

Traces of a Theology of the Cross in James H. Cone's *Black Theology and Black Power*

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Abstract: Despite several scholars describing James Cone's final book, *The Cross and the Lynching Tree* as his theology of the cross, the possible presence of this theme in Cone's first book, *Black Theology and Black Power*, has not been explored. Therefore, this article examines Cone's first book for traces of the theology of the cross. The article investigates Cone's creative synthesis of black theology and the Black Power movement, Cone's early Christology, his collective-political and eschatological expansion of the "happy exchange," his references to texts from the early Martin Luther, and his re-interpretation of the Pauline-Lutheran themes of "neighbor love" and "new creation" for following Jesus Christ in the ghetto. By so doing, the article claims that Cone's theology up to 1975 contributed to the ongoing tradition of the theology of the cross, and that mystical-sapiential and prophetic theology can be connected through Cone's early theology for a contemporary Lutheran theology of the cross.

Keywords: James Cone; Martin Luther; Theology of the Cross; Martin Luther King, Jr.; Malcolm X

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Introduction

James H. Cone (1938–2018) is widely known as the founder of black liberation theology, but his development as a black theologian is not typically thought of in connection with the constructive re-interpretation of Luther's theology of the cross in twentieth-century European theology.¹ Further, despite several scholars describing Cone's final book, *The Cross and the Lynching Tree*² as

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- 1 I mean especially a re-interpreted theology of the cross as can be found in Karl Barth, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Rudolf Bultmann, Paul Tillich, Anders Nygren, Jürgen Moltmann, and Wolfhart Pannenberg. James Cone draws from these theologians in his early work.
 - 2 James H. Cone, *The Cross and the Lynching Tree* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2011). N. B. I have referred to Cone's *Cross and the Lynching Tree* as his final book, because it is the last book he published during his lifetime. However, his second autobiographical reflection, *Said I Wasn't Gonna Tell Nobody*, was published posthumously in 2018. See James

his theology of the cross, the possible presence of a theology of the cross in Cone's first book, *Black Theology and Black Power*,³ has not been explored.⁴ Therefore, this article examines Cone's *Black Theology and Black Power* for traces⁵ of the theology of the cross and proposes a previously overlooked hermeneutic for reading Cone's first book related to a contemporary Lutheran theology of the cross. We will explore Cone's creative synthesis of black theology and the Black Power movement, Cone's reception, synthesis, and development of several twentieth-century European theologians in his early Christology who can all be placed within the tradition of the theology of the cross, Cone's collective-political and eschatological expansion of the "happy exchange," his references to texts from the early Martin Luther, and his re-interpretation of the Pauline-Lutheran themes of "neighbor love" and "new creation" for following Jesus Christ in the ghetto. By so doing, we will examine how Cone's theology up to 1975 contributed to the ongoing tradition of the theology of the cross, and how mystical-sapiential and prophetic theology might be connected through Cone's (early) theology for a contemporary Lutheran theology of the cross.⁶

H. Cone, *Said I Wasn't Gonna Tell Nobody: The Making of a Black Theologian* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2018).

- 3 James H. Cone, *Black Theology and Black Power*, 1st ed. (New York, NY: Seabury, 1969).
- 4 My monograph on the theology of the cross and James Cone, from which the present article is based, reworked, and expanded, is an exception. See Brach S. Jennings, *Transfiguring a Theologia Crucis through James Cone* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2023). For arguments that Cone's *The Cross as the Lynching Tree* is his theology of the cross, see Dominik Gautier, "The Cross and the Lynching Tree: Die Kreuzestheologie James H. Cones," *Ökumenische Rundschau* 64:2 (2015), 198–206; Dominik Gautier, "Theology as Blues: Zum Tod von James H. Cone," *Ökumenische Rundschau* 67:3 (2018), 426–29; Mark R. Glanville, "The Birth of the Blues and the Birth of Biblical Law in Parallel: A Dialogue with James Cone's Theology of the Cross," *Review and Expositor* 117:1 (2020), 114–27, and Joshua Heavin, "Power Made Perfect in Weakness: *Theologia Crucis* in 2 Corinthians 13:3–4," *Journal of Theological Interpretation* 13:2 (2019), 251–79. Cf. Jürgen Moltmann, "Personal Reflections of James H. Cone," *Theology Today* 75:2 (2018), 277–80.
- 5 My use of the term "trace" is indebted to the philosopher Jacques Derrida. Derrida emphasizes that original authorial intent and historical context is one level of textual interpretation among numerous possible readings, per his argument "there is no outside text." See Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, trans. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1976), 61, 158.
- 6 I have chosen 1975 as the terminus for what I have called "Cone's early theology" because Cone's theology undergoes a change in *God of the Oppressed*, wherein he no longer first consults European theological hermeneutics indebted to Karl Barth, Rudolf Bultmann, and Paul Tillich in particular for constructing his theology, but draws instead from black music, folk tales, and history as the building blocks for a new theological

Interpreting Martin Luther's Early Theology in Relation to James H. Cone's *Black Theology and Black Power* for a Contemporary Theology of the Cross

The motif "theology of the cross" has been synonymous with the German Augustinian monk and Reformer Martin Luther (1483–1546) since Walther von Loewenich's (1903–1992) historical-systematic survey in the 1920s of Luther's theology from the *Heidelberg Disputation* of 1518 through the Reformer's mature *Lectures on Genesis* (completed 1545).⁷ Employing an interpretive framework indebted to Karl Barth's dialectical theology, von Loewenich argued that Luther's "theology of the cross" centered in the *Heidelberg Disputation* is a theology of revelation, wherein God is known as hidden in suffering through the crucified Christ.⁸ For von Loewenich, the theology of the cross was not only crucial to understanding Luther, but a "specific kind of theology" that "provides the center for all theological statements," including the doctrine of justification.⁹ Von Loewenich's dialectical reading of Luther's theology has been nuanced, critiqued, and developed further through historical research into Luther's theology in the context of late medieval passion mysticism as pioneered by Heiko A. Oberman (1930–2001).¹⁰ This research argues that the early Luther can fruitfully be seen as a late medieval Catholic friar who inherited and transformed the passion mysticism common in his day and before, seen in mystics such as Bernard of Clairvaux (1090–1153), Meister Eckhart (c. 1260–c. 1328), Johannes Tauler (1300–1361),

hermeneutic – even as his theology from *God of the Oppressed* onward remains in dialogue with European theologians. See James H. Cone, *God of the Oppressed*, Revised ed. (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1997), 5. I will occasionally still reference texts that fall outside what I have here denoted as Cone's "early theology," however, in so far as motifs from Cone's *Black Theology and Black Power* are either found in the later texts, or are illumined by them.

7 See Walther von Loewenich, *Luther's Theology of the Cross*, trans. Herbert J. A. Bouman (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg, 1976).

8 *Ibid.*, 30.

9 *Ibid.*, 18.

