Pre-Class Exploration**

## Scripture
*Isaiah 45:2-3; Amos 5:24; Psalm 82:1-8, Mark 10:42-45*

## Synopsis
This lesson will cover liberation as freedom in relation to God, self and community, as the project of freedom in history and Hope, and Jesus Christ as the ground of human liberation. Cone presents a theological question that we must explore in this lesson. “If Jesus Christ, in his past, present and future, reveals that the God of Scripture and tradition is the God whose will is disclosed in the liberation of oppressed people from bondage, what is the meaning of liberation?” (127). We will explore God’s work of salvation, Christology sources, and content of Jesus’ past, present and future in light of liberation.

## Reading
*God of the Oppressed* Chapter Seven “The Meaning of Liberation,” pgs. 127-149

## Theological Terms
Hypocrisy
Blasphemy

## Devotion/Prayer

> “Give us grace, O God, to dare to do the deed which we well know cries to be done. Let us not hesitate because of ease, or the words of men’s mouths, or our own lives. Mighty causes are calling us—the freeing of women, the training of children, the putting down of hate and murder and poverty—all these and more. But they call with voices that mean work and sacrifices and death. Mercifully grant us, O God, the spirit of Esther, that we say: I will go unto the King and if I perish, I perish.” ~ W.E.B DuBois
Scripture

Isaiah 45:2-3 (NRSV)

2 I will go before you
   and level the mountains,[a]
I will break in pieces the doors of bronze
   and cut through the bars of iron,
3 I will give you the treasures of darkness
   and riches hidden in secret places,
so that you may know that it is I, the LORD,
   the God of Israel, who call you by your name.

Amos 5:24 (NRSV)

24 But let justice roll down like waters,
   and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream.

Summary Sketch

Cone begins this chapter with addressing liberation as God’s work and plan through Jesus Christ. Cone writes, “there is no liberation independent of Jesus’ past, present and future coming” and there is no liberation without Christ (127). Jesus is the center of liberation, and this is the foundation hope of Black people. “Black people’s faith in Jesus’ future coming is the basis of their continued struggle against inexplicable evil in their present existence” (129). Cone suggests that “fellowship with God is the beginning and end of human liberation” (130). Cone speaks to the views of white theologians that all humans are oppressed, which signifies that Black people’s struggle for liberation is not any different from others. Such a perspective justifies their status in society and is not an aim to seek liberation from their social interests. The argument for the universal experience of human oppression is to retain a Christian identity while rejecting the liberating power of freedom through Jesus Christ. Bonhoeffer calls it “cheap grace” yet, Cone names it “hypocrisy and blasphemy” (136). Thus, “all oppressed” can be only understood from the perspective of the poor or the oppressed and not from the viewpoint of the oppressor. Cone asserts “there is no true liberation independent of the struggle for freedom in history. History is the immanent character of liberation; it is the project of freedom” (139). Thus, liberation is “the sociohistorical movement of a people
from the oppression of freedom” (140) Cone further contends that liberation means the “breaking of the chains that held people in servitude” (142).

**Historical Highlights**

*Roots* was written by Alex Haley in 1976, as he traced back his roots to his descendant, of an 18th century African named Kunta Kinte. Haley tells the story of Kunta, his captivity and transport to North America to live a life as a slave. The novel turned movie depicted Kunta coming to America in chains and collars. The stories told of slave auctions include visions of the enslaved bound, shackled, and yoked. Even in 1819, the Legislature of Louisiana enacted a law of putting iron chains and collars upon the enslaved, to prevent them from running away. Chains were used to restrain the feet or ankles of the enslaved, allowing walking but preventing running or kicking. Slaveholders were notorious for putting nooses around the necks of Blacks to assert a form of control and punishment to the point of death.

**Theological Touchpoints**

The past, present, and future perspectives of Christology as revealed in Scripture and history give way to understand “Jesus Christ as the ground of human liberation” (127). “When God is revealed as freedom for us, he is disclosed as the God of hope” (128). The goal of liberation is to be in relationship with God, self, and community. Liberation opens space for fellowship and communion with God. Cone asserts,

> Black worship itself is a liberating event for those who share the experience of the people that bears witness to God’s presence in the midst. Through prayer, testimony, song, and sermon the people transcend the limitations of their immediate history and encounter the divine power, thereby creating a moment of ecstasy and joy wherein they recognize that the pain of oppression is not the last word about black life (132).

As the psalmist says, “what a fellowship, what a joy divine.” Liberation frees the oppressed to fully encounter God. Thus, “Human liberation as fellowship with God also must be seen as the very heart of the theological concept of the ‘image of God,’ even though this point has often been obscured” (133). Liberation linked to what it means to be made in the image of God gives new witness to your identity that grants revelation not just about who Jesus is but also who we are and who we will become. Liberation, in Cone’s view, cannot be separated from “the struggle for freedom in history” (139). Yet
and still, the future of liberation matters as “not simply other worldly but the divine future that breaks into their social existence, bestowing wholeness in the present situation of pain and suffering and enabling black people to know the existing state of oppression contradicts their real humanity as defined by God’s future” (146). Blacks can fight for justice, breaking every chain of captivity “because the One who is their future is also the ground of their struggle for liberation” (129).

**Contemporary Connections**

On July 10, 2015, a 28-year old young woman named Sandra Bland from Chicago had been violated by a police officer in Waller County, Texas, arrested without just cause, taken to jail and found hung in a jail cell. On April 8, 2015, a tweet from Bland said, "AT FIRST THEY USED A NOOSE, NOW ALL THEY DO IS SHOOT # BlackLivesMatter #SandySpeaks." Sandy was speaking out against social injustices everywhere. Her message to her mother was about breaking chains of injustice beginning in Texas. “She said, ‘Momma, now I know what my purpose is. My purpose is to go back to Texas. My purpose is to stop all social injustice in the South.” Sandra was audacious, courageous and bold to speak out in quest for liberation. Now her Mother has taken up her fight and stated: “I'm ready.... This means war.” Sandra’s fight for justice will continue on.

#SayHerName

**Critical Questions**

1. Cone states, “Liberation is not a human possession, but a divine gift of freedom” and it “is not an object, but the project of freedom” (127).

