

Jesus in North America (6) **The Black Jesus**

The African-American history is a tale of slavery, suffering, prejudice, and a longing for equality. Africans were taken from their homelands, torn from different tribes and governments, betrayed by their own countrymen or African captors, bought and brutalized by alien "masters." While in slavery, many became Christians. In *We Have Been Believers: An African-American Systematic Theology*, James H. Evans, Jr. notes that the Jesus the slaves encountered as they were exposed to the Bible was a caring and liberating friend who shared their sorrows and burdens. Furthermore, this Jesus was able to bring real change in their personal condition and their collective estate. Evans observes that it was impossible, however, to speak of this Jesus without relating Him to the condition of slavery and exploitation. He also argues that the idea of Jesus is so deeply ingrained in the religious experience of African-Americans that some scholars have claimed – within the context of a negative assessment of black religion – that the Christianity of African people in the United States is, in essence, "*Jesusology*."

The Liberator

Many African Christians portray Jesus as the Liberator from social oppression and as a mediator of the goodness of God and as a victor over the cosmic forces of evil. In the Old Testament they saw their story. As slaves of Pharaoh did, black slaves could yearn for their own Moses, to take them to the Promised Land. In *American Jesus*, Stephen Prothero points out that from the beginning of the slave trade through the founding of the black church and the members of the civil rights movement, they have interpreted their experiences in the light of Exodus themes, claiming for themselves God's promise to deliver His chosen people from captivity, and find in their midst a series of Moses figures. But to get to the root of the view of Jesus among African-Americans, we must examine the formation of the African-American spirituals. One well-known spiritual clearly expresses the longing for freedom from slavery:

When Israel was in Egypt's land
(Let my people go),
Oppressed so hard they could not stand
(Let my people go).

The Black Jesus

In reaction to the Jesus proclaimed by the whites, the nineteenth century slaves and their free descendants began to shape Jesus in their own image – the Black Jesus. In 1829, Alexander Young's *Ethiopian Manifesto*, referred to the appearance of black Messiah. In the 1890s the Rev. Henry McNeal Turner, an influential bishop in the African Methodist Episcopal Church, paved the way for a greater acceptance of a Black Jesus when he affirmed that "God is a Negro". Marcus Mosiah Garvey, Jr. (1887-1940), widely acclaimed as "Moses of the Negro Race", affirmed the literal blackness of Jesus. "Never admit that Jesus Christ was a white man," he told his followers. In 1949, the

African-American theologian Howard Thurman argued in his book, *Jesus and the Disinherited*, that salvation is essentially social/political. For him, the crucial question was, "who is Jesus for the downtrodden?" He wrote, "The masses of men live with their backs against the wall. They are the poor, the disinherited, the dispossessed. What does our religion say to them? The issue is not what it counsels them to do for others whose need may be greater, but what religion offers to meet their own need." And for Thurman, the "Jesus' religion" is a direct response to the concrete sufferings of the oppressed.

Albert B. Cleage Jr. (1911-2000) was the most celebrated radical theologian inside the black church in the late 1960s. He advocated black separatism in politics and economics. He was convinced that his ideas would go nowhere without the support of the black church. So he began a Christian form of Black Power centred on a Black Messiah. His influential collection of sermons called *The Black Messiah* (1968) was focussed on Israel's exodus from Egypt. He portrayed the Black Messiah as a Black Moses – a liberator from oppression, not a Saviour from sin. He imagined heaven on earth as a black kingdom, and he championed violence as a path through the wilderness, arming his black Moses with a sword. He argued that the first step toward black liberation was the crucifixion of the white Christ and the resurrection of a Black Messiah. "Black people cannot build dignity on their knees worshipping a white Christ," he wrote. "We must put down this white Jesus which the white man gave us in slavery and which has been tearing us to pieces." He reconstructed Jesus as the black hero of a black nation. According to Cleage, the Israelites were a black people. Jesus was a black man born of a black woman who was descended from black Israelites.

In *Black Theology and Black Power* (1969), James Cone, a young black professor, became the leading spokesman for an American version of the Latin American theology of liberation that became known as Black Liberation theology. Like Cleage, Cone attempted to integrate the Jesus of the black church with the ways and means of Black Power. He said that Black Power was "Christ's central message to twentieth century America." Cone also followed Cleage in colouring Jesus black.