10 See Heiko A. Oberman, "Simul genitus et raptus. Luther und die Mystik," in Heiko A. Oberman, *Die Reformation: Von Wittenberg nach Genf* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1986), 45–89, and Heiko A. Oberman, *Luther: Man Between God and the Devil*, trans. Eileen Walliser-Schwarzbart (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1989).

and Johannes von Staupitz (1460–1524).¹¹ Through this revisionist historical research, Luther is returned to his own premodern context, rather than being seen as the person responsible for the birth of modernity.¹²

When constructive systematic theology privileges this revisionist research, Luther's theology of the cross becomes a theological motif about the mystical-sapiential encounter with God hidden in suffering through the crucified Christ.¹³ Understanding Luther's theology of the cross in relation to *sapientia* (wisdom) then means theology is existential, and is a written, lived, and even performed endeavor, wherein the words of the Bible stimulate human imagination, senses, desires, and longings amid suffering and the cross.¹⁴ However, a distinct Protestant identity rooted in justification (arguably the reverse side of the theology of the cross) as the prophetic critique of idolatry should not be lost in the effort to show Luther's Catholic

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- 11 See especially Berndt Hamm, *The Early Luther: Stages in a Reformation Re-Oriented*, trans. Martin Lohrmann (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 2013); Christine Helmer (ed.), *The Medieval Luther* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2020); Volker Leppin, *Transformationen: Studien zu den Wandlungsprozessen in Theologie und Frömmigkeit zwischen Spätmittelalter und Reformation* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2020); Franz Posset, *The Real Luther: A Friar at Erfurt and Wittenberg* (St. Louis, MO: Concordia, 2011); and Ronald R. Rittgers, *The Reformation of Suffering: Pastoral Theology and Lay Piety in Late Medieval and Early Modern Germany* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012).
- 12 Both images of Luther have been examined in an historical survey by Christine Helmer. See Christine Helmer, *How Luther Became the Reformer* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2019).
- 13 According to Oswald Bayer, Luther understood theology primarily as wisdom (*sapientia*), which had to do with experience(s) gleaned from the pre-scientific world, even as he included science (*scientia*) rather than excluding it. See Oswald Bayer, *Theology the Lutheran Way*, ed. and trans. Jeffrey G. Silcock and Mark C. Mattes (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2008), 28. Therefore, theology began in the church for Luther, and particularly with the monastic tradition of the public recitation of the Psalms, before he considered it as a university science. Luther's mystical-sapiential theology is related to his struggles with *Anfechtung* (agonizing struggle), and thus to the existential question of Christ's presence in suffering. See *Ibid.*, 60. For *Anfechtung* in relation to Luther's theology of the cross, see Vitor Westhelle, "Luther's *Theologia Crucis*," in Robert Kolb, Irene Dingel, and L'ubomir Batka (eds.), *The Oxford Handbook of Martin Luther's Theology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 165.
- 14 Luther writes in his later lectures on the *Psalms of Assent*: "Therefore, theology is infinite wisdom, because it can never be learned" (*Ideo Theologia est infinita sapientia, quia nunquam potest edisci*). Translation mine. See Martin Luther, *Vorlesungen über die Stufenpsalmen (1532–1533) [1540]*, in *D. Martin Luthers Werke Kritische Gesamtausgabe 40 (3)* (Weimar: Hermann Böhlhaus Nachfolger, 1930), 63 (17). Cf. Bayer's description of Luther's sapiential theology as related to *Anfechtung* in Bayer, *Theology the Lutheran Way*, 63–67.

roots.¹⁵ Fortunately, the mystical-sapiential and the prophetic are connected in Luther's early theology and do not need to be separated in constructive systematic theology in general.¹⁶

The theology of the cross as a theological motif has also expanded well beyond Luther, particularly in the second half of the twentieth century. Whereas Luther focused on theology for the perpetrators of *spiritual* sin (inhabiting the Augustinian tradition's understanding of sin as "pride") with the sinner standing always as *simul iustus et peccator* before God, twentieth-century theologies of the cross radicalized Luther's perpetrator-oriented understanding of sin toward the question of justification for victims and perpetrators of *systemic-political* sin.¹⁷ This expansion is pertinent to James

15 Here I have in mind Paul Tillich's argument for the creative tension between the Catholic substance and the Protestant principle (justification) for theology. See Paul Tillich, *Systematic Theology, Volume 3: Life in the Spirit, History and the Kingdom of God* (Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press, 1963), 245, and Carl E. Braaten, "Paul Tillich's Message for our Time," *Anglican Theological Review* 72:1 (1990), 16–25. The revisionist historical research into Luther's thinking retrieves the Catholic substance that von Loewenich overlooked, even in the later editions of his text where he was more sympathetic to mysticism (see Loewenich, *Luther's Theology of the Cross*, 147–66). Nevertheless, the caution for the revisionist approach to Luther remains not to lose the radicality of justification through an over-emphasis on Luther's Catholic roots. See Vitor Westhelle, "Justification as Death and Gift," *Lutheran Quarterly* 24:3 (2010): 249–62; 260. For justification as the reverse side of the theology of the cross, see Regin Prenter, *Luther's Theology of the Cross* (Philadelphia, PA: Fortress, 1971), 4. For Luther's *Heidelberg Disputation* and *The Freedom of a Christian* as critiques of idolatry, see Lois Malcolm, "Rahner's Theology of the Cross," in Paul G. Crowley, S. J. (ed.), *Rahner Beyond Rahner: A Great Theologian Encounters the Pacific Rim* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2005), 115–31.

16 See Martin Luther, *Two Kinds of Righteousness* (1519), in Harold J. Grimm and Helmut T. Lehmann (eds.), *Luther's Works Volume 31: Career of the Reformer 1* (Philadelphia, PA: Fortress, 1957), 297–306, and Lois Malcolm, "Mystical and Prophetic: The Theology of Paul Tillich Reconsidered," *Bulletin of the North American Paul Tillich Society* 32:4 (2006), 9–14. I am emphasizing Luther's early theology in this article, because Cone draws exclusively from the pre-1525 Luther in his *Black Theology and Black Power*. This need not imply, however, that the motif "theology of the cross" only applies to the early Luther, even as direct references to the "theology of the cross" or the "theologian of the cross" disappear in Luther's writings after 1518. See Jennings, *Transfiguring a Theologia Crucis through James Cone*, 16–22, 98–102.

17 In Luther, the phrase *simul iustus et peccator* can be found as early as the *Romans Lectures* of 1515–1516. See Hilton C. Oswald (ed.), *Luther's Works 25: Lectures on Romans, Glosses and Scholia* (St. Louis, MO: Concordia, 1972), 260, and Hamm, *The Early Luther*, 163. The development of the theology of the cross and the corresponding doctrine of justification toward victims and perpetrators of systemic sin, seen especially in Jürgen Moltmann's theology, was undertaken in light of twentieth-century catastrophes such

Cone's *Black Theology and Black Power*, as this text is arguably a prophetic theology written for black victims of the white racist society of the late 1960s United States, critiquing the white perpetrators of the idolatry of racism for the healing of black victims and white perpetrators alike.

If Luther's own theology of the cross brings together the mystical-sapiential and the prophetic, and the theology of the cross is seen as an ongoing theological tradition rather than a motif restricted exclusively to Luther, then James Cone's *Black Theology and Black Power* can be explored in relation to this tradition. The present article will thus investigate how Cone's first book contributed to the ongoing tradition of the theology of the cross, and how this text offers a hermeneutic for connecting mystical-sapiential and prophetic motifs for a contemporary Lutheran theology of the cross.