What is your testimony of liberation?

________________________________________________________________

________________________________________________________________

________________________________________________________________

2. Cone states that “Christ’s salvation is liberation; there is no liberation without Christ” (130). And “there is no liberation without transformation” (139).

Can you recall when and where you experienced a liberating transformation?
3. At the center of human liberation is fellowship with God, self and community. How has your experience of liberation in Christ rekindled or brought you into fellowship and kinship with believers, loved ones, family and friends?

Who belongs to your circle of influence?

3 Ibid.
Lesson Nine

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Title</th>
<th>How Long, O’ Lord?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Subject</td>
<td>Pre-Class Exploration</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Scripture</td>
<td>Habakkuk 1:2; Psalm 41:1-2, 94:3, Isaiah 53:4-5; Deut. 2:2-3; Romans 8:18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Synopsis</td>
<td>Cone discusses the theme of suffering in the Bible and theology. Let’s explore together the quest for liberation with peril of human suffering.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reading</td>
<td>God of the Oppressed Chapter Eight “Divine Liberation and Black Suffering,” pgs. 150-178</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
| Theological Terms | Black Humanism  
Black Passivity  
Orthodox  
Q Source (gospel sayings)  
Retribution  
Sovereignty of God  
Theodicy |
| Devotion/Prayer | O Lord, you God of vengeance, you God of vengeance, shine forth! Rise up, O judge of the earth; give to the proud what they deserve! O Lord, how long shall the wicked, how long shall the wicked exult? The Lord knows our thoughts, that they are but an empty breath. Happy are those whom you discipline, O Lord, and whom you teach out of your law, giving them respite from days of trouble, until a pit is dug for the wicked. ~ Psalm 94:1-13 |
Scripture

Habakkuk 1:2 (NRSV)

2 O LORD, how long shall I cry for help, and you will not listen?
Or cry to you “Violence!” and you will not save?

Psalm 94:3 (NRSV)

3 O LORD, how long shall the wicked, how long shall the wicked exult?

Psalm 41:1-2 (NRSV)

1 Happy are those who consider the poor; he LORD delivers them in the day of trouble.
2 The LORD protects them and keeps them alive; they are called happy in the land.
You do not give them up to the will of their enemies.

Summary Sketch

Cone address an underlining question at the helm of this chapter about God’s power to liberate and to bring justice unto the oppressor. “If God is the One who liberated Israel from Egyptian slavery, who appeared in Jesus as the healer of the sick and the helper of the poor, and who is present today as the Holy Spirit of liberation, then why are black people still living in wretched conditions without the economic and political power to determine their historical destiny?” (150). This question raises concerns about our understanding of who God is and what God is willing or able to do. Should we deny or accept “the perfect goodness or the unlimited power of God?” (150). Cone asserts, “it is a violation of black faith to weaken either divine love or divine power” (150). The place to begin examining the problem of suffering and God’s response is the Bible. Israel asked the question, “O Lord, how long shall the wicked, how long shall the wicked exult? (Psalm 94:3 RSV). Cone suggests that this is not a theoretical question arising out of an intellectual concern about divine justice; rather it is a practical question arising out of the struggle of faith (151). Habakkuk and Jeremiah asked God questions about the length of suffering and divine justice to which no answers were received. Both prophets ‘refused to let evil count decisively against Yahweh’s sovereignty” (153). In the New Testament, Jesus was the suffering servant. “On the cross, God’s identity with the suffering of the world was complete” (161). God’s victory over suffering has given the oppressed freedom “to struggle politically against the imposed injustice of rulers” (161). Cone discusses the theological ideas of Western tradition regarding suffering and the affirming and contrasting thoughts about God’s ability to free the oppressed from the
Black religious perspective. Although Black oppression and suffering offer a challenge to our faith, they do not negate it.

**Historical Highlights**

January 11, 2019, Justice prevailed and the Groveland four were exonerated after 70 years of being written in the Florida history books as criminals for egregious crimes they did not commit and punishments they did not deserve. The Florida Board of Executive Clemency agreed unanimously to pardon the Groveland Four. Just a few years earlier, on Tuesday, April 18, 2017, the Florida House of Representatives unanimously passed a resolution apologizing to the families of the Groveland Four, exonerating the men and granting posthumous pardons. All four men (Samuel Shepherd, Walter Irvin, Charles Greenlee and Ernest Thomas) died before this exoneration was given with the latest death in 2012. 70 years of suffering is the amount of time four young Black men faced imprisonment at the hand of white oppressors. This has taken its toll on the victims and families. “The case of “The Groveland Four” included a race riot, torture, multiple murders, two trials and a Supreme Court reversal. Though widely covered by the national press, the case has been largely forgotten... even though it helped lay a foundation for the Civil Rights Movement.”

**Theological Touchpoints**

A piercing question emerges when considering the relationship between divine liberation and Black suffering. “If God is unlimited in power and goodness, as the Christian faith claims, why does God not destroy the powers of evil through the establishment of divine righteousness?” (150). Such a question reveals the age-old challenge of theodicy for Christians and further interrogates whether God’s activity or inactivity in the lives of the oppressed is a divine sanctioning of oppression toward Black people, in particular. Much like the prophets and psalmists petitioned God with the question “How Long, O Lord?” the oppressed have also lamented the oppression and devastation. Cone makes it clear, “For the oppressed, justice is the rescue from hurt; and for the oppressors it is the removal of the power to hurt others—even against their will—so that justice can be realized for all” (159). If we accept that Jesus took on suffering to join in solidarity with the oppressed, “…the theological question is, What does Jesus’ acceptance of the role of the Suffering Servant of the Lord have to do with human suffering?” (160). Cone offers least two responses to this inquiry: “On the one hand, the faith of black people as disclosed in the sermons, songs, and prayers,
revealed that they faced the reality of black suffering. Faith in Jesus did not cancel out the pain of slavery” (177). “But on the other hand, Jesus’ presence in the experience of suffering liberated black people from being dependent upon the historical limitation of servitude for a definition of their humanity” (178). In the face of suffering, liberation may not always be a fixed destination, but an ongoing work through relationship with Jesus Christ.