Black Jesus images began showing up on stained-glass windows, paintings, and murals in black churches during the 1980s as Afro-centrist thinking spread from campuses to congregations and more African Americans came to see Africa as the fountainhead of both Judaism and Christianity. In the 1990's, those images proliferated in Bibles specially designed for black Africans, including *The Original African Heritage Study Bible* (1993) and the *African American Jubilee Edition* (1999). Of course, not all African Americans accepted this black Jesus. Tom Skinner (1942-1194), an evangelical, argued in his book, *How Black Is the Gospel?* (1970), that though Jesus lived in violent and revolutionary times, he did not identify or support violent revolution. "Whatever contemporary man decides about the 'color' of religion, Christ stands outside that debate. Even a superficial reading of the gospel reveals that Christ showed only one special interest – allegiance to His Father and the Kingdom of God. He was owned by no man, He belonged to no particular group, and He refused to sanction one party or system over another. He was God in the form of a man – neither black nor white." John

M. Perkins, another prominent African American evangelical said of Skinner, "He was a prophet without honor because he was hitting at themes of reconciliation that were too radical for blacks and whites alike."

Jesus Without Skin Colour

Black Theology and the Black Jesus are the consequences of bigotry and racism which are woven into the very warp and woof of American society. The dictionary defines *racism* as "a belief that racial differences produce an inherent superiority of a particular race." The word *race* (as applied to people) does not appear in the Bible, nor does the term racism. But racism is not just a sin committed by the Caucasian (white) race. It has enslaved and oppressed people around the world. At its heart, racism is a spiritual malady. It is a violation of God's law of love. And an act of rebellion against God's revealed truth that all human beings are created in God's image. We need to deal with the sin of racism, not on the basis of sociological or anthropological insights or cultural dictates, but on the basis of Scripture which declares that the grace of God is for all people (Titus 2:11). The Bible does give clear guiding principles to follow in dealing with the age-old problem of prejudice, favouritism based on race, ethnicity, or class.

1. Created in the image of God

God's Word declares that man's worth and dignity are derived from being a child of God by creation (Ps. 8:4). We are created in the image of God. The image of God is a universal human characteristic, since each one of us, no matter our racial or cultural background, has been created by the same Triune God. This fact leads to the truth that every person has inestimable value. It implies a radical unity and equality of all people. Therefore, the Christian faith allows no room for holding that other human beings are fundamentally different from "us" or somehow less truly made in God's image than "we" are.

2. The Church

Racism is sin because it teaches that a person can be excluded from acceptance into the family of faith based on colour of skin, when the gospel teaches that the only basis of exclusion from the Body of Christ is sin, not skin. The Church is the new community. The church is where the rich diversity of cultural and ethnic differences should be accepted. In church we worship *together*. There is an old saying, "The ground is level at the foot of the cross." The oneness of the family of God makes us blood kin, for it is the blood of Jesus that cleanses us from all unrighteousness – and that "all" includes racism. In Christ we accept each other, not as Europeans, Africans, Orientals and so on, but as Christians. *Lord's Day 21 of the Heidelberg Catechism* is still one of the most eloquent descriptions of this community. Q 54: What do you believe concerning the "Holy Catholic Church"? Answer: "That out of the whole human race, from the beginning to the end of the world, the Son of God, by His Spirit and Word, gathers, defends and preserves for Himself unto everlasting life a chosen communion in the unity of the true faith; and that I am and forever shall remain a living member of this communion."

3. *Reconciliation*

Racial reconciliation is a vital part of the unfolding drama of redemption. The Church's responsibility is to be light and salt. Racial reconciliation should be on her agenda (2 Cor. 5:19). God did not give this ministry to the government but to the church. If we are going to follow Jesus, then the devotion we have for Him must be reflected in our attitude towards *others*, who also have been created in the image of God, and they are precious in His sight. Therefore, we must resolve to stand publicly and privately for racial reconciliation and justice and to speak out against racism whenever and wherever we encounter it.

Continue
Johan D. Tangelder