Before examining selections from *Black Theology and Black Power*, there are some biographical facts that need to be noted about Cone. Cone never described black theology as a theology of the cross. Also, he was not raised in a theological-ecclesial tradition related to Martin Luther but in the Macedonia African Methodist Episcopal Church in Bearden, Arkansas, where he was exposed to the personal presence of God in prayer, song, and sermon.¹⁸ Therefore, the existential-experiential roots of Cone's early theology are not found in Martin Luther, but in the black church tradition of the United States. So, while Cone identified himself as a Protestant, he described his faith as being shaped "more by the faith of the African slaves of nineteenth-century America than by the sixteenth-century Protestant Reformation."¹⁹ Finally, if Cone has a direct existential-experiential connection to the Protestant Reformation broadly understood, it is his appreciation for and radicalization of John Wesley's understanding of sanctification, rather than a personally acknowledged indebtedness to the theology of the cross.²⁰ These biographical

as the Holocaust and the Chernobyl explosion in 1986. See Alan E. Lewis, *Between Cross and Resurrection: A Theology of Holy Saturday* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2001). Lewis engages thoroughly with European and white North American literature about the tradition of the theology of the cross and contributes to the expansion of this tradition for twentieth-century ethical-political questions in light of the Holocaust and Chernobyl. He does not, however, address James Cone's theology.

18 Cone, *God of The Oppressed*, 1.

19 James H. Cone, "A Theological Challenge to the American Catholic Church," in James H. Cone, *Speaking the Truth: Ecumenism, Liberation, and Black Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1986), 50.

20 See Cone, *Speaking the Truth*, 29–34.

facts challenge this article's claim of a theology of the cross in his early thought.

However, Cone encountered Luther's theology of the cross *at least* indirectly in his doctoral studies under the British-American Luther scholar Philip S. Watson.²¹ Therefore, through a method of close reading that synthesizes literary criticism, reception history and historical theology, hermeneutics, and ethics, we will attempt to uncover traces of a theological motif beginning in and expanding beyond Martin Luther in Cone's *Black Theology and Black Power* that were first present in his work thanks to his doctoral studies under Watson, even as Cone did not refer to himself as a theologian of the cross in any of his writings.

Traces of a Theology of the Cross in James Cone's Creative Synthesis of Black Theology and the Black Power Movement

We begin by examining Cone's creative synthesis of black theology and the Black Power movement of the 1960s for traces of a theology of the cross. In *Black Theology and Black Power*, Cone presented a strong critique of white theology's failure to engage racism as a theological issue. As the title suggests, the book was written in the context of the Black Power movement as it emerged out of the Civil Rights movement, and Cone intended it to be a prophetic indictment on white theology (and the corresponding white churches) in the tradition of the biblical prophets.²² This book connected the

21 Cone would have encountered Watson's interpretation of Luther's theology of the cross particularly in Watson's 1947 Fernley-Hartley lecture published as *Let God be God*, which is cited in Cone's doctoral dissertation. See Philip S. Watson, *Let God Be God: An Interpretation of the Theology of Martin Luther* (Philadelphia, PA: Mühlenberg, 1948). For Cone's personal recollections of his relationship to Philip S. Watson, see Cone, *Said I Wasn't Gonna Tell Nobody*, 4–6, 28, 56–57, 82–84, 108. In a personal telephone conversation with me on October 18, 2016, Cone said the following about his relationship to Luther: "Lutherans domesticate Luther! I read a lot of Luther in graduate school because of my teacher Philip Watson! Luther was so radical they wanted to kill him!"

22 For details on the origins of black theology amidst the Black Power movement of the 1960s, see Gayraud S. Wilmore and James H. Cone (eds.), *Black Theology: A Documentary History, 1966–1979* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1979), 15–21. Cone notes that it is unclear who first used the term black theology, but that he was the first person to use the term in relation to a new constructive theology. See James H. Cone, *For My People: Black Theology and the Black Church* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1984), 19. For Cone's analysis of the intellectual development of black theology in relation to the Civil Rights and Black

Christian theological identity of Martin Luther King, Jr. and the radical black consciousness of Malcolm X in a creative synthesis, which would be present in all of Cone's subsequent theological books.²³ What has so far been overlooked in Cone's first constructive book, is the possibility of an underlying theology of the cross acting as a connecting theological motif that synthesizes not only King, Malcolm X, and major European theologians of Cone's time, but also mystical-sapiential and prophetic motifs for theology. We are thus investigating how this book can be read as a creative combination of a new, prophetic black theology in relation to the Civil Rights and Black Power movements with traces of the theology of the cross.

Cone recognizes that his constructive work lacks the neutrality required in academic theology. "This work, then, is written with a definite attitude, the attitude of an angry black man, disgusted with the oppression of black people in America and with the scholarly demand to be 'objective' about it."²⁴

Power movements, see *Ibid.*, 6–24. For historical essays on the Black Power movement, see Peniel E. Joseph (ed.), *The Black Power Movement: Rethinking the Civil Rights-Black Power Era* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2006). Finally, for the Hebrew Bible prophets as impassioned proclaimers of God's justice, see Marcus J. Borg, *Reading the Bible Again for the First Time: Taking the Bible Seriously but Not Literally* (New York, NY: Harper-Collins, 2001), 111–44. Especially important for Cone is Is. 61:1–3, from which Luke 4:17–20 is based.

- 23 See James H. Cone, "Introduction: Looking Back, Going Forward," in James H. Cone, *Risks of Faith: The Emergence of a Black Theology of Liberation, 1968–1998* (Boston: Beacon, 1999), xxi. Cf. James H. Cone, "Calling Oppressors to Account for Four Centuries of Terror," *Currents in Theology and Mission* 31:3 (2004), 179–86. It is also important to note that Cone incorporates the parts of King's political theology into his own work that are either overlooked or seen as radical by many white US-Americans. However, it can be argued that the radical King is the actual King, and vice versa. An example of the "radical King" is found in King's support of democratic socialism, demonstrated by his solidarity with garbage workers in Memphis, Tennessee, for which he was executed in April 1968. See Thomas F. Jackson, *From Civil Rights to Human Rights: Martin Luther King, Jr., and the Struggle for Economic Justice* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2009).
- 24 Cone, *Black Theology and Black Power*, 2. Throughout this article, the text of Cone's *Black Theology and Black Power* has been modified related to gender-inclusive language. This decision was made in relation to Cone's own insistence of the need to confront sexism as a black male theologian, and his decision to change the exclusive language of the 1970 edition of *A Black Theology of Liberation* to gender inclusive language in the 1986 edition. See James H. Cone, *A Black Theology of Liberation*, 40th Anniversary Edition (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2010), xx. Regarding the excerpt from *Black Theology and Black Power* cited here, Cone's tone is reminiscent of Malcolm X, who Cone also relates to the role of angry biblical prophet. See especially James H. Cone, *Martin and Malcolm and America: A Dream or a Nightmare?* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1991), 95.