**Contemporary Connections**

Dylan Roof, a young white man, befriended church parishioners, during a prayer meeting at the Emmanuel A.M.E. Church in Charleston, South Carolina the night of June 17, 2015, killing nine people (Rev. Sharonda Coleman-Singleton, Rev. Depayne Middleton, Rev. Dr. Daniel L. Simmons, Sr. Mother Susie Jackson, Bro. Tywanza Sanders, Sis. Myra Thompson, Sis. Ethel Lee Lance, and Sis. Cynthia Graham-Hurd), including Pastor Clementa Pinckney. Authorities called it a hate crime. Love invited Dylan Roof into the church. Love accepted a stranger into its midst. Love forgave, even when it was not deserving. But it was hatred towards Black people that showed up that Wednesday Night. We may never know why. We can never fill the voids of the families missing loved ones. Suffering forces us to sit with the evil of oppressive systems and a vicious world. It forces us to look hatred in the face and know that the guilty are not being punished. How long, O Lord?

**Critical Questions**

1. Cone suggests that to “begin an examination of the problem of suffering is with the Bible” (151). How does the Scriptures reconcile the suffering of the innocent or the weak with God’s liberating power?

2. Cone asks a theological question regarding suffering for us to explore: “What does Jesus’ acceptance of the role of the suffering servant of the Lord have to do with human suffering?” (160).
3. Cone suggests that the question “How long shall the wicked be exalted?” is not a theoretical question, but a practical one emerging out of the struggle of faith (151).

How do we explain a liberated God when Blacks are still under oppression?

Unit 3 Activity

Find the words below either vertical, diagonal or horizontal.

Theology  Divinity  Humanity
Doctrine  Suffering  Freedom
Oppression  Liberation  Blackness
Sovereignty  Passivity  Humanism
Retribution  Orthodox  Theodicy
Blasphemy  Hypocrisy  Paradox
Eschatology  Soteriology  Christology
Christ is black, therefore, not because of some cultural or psychological need of black people, but because and only because Christ really enters into our world where the poor, the despised, and the black are, disclosing that he is with them, enduring their humiliation and pain and transforming oppressed slaves into liberated servants (126).

My point is that God came, and continues to come, to those who are poor and helpless, for the purpose of setting them free. And since the people of color are his elected poor in America, any interpretation of God that ignores black oppression cannot be Christian theology (126).

The Spirit of the Lord is upon Me, because He has anointed Me to preach the gospel to the poor; He has sent Me to heal the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to set at liberty those who are oppressed (Luke 4:18).

Jesus is Black. The Rev. Dr. James Hal Cone proclaimed messianic blackness as a truth validated by his lived realities. Cone grew up poor in a small rural town in Bearden, Arkansas where he encountered the faith of his mother at Macedonia AME Church. As he grew older, Cone internalized the racial injustices and economic inequalities of being Black in Jim Crow South. The most formative event that shaped his theology was the Detroit Riots. He was also deeply influenced by Martin Luther King and the Civil Rights Movement, as well as Malcolm X and the Black Power Movement. Martin represented Cone’s deep ties to the Church and Malcom signified his radical solidarity with the Black experience. Synthesizing Martin and Malcom in light of the atrocities of white supremacy, Cone sought to reconcile the tension between his faith and the suffering of Black people. He concluded, “Christ is black, therefore, not because of some cultural or psychological need of black people, but because and only because Christ really enters into our world where the poor, the despised, and the black are, disclosing that he is with them, enduring their humiliation and pain and transforming oppressed slaves into liberated servants” (125-126).

Cone makes a salient connection between Jesus’s (ontological) blackness and the experiences of Black people. This prophetic claim is a radical shift from white normative theology to the groundbreaking emergence of Black theology. As the “Father of Black Theology,” Cone innovated a new hermeneutical methodology that centered the cross with the marginalized experiences of Black people in a gospel message of liberation that challenges white supremacy and systems of oppression. Cone’s provocative declaration that Jesus is Black invalidated scriptural ideologies that justified the slavocracy (“slaves obey your masters”) and affirmed the insurrectionist inclinations of a subversive counter-cultural movement of prophetic resistance. Black theology emerged from the experience of Black people and became the existential soundtrack for Black liberation captured by the discordant and delightful tensions of the blues and the spirituals (“Oh freedom… Oh freedom over me. And before I’d be a slave, I’d be buried in my grave and go home to my Lord and be free”). Cone reclaimed biblical texts such as the Exodus story and Isaiah’s messianic prophecy as reiterated by the Lukan gospel. He used these sources to suggest if God can liberate the Israelites from exile, then God can also free black people from slavery and oppression. The fulfillment of prophecy, according to Cone, is Black liberation. Therefore, Jesus is Black and forging solidarity with the oppressed in the struggle for freedom.
As a point of critique, however, Black Theology appealed to blackness, but it did not give accessibility to Black womanhood. As a result, womanist scholars such as Jacqueline Grant and Delores Williams critiqued Cone’s omission of Black women who were confronted by the triple oppressions of racial, economic and gender inequalities. Grant, in *White Women’s Christ and Black Women’s Jesus* (1989), argued that Jesus is not only Black, but Jesus is also a Black Woman. Williams, in *Sisters in the Wilderness* (1993), claims that God is not always a liberator, but liberation is empowered by Black women’s radical agency to survive. Womanist scholars critiqued the violent nature of the atonement theories (particularly sacrificial logic) and by extension challenged Black Theology. In response, Cone makes a corrective claim that, “unless we are willing to incorporate [womanist] critiques into our christologies and explicitly reject androcentric atonement theories, we become accomplice to the church’s mis-ogynistic behavior against women (xv).” Cone’s response signals the problem of perpetuating patriarchy between the pulpit and the pews. Toxic masculinity in the Church has caused Black women extreme trauma and suffering that contradicts the liberating gospel message of the historical Jesus who, as a Palestinian Jew, shared marginalized identity and served the oppressed.