It is precisely this prophetic deviation from the academic norm where traces of the theology of the cross in *Black Theology and Black Power* begin to be found, as this text can be interpreted as a radicalized prophetic theology of wisdom (*sapientia*) centered in the cross of Jesus Christ that connects to and radicalizes the early Martin Luther's Pauline-Augustinian theology of the cross (cf. 1 Cor. 1:18–31). In Thesis 22 of the *Heidelberg Disputation*, Luther contrasts the wisdom of the theologian of glory with the wisdom of the theologian of the cross. The former's wisdom "sees the invisible things of God in works as perceived by human beings" and is "completely puffed up, blinded, and hardened." The latter's wisdom centers in the worldly foolishness of the crucified Christ, who is the source for "true theology" amid suffering (proof to Thesis 20).²⁵ However, whereas the subject of theology for Luther is the sinful human being and the God who justifies, Cone's early theology is a prophetic theology for oppressed black people. Luther's overall theology is thus a theology for the perpetrators of *spiritual* sin, and Cone's *Black Theology and Black Power* is a theology for the victims of *systemic-political* sin.²⁶

In Cone, we see an example of a "transfiguration" of Luther's Pauline-Augustinian theology of the cross through Martin Luther King, Jr. and Malcolm X, wherein sapiential and prophetic theological motifs are connected for the liberation of black victims and their white perpetrators in a white racist society. Connecting King and Malcolm X arguably then means for Cone a synthesis between the motifs of divine delight and prophetic justice. The former relates to an Augustinian notion of theology as *sapientia* and

25 Martin Luther, *The Heidelberg Disputation (1518)* in LW 31: 41, 52–53. Understanding theology as *sapientia* is rooted overall in the Western church in the writings of Augustine of Hippo. See Brevard S. Childs, *Biblical Theology of the Old and New Testaments: Theological Reflection on the Christian Bible* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 1993), 36–37, and Benjamin T. Quinn, *Christ, the Way: Augustine's Theology of Wisdom* (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Academic, 2022). Luther's Pauline Augustinianism is revealed in the *Heidelberg Disputation* when he calls Augustine Paul of Tarsus's "most trustworthy interpreter" (LW 31: 39).

26 See Jennings, *Transfiguring a Theologia Crucis through James Cone*, 73–76 for a constructive expansion of Luther's (perpetrator-oriented) spiritual understanding of sin as related to the justification of the victims of systemic sin through the pioneering feminist theologian Valerie Saiving-Goldstein, Lutheran ethicist William H. Lazareth, and James Cone. For Luther's understanding of the "subject of theology" as the sinful human being and the God who justifies, see Oswald Bayer, *Martin Luther's Theology: A Contemporary Interpretation*, trans. Thomas H. Trapp (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2008), 29–42.

the latter relates to a prophetic critique from the perspective of divine delight. However, Christian religious faith relates to justice in King's theology and justice relates to Islamic religious faith in Malcom X's theology. Therefore, Cone sees the two political-theological figures as complementary instead of exclusionary, even as they correct and challenge each other at various points.²⁷

In any case, Cone argues theology must become prophetic if it is to remain faithful to Jesus Christ in relation to oppressed black people in the United States. Cone's angry and prophetic tone in light of the suffering of black people thus has a biblical and Christological basis and his first book is written as a challenge to the church to combat racism. "If the Church is to remain faithful to its Lord, it must make a decisive break with the structure of this society by launching a vehement attack on the evils of racism in all forms. It must become *prophetic*, demanding radical change in the interlocking structures of this society."²⁸ Cone urges the church and theology to become prophetic because he sees the Black Power movement as "Christ's central message to twentieth-century America."²⁹

Given the systemic oppression of blacks in the United States, Cone believes theologians need to become emotionally involved with the struggle for racial justice distinctively *as theologians*. "It seems that one weakness of most theological works is their 'coolness' in the investigation of an idea. Is it not time for theologians to get upset?"³⁰ Cone's writing here has an unmistakable existential urging to it, related to his understanding of Truth as "that which places a human being in touch with the real" after which one

27 For the process of "transfiguring" Luther's theology in contexts far removed from sixteenth-century Germany indebted to Erich Auerbach, Jacques Derrida, and postcolonial studies, see Vitor Westhelle, *Transfiguring Luther: The Planetary Promise of Luther's Theology* (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2016), 7, 111–23, 190, 318–19. For Cone's argument that King and Malcolm X should be seen as complementary rather than exclusionary, see Cone, *Martin and Malcolm and America*, 244–71. For a synthesis of the theological motifs of divine delight and prophetic justice, see Brach S. Jennings, "St. Augustine and Malcolm X as Theological Figures in Relation to a Contemporary *Theologia Crucis* in Solidarity with the #BlackLivesMatter Movement," *Currents in Theology and Mission* 49:1 (2022), 64–70.

28 Cone, *Black Theology and Black Power*, 2. Italic in original.

29 *Ibid.*, 1. Cf. Wilmore and Cone (eds.), *Black Theology: A Documentary History, 1966–1979*, 15–23.

30 *Ibid.*, 3.

is “prepared to give all for it.”³¹ Theologians being “upset” at the condition of oppressed blacks in the United States thus allows them to critique white oppressors for the sake of the existence of the oppressed. “This is a word to the oppressor, a word to Whitey, not in hope that he will listen (after King’s death who can hope?) but in the expectation that my own existence will be clarified,” writes Cone.³²

Cone seeks to call white perpetrators to account for the systemic injustice of racism from the standpoint of an angry, prophetic black theologian. The goal of Cone’s project becomes clear at the end of the Introduction to *Black Theology and Black Power*: he accents his own particularity as writing from “the attitude of an angry black man” for the sake of the United States, as a black American who wishes both for the dismantling of white America’s oppression of black people and that some white people might be moved by his strong critique.

I am critical of white America, because this is *my* country; and what is mine must not be spared my emotional and intellectual scrutiny. Although my motive for writing was not – did not want to be – dependent upon the response of white people, I do not rule out the possibility of creative changes, even in the lives of oppressors. It is illegitimate to sit in judgment on another human being, deciding how they will or must respond. That is another form of oppression.³³

Even though Cone writes in an angry tone reminiscent of a biblical prophet, his anger is directed toward a country he is a part of and is demanding full recognition from as someone with the right to protest for full human dignity

31 Ibid., 9. Cone’s existential understanding of Truth connects to Tillich’s notion of “ultimate concern” in relation to the theologian’s task of explicating Christian symbols for contemporary culture. Tillich can be fruitfully understood as within the tradition of theology as *sapientia* due to his argument for theologians to have an existential commitment to the content they expound upon. See Paul Tillich, *Systematic Theology, Volume 1: Being and the Question of God* (Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press, 1951), 23. See also the article by Lois Malcolm referenced in n. 16 above.

32 Cone, *Black Theology and Black Power*, 3. Cone reflects theologically about King’s “journey to Memphis” in ways reminiscent of Jesus’s traveling to Jerusalem in *The Cross and the Lynching Tree*, which gives evidence both for Cone understanding King as a theologian of the cross and for his own theology containing traces of a theology of the cross overall. See Cone, *The Cross and the Lynching Tree*, 90. Cf. Cone, *Martin and Malcolm and America*, 127.

33 Ibid., 4. Italic in original. Cone shares another important commonality with Malcolm X in relation to the possibility of (healing) change in white oppressors. See Alex Haley, *The Autobiography of Malcolm X as Told to Alex Haley* (New York, NY: Ballantine, 1964), 422.

in light of innocent black victimhood. Cone's protest is done Christologically in his first book, as Cone creatively synthesizes the Black Power movement with the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

The question of Christ's presence in suffering stands behind his theological protest against black suffering. Cone thus defines the task of theology as being "to show what the changeless gospel means in each new situation," and describes how "contemporary theology from Karl Barth to Jürgen Moltmann" is engaged in this task. Here, Cone relates to Rudolf Bultmann and Paul Tillich's hermeneutical projects concerning the creative tension between the existential questions formulated in modern culture and the answers to the questions of existence given in the Gospel kerygma.³⁴ What Cone finds missing in so-called "contemporary theology," though, is a revolutionary theology written from the standpoint of oppressed black people in the United States who are seeking freedom from white oppression. Therefore, Cone understands systemic racism in the United States as the cultural situation for which the changeless Gospel must be translated. He relates his understanding of theology to his constructive definition of Black Power, which he outlines at the beginning of his book.

Black Power means black freedom, black self-determination, wherein black people no longer view themselves as without human dignity but as persons, human beings with the ability to carve out their own destiny. In short, as Stokely Carmichael would say,

34 Cone, *Black Theology and Black Power*, 31. See Rudolf Bultmann, *Jesus Christ and Mythology* (New York, NY: Scribner's, 1958); Rudolf Bultmann, "Neues Testament und Mythologie," in Hans-Werner Bartsch (ed.), *Kerygma und Mythos I: Ein Theologisches Gespräch*, 4th ed. (Hamburg-Bergstedt: Herbert Reich, 1960), 15–48, and Tillich, *Systematic Theology Volume 1*, 60–61. Bultmann can be read within the tradition of the theology of the cross due to his (in)famous "demythologizing hermeneutic," which centers in the proclamation of the crucified Christ as risen eschatologically in the kerygma. If Luther's understanding of justification is the reverse side of a theology of the cross, as Regin Preter argued, then the relationship of Bultmann's demythologizing hermeneutic to the Pauline-Lutheran understanding of justification can be called a twentieth-century theology of the cross, even as Preter himself sought a path between Bultmann and Karl Barth for a contemporary Lutheran theology of the cross. See Bultmann, *Jesus Christ and Mythology*, 58, and Preter, *Luther's Theology of the Cross*, 4. For Tillich's connection to the tradition of the theology of the cross, see above, nn. 15 and 31 and below, n. 68. Cone's reception of Bultmann's "demythologizing hermeneutic" and Tillich's "method of correlation" is detailed in an essay he published in 1975 (coinciding with the first edition of *God of the Oppressed*), called "Christian Theology and Scripture as the Expression of God's Liberating Activity for the Poor." See Cone, *Speaking the Truth*, 4–17.

Black Power means T.C.B., Take Care of Business – black folks taking care of black folks' business, not on the terms of the oppressor, but on terms of the oppressed.³⁵

Cone's theology is concerned with an explicitly named particularity from the outset, which is partially how Cone's (early) theology can be understood as a radicalized theology of the cross for the victims and perpetrators of systemic-political sin. The prophetic and political task of theology as Cone understands it in *Black Theology and Black Power* can then be fruitfully read as an expansion of Thesis 20 of Luther's *Heidelberg Disputation*, wherein the theologian of the cross is the one who "calls a thing as it is" in contrast to the theologian of glory who "calls evil good and good evil" (Is. 5:20).³⁶

In an essay from 1994, Cone made explicit his appreciation for both Luther's *Heidelberg Disputation* and Jürgen Moltmann's expansion of the *Heidelberg Disputation* in *The Crucified God*, even as he re-shaped these theologians from the perspective of suffering peoples of color in the two-thirds world. Cone writes:

As black theologians have reread the Bible in the light of the struggles of the oppressed, the idea of the 'suffering God' has become important in our theological perspective. Our theological imagination has been stirred by Jürgen Moltmann's writings about 'the Crucified God,' as well as Luther's distinction between the 'theology of glory' and the 'theology of the cross.' But it has been the actual suffering of the oppressed in black and other Third World communities that has been decisive in our reflections on the cross of Jesus Christ. As Gustavo Gutiérrez has said: 'We cannot speak of the death of Jesus until we speak of the death of real people.' For in the deaths of the poor of the world is found the suffering and even the death of God.³⁷

35 Cone, *Black Theology and Black Power*, 6.

36 LW 31: 40.

37 James H. Cone, "An African American Perspective on the Cross and Suffering," in Jacob Tesfai (ed.), *The Scandal of a Crucified World: Perspectives on the Cross and Suffering* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1994), 58. The material from Cone about Luther's and Moltmann's theologies of the cross is also found in Cone's first autobiographical reflection and in a *Festschrift* for Moltmann's sixtieth birthday. See James H. Cone, *My Soul Looks Back* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1986), 105 and James H. Cone, "Black Theology in American Religion," in Hermann Deuser, Gerhard Marcel Martin, Konrad Stock, and Michael Welker (eds.), *Gottes Zukunft – Zukunft der Welt: Festschrift für Jürgen Moltmann zum 60. Geburtstag* (München: Chr. Kaiser, 1986), 380–89. However, I have referenced the text from 1994 here because this essay is explicitly about the cross theme in relation to oppressed peoples of color worldwide, containing a continuity with and development of *Black Theology and Black Power*, the development being that suffering peoples of color in the two-thirds world has become an explicit concern of Cone's theologizing,

In Cone's *Black Theology and Black Power*, a theologian who *does not* take the suffering of black people as a subject worthy of hermeneutical reflection is analogous to a theologian of glory. Conversely, a theologian who *does* take the suffering of oppressed blacks in the United States as a valid starting point for hermeneutical reflection is analogous to a theologian of the cross. This analogy relates to Cone's sharp distinction between black theologians and white theologians, wherein black theologians write for oppressed black people struggling for freedom amid the idolatry of systemic white racism in the United States. Cone thus defines Black Power as the "complete emancipation of black people from white oppression by whatever means black people deem necessary,"³⁸ and identifies a "desperate need" for black theology that applies "the freeing power of the gospel to black people under white oppression."³⁹ White oppression is exemplified by the exploitation white racists practice toward blacks, from which blacks seek survival.⁴⁰

Traces of a Theology of the Cross in Cone's Early Christology

Cone's early Christology is arguably a synthesis of mystical-sapiential and prophetic Christological motifs from Karl Barth, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, and Jürgen Moltmann that draws from Wolfhart Pannenberg's description of a "Christology from below." Since these European theologians can all be placed within the tradition of the theology of the cross, we will investigate Cone's reception, synthesis, and development of them.⁴¹ It is important to keep in mind for our investigation that Cone's early Christology connects the experiential particularity of oppressed black people in the United States to the particularity of Jesus Christ. This connection belongs to the core of Cone's arguments throughout *Black Theology and Black Power*, seen in Cone's understanding of Christianity finding its beginning and end in Jesus Christ.

even as he still begins with the particularity of oppressed black people in the United States.

38 Cone, *Black Theology and Black Power*, 6. This description again has commonalities with Malcolm X.

39 Ibid.

40 Ibid., 19. Cf. James H. Cone, "Black Consciousness and the Black Church: A Historical-Theological Interpretation," *The Annals* 387:1 (1970), 49–55; 50.