Hence, as we think about the applicability of Cone’s book, *God of the Oppressed*, we too must grapple with our faith in light of the injustices confronting the Black experience in its totality. We must ask the questions: What does it mean to be Black and Christian in America today? How do we overcome religious contradictions in our ecclesial practices to dismantle oppressive systems of power in our sanctuary and society at large? How do we engage in deep solidarity with marginalized identities to affirm otherness in relation to the life and ministry of Jesus? How will we advocate for Black women who are among the fastest growing population in prisons? How will we believe Black women when they tell their traumatizing MeToo truths? How will we affirm the choices of same-gendered loving people? How will we apply the gospel of liberation to our liturgies and living to challenge and cultivate the church to become a catalyst for change and resist oppressive structures of power in the struggle for freedom? How do we become liberated servants?

In the tradition of Black Theology and in the spirit of prophetic prophecy; as disciples of Black Jesus and the creation of a God of the oppressed; and in the hope of resurrection and a realized eschatology of God’s Kingdom on earth, we are called to be more than liturgical saints in the sanctuary on Sundays, but we are called to become liberated servants in the streets to, “bring good news to the poor…proclaim release to the captives…and…let the oppressed go free.” To be Black and Christian in America is to recognize that liberation is political and prophetic. Cone contends, “The Jesus story is the poor person’s story, because God in Christ becomes poor and weak in order that the oppressed might become liberated from poverty and powerlessness” (74). He continues, “The cross and the resurrection show that the freedom promised is now fully available in Jesus Christ” (74). Hence, in Cone’s final analysis, he moves from the cross to resurrection to elucidate God’s radical reordering of social structures where the last are first, the fools shame the wise and the poor inherit the earth. Black liberation, then, is also salvific and it is available by a God of the oppressed who “continues to come, to those who are poor and helpless, for the purpose of setting them free.”
Unit 4

God of the Oppressed: Discovering Black Liberation Theology
**Lesson Ten**

**When The Lord Sets You Free**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th><strong>Title</strong></th>
<th><strong>When The Lord Sets You Free</strong></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Subject</strong></td>
<td><strong>Pre-Class Exploration</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Scripture</strong></td>
<td><em>John 8:36; Matthew 5:3-12</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Synopsis</strong></td>
<td>This lesson looks at Christian ethical responses to white racism and explores “What are we to do?” As we explore the difference between Christian theology of “Who is God,” and Christian Ethics of “What must we do?”, let’s also discuss why black lives matter?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Reading</strong></td>
<td><em>God of the Oppressed</em> Chapter Nine “Liberation and the Christian Ethic,” pgs. 179-206</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Theological Terms</strong></td>
<td>Sola scriptura</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Koinonia</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Liturgy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Devotion/Prayer</strong></td>
<td>“O God, as a black person, I get exceedingly tired and so filled up with confronting and fighting racism, that formidable foe. It passes its poison from one generation to another. It has polluted all of the wellsprings of the nation’s institutional life, More widespread than the drug scourge, more explosive than nuclear weapons, more crippling than germ warfare—racism has washed up on the shores of every nation of every continent…May the Spirit’s presence and power direct and inspire me now and evermore until victory is won for my people, and until the kingdoms of this world become the kingdom of our Lord and of his Christ. Amen.”† ~William D. Watley</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Scripture

John 8:36 (NRSV)

36 So if the Son makes you free, you will be free indeed.

Summary Sketch

Cone explores the close connection and interdependence of theology and ethics. “Christian theology is the foundation of Christian ethics” (180) Christian theology asks, “Who is God?” and ethics asks, “What must we do?” (180). Ethics flows out of theology and is molded by its framework. Cone addresses the views of many Christian theologians and their claims about the “universal’ character of their discourse and consequently failed to pay sufficient attention to the danger of divorcing theology from its political base” (181). Cone contends that “white ethicists take their cue from their fellow theologians: because white theologians have not interpreted God as the Liberator of the oppressed, it follows that white ethicists would not make liberation the central motif of ethical analysis” (185). Thus, both have been blinded about the liberation of the oppressed. “Christian ethics is meaningless apart from God’s election of the oppressed for freedom in this world” (189). Cone concludes with a discussion about ethics, violence, and Jesus to claim that “one of the tasks of the black ethicists is to untangle the confused and much-discussed problem of violence and nonviolence and Jesus’ relationship to both” (199).

Historical Highlights

“On June 19, 1865 - two months after the end of the Civil War - General Gordon Granger rode to Galveston, Texas with 2,000 Union troops to read General Order No. 3, which freed 250,000 slaves. Thus, began the traditional celebration of Juneteenth, but it wasn't all singing and dancing from the outset.”2 Every year, America celebrates its independence on July 4th. Free indeed! Not for everyone. While President Lincoln signed the Emancipation Proclamation, issued on January 1, 1863, to legally free enslaved Blacks, not all states complied, especially those states who separated from the Union including Texas. After two and a half years, these confederate states came into agreement with the Union. Even then, many of the southern states still practiced slavery, and for years after the Emancipation Proclamation and Juneteenth, many former slaves were intimidated and discouraged from celebrating. Were Blacks free? Not really. Following the Emancipation were Jim Crow laws, segregation, and the Great
Depression. In 1979, Texas was the first state to make Juneteenth an official holiday celebrating Black liberation. In 2015, 43 states recognized Juneteenth as both a day of celebration and national awareness.

**Theological Touchpoints**

Theology speaks to what we believe. Ethics addresses what we do. “Seemingly, “Christian theology is the foundation of Christian ethics” (180). Like the white theologians that Cone confronts in earlier chapters, white Christian ethicists developed ethical values, virtues, and vices apart from a liberating God. Cone retorts, “Christian theology’s failure to ground its analysis of God in the biblical story of the divine liberation of the oppressed has led to a similar error in Christian ethics. Both theologians and ethicists tend to listen more to philosophy and culture, thereby reflecting the cultural interests of the oppressors” (186). The gospel of Jesus Christ can “can never be identified with the established power of the state” (181). Quite frankly, “whatever Christian ethics might be, it can never be identified with the actions of the people who conserve the status quo” (182). So, what must we do? Cone argues the oppressed must operate from a different moral grid than their oppressors. “The grounding of Christian ethics in the oppressed community means that the oppressor cannot decide what is Christian behavior” (191). The Christian task is simple: we must “be a liberator of Christ, because that is what you are!” (190). We are called to do what Jesus did. Cone critiques ways violence is often one-sided, and we look to resisters to stop the violence. What about the already violent systems that perpetuate domination in our society? Cone contends,

> Violence is not only what black people do to white people as victims seek to change their structure of existence; it is also what white people did when they created a society for white people only, and they do in order to maintain it (200).