41 See again nn. 1 and 17 above.

Christianity begins and ends with the human being Jesus – his life, death, and resurrection. He is the Revelation, the special disclosure of God to human beings, revealing who God is and what his purpose for humankind is. In short, Christ is the essence of Christianity. Schleiermacher was not far wrong when he said that 'Christianity is essentially distinguished from other faiths by the fact that everything in it is related to the redemption accomplished by Jesus of Nazareth.' In contrast to many religions, Christianity revolves around a Person, without whom its existence ceases to be.⁴²

By defining Jesus Christ as the "special disclosure of God to human beings," Cone follows Barth's doctrine of election in Volume 2.2 of the *Church Dogmatics*. CD 2.2 can be fruitfully understood as Barth's theology of the cross, when he writes, "the crucified Jesus is the image of the invisible God" (drawing from the "Jewish wisdom Christology" of Col. 1:15), and through his use of the word "exchange" (*Tausch*) for the Golgotha event, wherein the "happy exchange" becomes collective by Jesus Christ electing the suffering of human beings onto himself.⁴³

42 Cone, *Black Theology and Black Power*, 34. While Cone references Friedrich Schleiermacher in this excerpt, his overall argument relates to Karl Barth, which is why I am not exploring Cone's reception of Schleiermacher here. For Cone's reading of the discontinuity between Schleiermacher and Barth in his doctoral dissertation, see James Hal Cone, "The Doctrine of Man in the Theology of Karl Barth," PhD diss. (Northwestern University, 1965), 1, 13, 26, 29, 32. Subsequent scholarship on Schleiermacher and Barth sees the two theologians as more compatible in terms of the method of correlation than Cone's arguments imply, even as they have notable differences in content. See Jennings, *Transfiguring a Theologia Crucis through James Cone*, 106, n. 5–107, n. 8. In any case, Cone seems not to argue for a great discontinuity between Schleiermacher and Barth in *Black Theology and Black Power*, suggesting he may have modified his views between his dissertation in 1965 and his first book in 1969.

43 Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics 2, Part 2: The Doctrine of God*, trans. G. W. Bromley, J. C. Campbell, Ian Wilson, J. Strathearn McNab, Harold Knight, and R. A. Stewart (London: T&T Clark, 1957), 123, 164–67 (hereafter cited as CD). Barth cites von Loewenich with approval in relation to his own proposal that dogmatic science for the church should be undertaken as a theology of the cross. See CD 1.1, 14, 167. For arguments that Barth's doctrine of election is his theology of the cross, see Jennings, *Transfiguring a Theologia Crucis through James Cone*, 105–32; Lewis, *Between Cross and Resurrection*, 163–97, and Jürgen Moltmann, "The Election of Grace: Karl Barth on Predestination," in Daniel L. Migliore (ed.), *Reading the Gospels with Karl Barth* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2017), 1–15. For arguments for a collectivization of Luther's "happy exchange" in Barth's doctrine of election, see especially George Hunsinger's insightful article on Barth's reception of Luther in George Hunsinger, "What Karl Barth Learned from Martin Luther," *Lutheran Quarterly* 13:2 (1999), 125–55; 135. For Col. 1:15 as an example of Christology rooted in the Jewish Wisdom tradition, see Marcus J. Borg, *Meeting Jesus Again for the First Time: The Historical Jesus, the Heart of Contemporary Faith* (New York: Harper Collins, 1994), 96–118; 107, and Lois Malcolm, "No Wisdom, No Trinity: Why

Cone wrote his doctoral dissertation on Barth's anthropology and read deeply throughout Barth's *Church Dogmatics* for his dissertation; therefore, arguing for a connection to CD 2.2 in *Black Theology and Black Power* is warranted. Further, although Cone does not directly examine CD 2.2 in his dissertation, he argues for a connection between Barth's doctrine of election and Barth's anthropology in CD 3.2, writing: "Humankind's existence rests upon God's election! [...] In this One human being all people have been elected by God. The starting point must be with God's election of this human being [Jesus Christ], and it will be shown that through this human being's election all people are elected."⁴⁴ Cone agrees with Barth that theological language should proceed from a Christological center so that theology does not become "idle, abstract words which have no relation to the Christian experience of revelation."⁴⁵ He thus sees Barth's approach as ensuring that Christian theology remains "Christianly Christian."⁴⁶ However, Cone differs from Barth by describing Jesus Christ in *Black Theology and Black Power* as the "special disclosure of God" to black people being oppressed by white racism in the United States.

Cone also describes Jesus as the "human being for others" similarly to Bonhoeffer, and particularly Bonhoeffer's *Prison* letters: "According to the New Testament, Jesus is the human being for others who views his existence as inextricably tied to other human beings to the degree that his own Person is inexplicable apart from others."⁴⁷ From Moltmann, Cone incorpo-

(the Biblical Figure Of) Wisdom Matters for Interpreting and Confessing the Trinity," *Word and World* 41:3 (2021), 221–30.

44 Cone, "The Doctrine of Man in the Theology of Karl Barth," 66. Language altered slightly for gender inclusivity.

45 Cone, *Black Theology and Black Power*, 34.

46 Ibid. Cone implicitly disagrees with Barth's polemic over the question of natural theology in his debate with Emil Brunner in the 1930s in *Black Theology and Black Power*. Thus, whereas Barth restricts revelation to salvation revelation in Jesus Christ (following Albrecht Ritschl), Cone aligns with Tillich's argument (based in Adolf Schlatter and Wilhelm Lütgert) for general *and* salvation revelation, which could be one reason why Cone turns toward Tillich's correlationism *at least* by the time of writing *God of the Oppressed*. See n. 34 above, Christian Danz, *Paul Tillich: Contexts and Key Issues* (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 2024), 79–110, and Jennings, *Transfiguring a Theologia Crucis through James Cone*, 229, n. 92. Cf. Cone's reading of the Barth-Brunner debate over natural theology in Cone, "Doctrine of Man in the Theology of Karl Barth," 8–22, 143–45.

47 Cone, *Black Theology and Black Power*, 35. See John W. De Gruchy (ed.), *Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works 8: Letters and Papers from Prison*, trans. Isabel Best, Lisa E. Dahill, Reinhard

rates a "political hermeneutics of the gospel." "When black people begin to hear Jesus' message as contemporaneous with their life situation," Cone writes, "they will quickly recognize what Jürgen Moltmann calls the 'political hermeneutics of the gospel.'"⁴⁸

Finally, Cone incorporates Pannenberg's Christology from below for his Christological methodology; Cone directly cites Pannenberg: "It is precisely Christology that discusses and establishes the justification and appropriate form of theological reference to Jesus in a methodological way."⁴⁹ Pannenberg's Lutheran stress on fleshing out the full humanity of Jesus in human history provides Cone with a way to anchor his own Christological arguments in the historical Jesus, in order to combat the critique that black theology is primarily ideology. However, Cone differs from Pannenberg by arguing for the contemporary presence of Jesus Christ in the sufferings and struggles of oppressed black people for justice and in his synthesis of a Christology from above (a mystical-sapiential Word/Wisdom Christology) and a Christology from below (a Lukan prophetic Spirit Christology).⁵⁰

Krauss, and Nancy Lukens (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 20010), 501 for Bonhoeffer's description of Jesus Christ as the "human being for others" (hereafter DBWE). This description relates to Bonhoeffer's July 18, 1944 letter to Eberhard Bethge (DBWE 8: 480), wherein he expands his position in his poem "Christians and Heathens" that Christians are to stand by God in God's suffering (DBWE 8: 460–61). Cone cites this letter directly in Cone, *Black Theology and Black Power*, 66 (see below). For a convincing reading of the whole of Bonhoeffer's theology as a theology of the cross, see H. Gaylon Barker, *The Cross of Reality: Luther's Theologia Crucis and Bonhoeffer's Christology* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2015).

48 Ibid., 37. Cf. Jürgen Moltmann, "Toward a Political Hermeneutics of the Gospel," *Union Seminary Quarterly Review* 23:4 (1968), 303–23. Moltmann's reception and expansion of Luther's theology of the cross in the *Heidelberg Disputation* and Barth's Doctrine of Election is seen most clearly in his 1972 book, *The Crucified God*. See Jürgen Moltmann, *The Crucified God: The Cross of Christ as the Foundation and Criticism of Christian Theology*, 40th Anniversary Edition, trans. A. Wilson and John Bowden (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2015), 285–418. For Cone's explicit connection to Moltmann's radicalization of Luther's theology of the cross, see n. 37 above.

49 Ibid. Cf. Wolfhart Pannenberg, *Grundzüge der Christologie* (Gütersloh: Gütersloher, 1976), 9. For critical remarks on Pannenberg's Christology related to the tradition of the theology of the cross, see Jennings, *Transfiguring a Theologia Crucis through James Cone*, 29–32, and Lewis, *Between Cross and Resurrection*, 53–54, n. 16. For Pannenberg's arguments about the difference between Paul of Tarsus's own theology of the cross and Martin Luther's subsequent reception of Paul, see Wolfhart Pannenberg, "A Theology of the Cross," *Word and World* 8:2 (1988), 162–72.

50 Cone, *Black Theology and Black Power*, 34–35. This synthesis becomes clear in Cone, *God of the Oppressed*, 106–12. See also nn. 14–16 above.

Cone's Collective-Political and Eschatological Expansion of the Happy Exchange

Further traces of the theology of the cross in Cone's *Black Theology and Black Power* are found in Cone's argument that Christ takes the suffering and despair of the poor and oppressed onto himself. Here a collective-political and eschatological expansion of the "happy exchange," radicalized from Luther's *Freedom of a Christian*, Barth's doctrine of election, Bonhoeffer's *Christology* lectures and *Prison* letters, and Moltmann's *Theology of Hope* can be found. In Luther's theology, the "happy exchange" involves the mystical relationship between the individual-soul bride and Christ the bridegroom, who takes on the bride's sins and bestows the sinner-bride with his righteousness, as found directly in the German edition of *Freedom of a Christian*.⁵¹ This theme becomes collective in Barth's doctrine of election (as was shown above), collective and political in Bonhoeffer's theology, and eschatological in Moltmann's *Theology of Hope*. Cone arguably then re-frames this theme to be collective-political *and* eschatological, with spiritual sin re-framed as systemic-political sin for critiquing and rebelling against the idolatry of white racism.

There is thus an important re-shaping of the "happy exchange" in Cone's *Black Theology and Black Power* from Luther, Barth, Bonhoeffer, and Moltmann toward political rebellion, even as Cone's early theology contains traces of all these theologians. Cone writes: "In Christ, God enters human affairs and takes sides with the oppressed. Their suffering becomes his; their despair, divine despair. Through Christ the poor human being is offered freedom now to rebel against that which makes him other than human."⁵² While Cone's argument that Jesus Christ takes sides with the oppressed is similar

51 Martin Luther, *Von der Freiheit eines Christenmenschen* (1520), in *D. Martin Luthers Werke Kritische Gesamtausgabe* 7 (Weimar: Hermann Böhlau Nachfolger, 1897), 25 (30)–26: 4 (hereafter WA). The theology of the cross and happy exchange are interconnected in Luther's *Freedom of a Christian*. See Jennings, *Transfiguring a Theologia Crucis through James Cone*, 70–72. Cf. Hamm, *The Early Luther*, 176–89.

52 Cone, *Black Theology and Black Power*, 36. Cf. Cone, "Christianity and Black Power," in Cone, *Risks of Faith*, 3–12. Cone used explicit words from Bonhoeffer in this essay, when he defined Jesus as the "human being for others," which corresponds as well to Cone's reading of Volume 3.2 of Karl Barth's *Church Dogmatics* in his doctoral dissertation. See *Ibid.*, 7, and Cone, "Doctrine of Man in the Theology of Karl Barth," 88.

to Bonhoeffer's July 18, 1944 letter to Eberhard Bethge, Cone re-shapes Bonhoeffer's "solidarity Christology" toward political rebellion on behalf of those oppressed by the idolatry of systemic white racism.⁵³

Cone then argues for an eschatological reversal of poor and rich, due to Christ's entering into human affairs and siding with the oppressed.

And the Kingdom which the poor enter is not merely an eschatological longing for escape to a transcendent reality, nor is it an inward serenity which eases unbearable suffering. Rather, it is God encountering humanity in the very depths of his being-in-the-world and releasing humankind from all human evils, like racism, which hold humankind captive. The repentant person knows that though God's ultimate Kingdom be in the future, yet even now it breaks through like a ray of light upon the darkness of the oppressed.⁵⁴

Cone's eschatological arguments are concrete, corresponding to the concreteness of Jesus Christ as the incarnate Wisdom and Word of God, exemplified in Cone's phrase "God encountering humanity in the very depths of his being-in-the-world." This phrase is reminiscent of Bonhoeffer's *Christology* lectures, wherein Bonhoeffer writes, "God is bound up in the human being."⁵⁵ There is also a connection to Moltmann's *Theology of Hope*, wherein an eschatology of promised hope coming from the future breaks into the present, in order that a Word of promise can be given to those who suffer, and the oppressed can break free in hope from their chains.⁵⁶

53 DBWE 8: 480. For arguments as to how Bonhoeffer's July 18, 1944 letter to Bethge turns a theology of the cross toward the victims of sin in a way that is consonant with Cone's theology, see Jennings, *Transfiguring a Theologia Crucis through James Cone*, 157–61. For Cone's Christology as a "solidarity Christology" that is consonant with Bonhoeffer, see Jürgen Moltmann, *Vorwort*, in James H. Cone, *Kreuz und Lynchbaum*, trans. Ursula Sieg (Strufenhütten: Mutual Blessing Edition, 2019), 8.

54 Cone, *Black Theology and Black Power*, 37.

55 Larry L. Rasmussen (ed.), *Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works 12: Berlin 1932–1933*, trans. Isabel Best and David Higgins (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 2009), 344. For the relationship between Jesus Christ as the Incarnate Word of God and the Jewish figure of Wisdom, see Prov. 8:1–9; 18, Wis. 6:1–25; 9:1–4; 9; 17–18, Eccles. 24:1–34, Matt. 11:18–19, 1 Cor. 1:24, Phil. 2:5–11, Eph. 1:3–10, Heb. 1:2–3, and Col. 1:15–20. See also n. 43 above.