Violence is never one-sided. Given this, the question what do we do with violence loses its energy.” Therefore, “If violence versus nonviolence is not the issue, but, rather the creation of a new humanity, then the critical question for Christians is not whether Jesus committed violence or whether violence is theoretically consistent with love and reconciliation” (204). It is not simply what Jesus did, but what Jesus is doing. The challenge of not always knowing what Jesus would or did do in every situation is how Cone arrives at the notion of the “risk of faith” (204).
Contemporary Connections

“In July 2013, Opal Tometi walked out of a New York movie theater. She had just finished watching Fruitvale Station, a film documenting the lead-up to Oscar Grant’s death at the hands of a police officer in 2009. As Tometi stepped out onto the sidewalk, her phone buzzed. That is when she discovered that George Zimmerman, who had been charged in the murder of 17-year-old Trayvon Martin, had been acquitted. Despite all the knowledge, despite the testimonies, despite all of that, Trayvon Martin was put on trial for his own death.”3 In 2014, six months after the Zimmerman verdict, one truth-bearing #BlackLivesMatter burst a whole movement onto the scene. Tometi, Alicia Garza and Patrisse Cullors forged a strategy to protest the injustices of Black Americans. Something radical needed to happen, just as it did during the 1960s with the bus boycotts, sit-ins, freedom rides, and marches had to put an end to segregation. As a generation who has witnessed countless fallen black bodies in every area code and across gender, sexual, class, and educational lines, BLM protesters have no investment in respectability, but, recognition and reciprocity. The BLM movement’s guiding principles center on themes such as celebration of difference, affirmation of LGBTQ folk and Black women, linkage to the global concerns facing Black life, recognition of collective value, practicing restorative justice, promotion of Black villages and the Black family, fostering intergenerational dialogue, upholding loving engagement and empathy, and being unapologetically Black in the struggle for freedom.

Critical Questions

1. Matthew 5:39 is found in the Gospel of Matthew in the New Testament and is part of the Sermon on the Mount. Jesus speaks to the listeners in the crowd and tells the followers to turn the other cheek.

As Black Christians shall we take oppression, mistreatment and abuse lying down? What does it mean to turn your face towards justice?

________________________________________________________________

________________________________________________________________

________________________________________________________________

Who is God in your struggle for freedom or liberation?

________________________________________________________________

________________________________________________________________

________________________________________________________________

What must you do to fight against injustice?

________________________________________________________________

________________________________________________________________

________________________________________________________________

3. How do we confront an already violent system? The Black Lives Matter Movement have employed strategies such as body-blocking highways to disrupt social normalcy and die-ins to recognize the lives of those killed by police brutality.

What demonstration(s) do you think are necessary to resist the injustices being waged against Black people today?

________________________________________________________________

________________________________________________________________

________________________________________________________________

Lesson Eleven

**Lest We Forget**

**Pre-Class Exploration**

**Scripture**
Galatians 5:1; Deuteronomy 26:5-10; Exodus 19:5; Ephesians 2:8-10

**Synopsis**
As we draw near the end of our study, we must engage the relationship of liberation and reconciliation. Is reconciliation a gift from God? How might reconciliation and forgiveness walk together? Let’s examine James Cone’s interpretation and explore this critical topic together.

**Reading**
*God of the Oppressed* Chapter Ten “Liberation and Reconciliation,” pgs. 207-226

**Theological Terms**
Atonement
Cheap Grace
Costly Grace
Reconciliation

**Devotion/Prayer**

“God of our weary years, God of our silent tears, Thou who has brought us thus far on the way. Thou who has by thy might led us into the light, Keep us forever in the path, we pray;

Lest our feet stray from the places, our God where we met Thee, Lest, our hearts drunk with the wine of the world, we forget Thee. Shadowed beneath Thy hand, May we forever stand True to our God, true to our native land!”

~ James Weldon Johnson
Scripture

Galatians 5:1 (NRSV)

1 For freedom Christ has set us free. Stand firm, therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery.

Summary Sketch

The question that comes up when Black people defend their rights or take a stance against an oppressed society is the subject of the "biblical doctrine of reconciliation" and "Christian forgiveness" (207). Cone asserts that the difficulty in addressing reconciliation and forgiveness is not in the question itself, but in who is asking the question and almost always comes up when addressed to Blacks by whites (207). Cone’s position is that we dare not forget. In doing so, “black theologians must refuse to accept a view of reconciliation that pretends that slavery never existed,” that erases the history of lynching in this nation, and disregards that the struggle is continuing in this present day (208). Ultimately, reconciliation is a divine act that embraces the whole world, affects our relationship with God, and relates to divine liberation. Cone points to the reconciliation of God in the Old Testament through the liberation of Israel in The Exodus as well as the New Testament that reveals Jesus as the Reconciler and Liberator of those oppressed, including the poor and weak. Cone contends that “there is an essential connection between liberation and reconciliation that is virtually absent in the history of Christian thought” (211). Cone’s idea of reconciliation is that reconciliation is not only what God does to bring freedom to the oppressed, but what oppressed people do to remain faithful to their gift of freedom (213).

Historical Highlights

Many have died at the hands of injustice that we soon forget their names and their faces. But, Mamie Till Mobley would not let us forget the injustice done to her only son, Emmett Till. Emmett was just 14 years old when he met his fate after walking into a Mississippi general store in 1955. It was there that a white woman named Carolyn Bryant accused him of whistling, touching and groping her. Though the accusations were false, and she eventually recanted her story, white vigilantes took Emmett, beat, and shot him to the point of disfigurement that he was unrecognizable by his mother. Mamie Till Mobley would not let America forget what was done to her son so she observed his life with an open-casket funeral. Mobley would not let us forget Emmett
Till, the injustice, or his name. Today, we must continue to say the names of persons who have been wrongly killed by police brutality or other forms of violence. In doing so, we reclaim the stories of black lives lost unjustly and recall those accounts for America's memory. We shall never forget!

Theological Touchpoints

Cone wrestles with the preoccupation with reconciliation by the oppressor to forget or erase the wrong done to oppressed people. Cone laments, “The Christian view of reconciliation has nothing to do with black people being nice to white people as if the gospel demands that we ignore their insults and their humiliating presence” (207). Reconciliation points to the divine act of God entering into relationship with the political realities of God’s people and taking the side of the oppressed. Reconciliation is double-edged for Cone (1). “From God’s side, reconciliation between blacks and whites mean that God is unquestionably on the side of the oppressed blacks struggling for justice” (215). (2) “On the human side, reconciliation means that we blacks must accept our new existence by struggling against all who try to make us slaves” (218). We shall never forget. Cone calls for another kind of reconciliation that is beyond the Black and white divide. The Black theologian should also be concerned with being reconciled with Black people and other oppressed groups across the globe. Who are we for each other? Cone writes, “It is therefore black people’s reconciliation with each other, in America, Africa, and the islands of the sea, that must be the black theologian’s primary concern” (225).

Contemporary Connections

From the earliest arrival of slave ships to the Emancipation of slaves in 1865, Black Americans have endured oppression for more than 400 years. Many of our fore parents, not too many years ago were once enslaved, worked for plantation owners, picked cotton on slaveholder’s farms, and endured a hostile world. How can we forget the struggles of our ancestors? Never shall forget! From the bus boycotts to the sit-ins to the nonviolent marches, Black Americans endured the segregation of the Civil rights era. Some of our parents and grandparents participated in these protests and walked the miles with Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Some became militant protestors under the Black Power regime. How can we forget the struggles of our parents and surrogate parents? Never shall forget from the White House to the court house to the police brutality facing Black Americans that ushered in the Black Lives movement, we have had social and political unrest. The deaths of Trayvon Martin, Michael Brow, Freddie
Gray, Eric Garner, Sandra Bland, Tamir Rice, Korryn Gaines, Botham Jean, and countless others who have pushed society to address a long overdue conversation about the condition of the lives of African-American girls, boys, young men and women. How can we forget the struggles of our brothers, sisters and friends who have suffocated under the hands of police brutality and still cannot breathe? We shall never forget!

**Critical Questions**

1. James Cone states “we must not be afraid to ask the hard questions. In a society dominated by white people, what does Paul mean when he says that Christ is "our peace, who made us… one, and has broken down the dividing wall of hostility," reconciling us to God "in one body through the cross, thereby bringing the hostility to an end" (208). Cone asks the following questions for us to ponder:

   “Are we to conclude that the hostility between blacks and whites has been brought to an end?” If not, why hasn’t it ceased?

   __________________________________________________________________________

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2. The Bible tells us that we must forgive our brothers and sisters. Matthew 18:21-22 in the new King James version of the Bible reads: Then Peter came to Him and said, "Lord, how often shall my brother sin against me, and I forgive him? Up to seven times?" Jesus said to him, "I do not say to you, up to seven times, but up to seventy times seven."

   Is forgiveness and reconciliation the same thing?

   __________________________________________________________________________

   __________________________________________________________________________

   __________________________________________________________________________
How do we forgive those who have oppressed us and are continuing to do so?

________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________

3. Cone disagreed with the stance of the Black theologian named J. Deotis Roberts that “implied that “black people ought to forget their slavery and oppression and be prepared to join hands, in Christian love, with white oppressors” (219).

Which position do you align with most?

________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________

### Lesson Twelve

**Title**

Where Do We Go From Here?

**Subject**

Pre-Class Exploration

**Scripture**

*Micah 6:8, Acts 1:8*

**Synopsis**

We Made It! Our final lesson discussing *God of the Oppressed* invites you to think deeply about how the study of Black liberation theology from the writings of James Cone adds new imagination and perspective to your theology.

**Devotion/Prayer**

“*Heavenly Father, we thank thee for the opportunity of coming into thy house. We thank thee for our new understandings of the teachings of thy Son, Jesus Christ. We thank thee for knowledge that we are sustained and supported by thy strength and thy power. Be with us in everything we do in our efforts to unite and come together, in our efforts to fight against the enemy who would destroy us. Be with us in the difficult task of uniting and building a black peoplehood which has meaning in terms of today’s world. We pray to thee with a sense of confidence in the future, The things which must be done, we will do. Sustain and support us as we go about our task. Amen.*”

~ Albert B. Cleage, Jr.
Scripture

Micah 6:8 (NRSV)

He has told you, O mortal, what is good; and what does the LORD require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?

Acts 1:8 (NRSV)

But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.”

Summary Sketch

James Cone helped to forge new thinking about the relationship between Christian theology and the Black experience. It is important to note that Cone’s development of Black theology was shaped out of deep affirmation of Black people and the struggle to survive rather than an interest in sanctioning hatred toward white people. Cone speaks against whiteness as a system of domination that oppresses Black people, in particular. Just as Cone shared his Black religious experience at Macedonia A.M.E. Church, we too have an experience of faith to share. As the Gospel writers reveal, Cone helps us to discern Jesus as the Liberator who relates to the struggle of oppressed people. As we conclude our reading of James Cone’s God of the Oppressed and look back on where we have come from, we can express growth, enlightenment, and new hope for liberation in Christ Jesus. In his final memoir Said I Wasn’t Gonna Tell Nobody (2018), Cone writes, “Black liberation theology strives to open a world in which black people’s dignity is recognized.”

Historical Highlights

Martin Luther King Jr.’s last book bears the same title of our lesson this week, Where do we go from here? Chaos or Community (1967). Following the March to Freedom from Selma to Montgomery that culminated in the signing of the Voting Rights Act of 1965 to grant Blacks the right to vote, King knew that the journey ahead for the Civil Rights Movement would produce unexpected challenges. Voting was not enough; there was more work to do. Black people needed economic justice in the forms of employment, decent healthcare, fair housing, and equal access to education that would require that
the movement continue. *Where do we go from here?* aligns with King’s last speech in Memphis, TN “I’ve Been to the Mountaintop” on April 3, 1968, the eve of his assassination. King gave a prophetic charge to Memphis to continue the struggle of justice to the end. King proclaims, “Let us rise up tonight with a greater readiness. Let us stand with a greater determination. And let us move on in these powerful days, these days of challenge to make America what it ought to be. We have an opportunity to make America a better nation.” Staying in the struggle to the end gives new clarity to the reality that every generation faces its own clarion call to RISE to the occasion and contribute its gifts to the struggle.

**Theological Touchpoints**

The final closing poem (at the end of Unit 4) entitled “futures” is written by theologian Oluwatomisin Oredein. Oredein invites us to think theologically about what Cone’s theology calls us the church to represent and do. Oredein asserts,

> James Cone is often considered a theological prophet with a fiery tongue -- his words ignite change because it unsettles the status quo. His call for social justice, his call for reform in the theological imaginations of the Christian church invoke images of fire -- from his passionate voice to the Spirit whose presence in the church and the world can make all things new. What would it mean to consider *God of the Oppressed* (as well as all of Cone's works) not only passionate work(s) but also pneumatological invitation(s), one(s) that encourage(s) the ending of one world in order to live fully into another, a true one? How does the church imagine forward? "futures" holds these ideas and questions together through centering the hopes of the church (Cone suggests) God is calling forth.

**Contemporary Connections**

On August 11-12, 2017, the world witnessed one of the largest uprisings of white supremacist/Neo-Nazi groups in Charlottesville, VA in efforts to "Unite the Right." The popular slogans as white supremacists marched with tiki torches in the night were "You Will Not Replace Us" and "One People, One Nation, End Immigration" on the campus of the University of Virginia at Charlottesville. Since the election of the 45th President Donald Trump, scholars have argued that the rise of white supremacy is a result of whitelash to the leadership of the 44th President Barack Obama for eight years. With 45
at the helm of this nation, racists, fascists, bigots feel comfortable unveiling their hatred openly. Theologian Kelly Brown Douglas argues in “Charlottesville and the Truth about America” that the increasing visibility of white supremacist groups exposes the truth that whiteness is at the core of the founding of this nation. Douglas suggests, “While the Charlottesville, VA ‘Unite the Right Rally’ is certainly alarming. It should come as no real surprise. For as disgusting as many Americans find the beliefs of these alt-right crusaders, their white supremacist beliefs reflect an ugly truth about this country. The truth is this country, even as it proclaims freedom and justice for all, was founded on an Anglo-Saxon myth of white racial superiority.”³ In the age of government shutdown, executive sanctions to build walls to turn away neighbors, policies to repeal DACA and unequal access to quality healthcare, Charlottesville exposes Trump’s presidential campaign to Make America Great Again, is synonymous with “Make America White Again” or “Make America Hate Again.” The truth is: If America has ever been great, (which points to any point in American history where citizens have lived up to the American ideals of liberty, justice, and equality), then such greatness must be marked, in large part, on the backs of oppressed people. Cone’s theology is still relevant for today as we call out white supremacy, racism, and injustice not simply as a thing of the past, but with a willingness to confront both the present and the future.

**Critical Questions**

1. Where do we go from here? What do you envision as the next steps for our homes, churches and communities?

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   __________________________________________

   __________________________________________

2. What does it mean to do justice, love mercifully, and walk humbly with God today?

   __________________________________________

   __________________________________________

   __________________________________________
3. Who/What did you discover about Jesus in this study?

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________________________________________________________________

4. How will your new understanding inform your influence in the world?

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________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________

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Unscramble the Theological Terms Below.

1. **PAHEC CGERA**
2. **ANOEICIRCNOTIL**
3. **ITRULYG**
4. **OILIENBTAR**
5. **LAOS PARRTUSCI**
6. **IOONNAIK**
7. **TOCLYS EAGCR**
8. **CTTFOISJAIINU**
9. **ICANRENTA**
10. **SOEFIHLPLW**

Answers:

1. **Cheap Grace**
2. **Reconciliation**
3. **Liturgy**
4. **Liberation**
5. **Sola Scriptura**
6. **Koinonia**
7. **Incarnation**
8. **Justification**
9. **Fellowship**
10. **Incahoots**
futures
by Oluwatomiisin Oredein

we were hoping for a ground-tree
a bush, some call it
tongues on fire
holy pyromaniacs
consumed by hope
for the better

we desire flames
require fire—
oh, purify we,
God of the obsessed

our true life,
our kindled thriving,
is not
on the other side of ashes
but wild
wind rustling our throats
into harmonies
angels have yet to know

we've incited something new
we say futures with an "s," instead
sure some piecemeal possibility
will carry us out of harm's way
singe troubled endings,
unwilling sacrifices,
dismember all that is not
for our good

and they will be as perfect
as God Herself

we hope, no - we prefer
the audacious sound of hearts
and singing
sharpened flattened
notes swayed and unbreaking
curled in mouths
hell bent on having—
on deserving—
too many futures
to choose from

we prefer
inhaling
expedient invitations
to settle into
what's to come...

we prefer
ourselves
Supplemental Resources
Opening

Black Theology – “a theology of and for black people, an examination of their stories, tales and sayings” (16).

Liberation Theology(ies) – A series of movements in Christian theology that emerged in the late 1960s, which addresses liberation from oppression as the ultimate reality of salvation. James Cone is the father of liberation theology in North America and father of Black liberation theology as one of the first to articulate the relationship between Black liberation and Christian theology. For Cone, liberation theology is the gospel of Jesus Christ.

Oppression – 1. Unjust treatment or control of another group based on any form of difference; 2. misuse and abuse of power or privilege that employs strategies and tactics to maintain power or privilege by a particular group over/against another; 3. the use of coercive force (physical, mental, spiritual, economic, etc.) or violence to harm a group or individual and prevent from thriving in any given culture or society. The acts aforementioned, whether direct or indirect, subtle or blatant, visible or invisible usually refer to ongoing repetitive, trauma–inducing, systemic, and cyclical insults against another.

Systematic Theology – The study of theology that seeks to align Christian doctrines (i.e. concepts of God, Christ, Spirit, Trinity, church, sin, salvation, and times, etc.) in a rational order or system.

Theology – From the Greek words “Theos” and “logos,” theology in its basic sense is God talk. Theology is not God speaking, but human speech that seeks to articulate the interrelatedness of God, humanity, and the whole of creation.

Whiteness – A social construct and system of domination at the heart of the American society that privileges white people and fortifies white experiences, behaviors, values over and against nonwhite peoples and groups. Whiteness as a theoretical concept undergirds racial, social, political, religious, and economic oppression of nonwhites.

Chapter 1 - Introduction

Black Church – In the brush arbors and hush harbors, the Black Church began as an invisible institution where enslaved Africans met in the wilderness to fellowship with each other and God away from slaveholders. The historical and visible Black Church represents the principle, autonomous institution in North America that influences the cultural, spiritual, social, political and spiritual dimensions of the Black community.

Discourse – The scripting and gathering of texts, ideas, actions, beliefs and practices to communicate a particular meaning and often used to legitimate structures of power.

Ethos – The characteristic spirit of a culture, era, or community as manifested in its beliefs and aspirations.

Exegesis – Critical interpretation of a text, especially scripture.

Homoousions/Homoousia – A Christological term meaning “one substance” developed at the first ecumenical Council of Nicea that maintains Jesus is of the same substance as God.

Survival – “a way of remaining physically alive in a situation of oppression without losing one’s dignity” (2).

Chapter 2: Speaking the Truth

Apocalyptic – Prophetic revelation of ultimate doom or catastrophe.

Heresy – “the refusal to speak the truth or to live the truth in the light of the One who is the Truth” (33).

Incarnation – The doctrine of the Christian theology that interprets God becoming human through the manifestation of Jesus Christ. Incarnation builds upon John 1:14 "And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father’s only son, full of grace and truth."

Incarnation opens new meaning for understanding an embodied God through Jesus who is not beyond humanity, but dwells among us, understanding and relating with human struggles.

Theological Praxis – “the church living in the world on the basis of what it proclaims” (34).

Truth – “transcendent (beyond the norm) reality, disclosed in the people’s historical struggle for liberation, which enables them to know that their fight for freedom is futile” (16).

Servitude – The state of bondage, captivity or enslavement.
God of the Oppressed Study Guide
Glossary of Theological Terms

Chapter 3: The Social Context of Theology

Anthropology – Study of the human condition.
Axiological – Derived from axiom; self–evident truth.
Dialectic – Discussion and reasoning by dialogue as a method of intellectual investigation.
Idealism – The practice of maintaining or believing unrealistic standards of perfection.
Social A Priori – A concept developed by sociologist who suggests one’s social environment shapes a person’s intellectual reasoning (48).
Tyranny – Cruel and oppressive governance or rule.

Chapter 4: Biblical Revelation and Social Existence

Hermeneutics – Lens or method of interpretation of the Bible or a given literary text.
Covenant – An agreement; a term used to characterize the relationship between Yahweh and the Hebrew people; [the foundation of Yahweh’s revelation through Word] (59).
Sine qua non – A Latin phrase for a necessary action or condition.
Ipso Facto – A Latin phrase for “by the very fact or act.”
Demythologization – A term first developed by German theologian Rudolf Bultmann that describes a hermeneutical approach to interpret text that distinguishes cosmology and history from theological and ethical teaching.
Yahweh – The Hebrew word for God that is derived from the Hebrew consonants “YHWH.” YHWH was used because the name of God was not too sacred to be spoken or written in Hebrew communities.

Chapter 5: Black Theology and Ideology

Ideology – “deformed thought, meaning that a certain idea or ideas are nothing but the function of the subjective interest of an individual or group” (83).
Dogma – A principle or set of principles laid down by an authority as undisputed or undeniably true, without consideration of evidence or the opinion of others.

Chapter 6: Who is Jesus Christ for Us Today?

Christology – The Study of Christ; doctrine of Christian tradition that engages the role, person, nature, and witness of Jesus Christ.
Docetism – An early belief that claims Jesus Christ was not a real person, which was considered heresy.
Eschatology – A Christian doctrine of theology concerned with the end times and the ultimate destiny of humanity.
Paradox – Something that appears contradictory, but once fully realized bears significant truth. (i.e. Jesus Christ is fully human and fully divine, bearing distinct parts that work collaboratively; yet we can never be sure when Jesus is operating or at what point Jesus is working out of his humanity or divinity).

Chapter 7: The Meaning of Liberation

Hypocrisy – One’s appearance of beliefs that does not match up to one’s practices.
Blasphemy – An affront or insult to God; lack of reverence towards God or sacred things.
Chapter 8: Divine Liberation and Black Suffering

Black Humanism – A concept of black philosophical thinking that addresses a heightened sense of human capacity. Both theist and non–theist humanist traditions exist within the Black community.

Black Passivity – Black acceptance of black suffering, without active response or resistance.

Orthodox – A tradition in Christian theology that suggests a “right” teaching exists.

Q Source (gospel sayings) – A hypothetical written collection of Jesus’ sayings that were a part of the oral traditions of the early Church and sampled by the gospel writers of Matthew and Luke.

Retribution – Punishment inflicted on someone as vengeance for a wrong or criminal act.

Sovereignty of God – A belief that God is the supreme authority with full rights and power; an attribute of God as the Creator of heaven and earth with absolute authority to do or allow whatever God desires.

Theodicy – Christian doctrine that deals with the classical question “If God is good, then why does evil exist?”

Chapter 9: Liberation and the Christian Ethic

Sola scriptura – A Latin term meaning “Scripture alone.” It comes from German Theologian and leader of the Protestant Reformation Martin Luther who used this phrase to speak to the authority of Scripture in his break away from the Catholic Church.

Koinonia – A Greek word meaning the coming together of Christians for communion and fellowship with God and each other.

Liturgy – A form of public Christian worship.

Chapter 10: Liberation and Reconciliation

Atonement – God taking our place and does for us what we could not do for ourselves (217).

Cheap Grace – a term developed by German Theologian Bonhoeffer that says, “Cheap grace is grace without discipleship, grace without the cross, grace without Jesus Christ, living incarnate” (214).

Costly Grace – costly grace recognizes that reconciliation is bound up with the repentance and According to Bonhoeffer there is no “justification of sin without the justification of the sinner” (214).

Reconciliation – a divine action that embraces the whole world, changing our relationship with God and making us new creatures (209).
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Bibliography


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