56 Cone, *Black Theology and Black Power*, 37. Cf. Jürgen Moltmann, *Theology of Hope: On the Ground and the Implications of a Christian Eschatology*, trans. James W. Leitch (New York, NY: Harper & Row, 1967), 148–54. For Moltmann's theology of hope as an eschatological expansion of the theology of the cross, see Moltmann, *Theology of Hope*, 163.

Radicalizing Luther's *Freedom of a Christian* and *Heidelberg Disputation*

Traces of a theology of the cross in Cone's *Black Theology and Black Power* can also be found in Cone's (indirect) references to Luther's *Freedom of a Christian* and *The Heidelberg Disputation*. First, Cone defines Black Power as "the message of Christ himself."⁵⁷ He notes this is "both politically and religiously dangerous," given Barth's early theology maintaining the sharp distinction between God and humanity, and Christ never promising political security.⁵⁸ Nevertheless, Cone argues that his definition of Black Power as Christ's message is appropriate, given Luther's emphasis on neighbor love. Through Anders Nygren, Cone's theology shows traces of Luther's *Freedom of a Christian*, wherein Luther interprets Paul's argument for "faith active in love" (Gal. 5:6) for the Christian life.⁵⁹

But if Luther's statement, 'We are Christ to the neighbor,' is to be taken seriously, and if we believe the New Testament witness which proclaims Jesus as resurrected and thus active even now, then he must be alive in those very persons who are struggling in the midst of humility and humiliation.⁶⁰

What is arguably Cone's radicalization of Luther's stress on neighbor love then shows traces of Luther's differentiation between human love and divine cruciform love in the proof to Thesis 28 of the *Heidelberg Disputation*. Luther writes: "the love of God which lives in the human loves sinners, evil persons,

57 Cone, *Black Theology and Black Power*, 37.

58 Ibid., 37–38. See again Cone's outlining of Barth's critique of natural theology, and Barth's polemic against Brunner on this topic, in Cone, "The Doctrine of Man in the Theology of Karl Barth," 1–22. See also n. 47 above.

59 See Anders Nygren, *Agape and Eros*, trans. Philip S. Watson (Philadelphia, PA: Westminster, 1953). For Luther's theology of the cross as a demonstration of God's love that is distinguished from the human love of the theology of glory, see Tuomo Manermaa, *Two Kinds of Love: Martin Luther's Religious World*, trans. Kirsi I. Stjerna (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 2010), 27–45; 28.

60 Ibid., 38. See again the German text of Luther's *Freedom of a Christian* in WA 7, 20–38. I am arguing here for a connection between justification and sanctification in Luther's emphasis on "neighbor love" as found in *Freedom of a Christian*. For an argument that justification and sanctification should be seen as two sides of the same coin in Luther's theological ethics (although without a direct reference to *Freedom of a Christian*), see William H. Lazareth, *Luther, The Bible, and Social Ethics* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 2001), 244. Lazareth briefly addresses *Freedom of a Christian* in relation to neighbor love and the universal priesthood of baptized Christians in Ibid., 221.

fools, and weaklings in order to make them righteous, good, wise, and strong. Rather than seeking its own good, the love of God flows forth and bestows good. Therefore sinners are attractive because they are loved; they are not loved because they are attractive.”⁶¹ While explicitly citing Nygren and the New Testament, Cone's language is strikingly similar to Luther's. Cone writes: “God's agape to human beings is spontaneous and creative, the starting point for the godhuman relationship. It is spontaneous in that there is no worth in a human being from God's perspective which accounts for God's love. The sole reason for God's love is found in God's loving character.”⁶²

Neighbor Love in the Ghetto and Blackness as New Creation

Final traces of the theology of the cross in Cone's *Black Theology and Black Power* surface in his re-interpretation of the classic Pauline-Lutheran themes of “neighbor love flowing from faith” (cf. Gal. 5:14; Rom. 13:8–10) and “new creation” (cf. 2 Cor. 5:17–19). Cone emphasizes that Jesus Christ was not only incarnate in the first century but is present in contemporary justice movements in the United States rebelling against injustice for the release of the captives.⁶³ This proclamation relates both to Cone's understanding of neighbor love in relation to Jesus Christ and to the church being found in the ghetto. Neighbor love means “joining God in his activity on behalf of the oppressed”⁶⁴ in a “radical identification with the neighbor” in order that God's grace not be cheapened.⁶⁵ For Cone, this means the white church is called to find Christ in the ghetto. Citing Bonhoeffer's July 18, 1944 letter to Eberhard Bethge referenced above that develops the theme that Christians are called to stand by God in God's suffering, Cone writes, “Christ is to be found, as always, where human beings are enslaved and trampled under foot; Christ is in the ghetto – there also is his church.”⁶⁶

61 LW 31: 57.

62 Cone, *Black Theology and Black Power*, 50.

63 Ibid. Cf. Lk. 4:18–19.

64 Ibid., 51.

65 Ibid., 52. Cone cites Bonhoeffer's *Discipleship* here. See Geoffrey B. Kelly and John D. Godsey (eds.), *Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works 4: Discipleship*, trans. Barbara Green and Reinhard Krauss (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 2003), 43 for Bonhoeffer's contrast of “cheap grace” and “costly grace.”

66 Cone, *Black Theology and Black Power*, 66.

As Cone understands the Gospel, if Jesus Christ is not present in the ghetto then the Gospel is a lie. Cone continues:

If the gospel is a gospel of liberation for the oppressed, then Jesus is where the oppressed are and continues his work of liberation there. Jesus is not safely confined in the first century. He is our contemporary, proclaiming release to the captives and rebelling against all who silently accept the structures of injustice. If he is not in the ghetto, if he is not where human beings are living at the brink of existence, but is, rather, in the easy life of the suburbs, then the gospel is a lie. The opposite, however, is the case. Christianity is not alien to Black power; it is Black Power.⁶⁷

Cone's argument contains traces of a theology of the cross, given Cone's drawing from Bonhoeffer's *Discipleship* and his letter to Bethge. He is concerned with Christ's contemporary presence with oppressed people so that black people can love God, their neighbors, and themselves as people who have been given the gift of physical blackness by Jesus Christ.⁶⁸

Cone's argument that blackness is a gift of God is akin to Paul's statement about New Creation in 2 Cor. 5:17: "When St. Paul speaks of being 'a new creature' in Christ, the redeemed black person takes that literally. He glorifies blackness, not as a means of glorifying self in the egotistical sense, but merely as an acceptance of the black self as a creature of God."⁶⁹ Blackness, love of God, and neighbor love are all interconnected in Jesus Christ, in order for oppressed black people to find freedom and flourishing through the Christian message in a society permeated by white racism. Cone's stress on neighbor love in the Ghetto and Blackness as New Creation thus interweaves a Pauline Wisdom Christology and a Lukan prophetic Spirit Christology (Lk. 4:18–19).

67 Ibid., 38.

68 Ibid., 53. Cone's theological understanding of blackness as a gift of God corresponds to his understanding of black consciousness and the Black Power movement. See Cone, "Black Consciousness and the Black Church," 50. In this essay there is an explicit connection to Paul Tillich's notion of the "courage to be," which can be interpreted as Tillich's "existentialized" theology of the cross through Tillich's notion of the "God above the God of theism." See Paul Tillich, *The Courage to Be* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1952), 188.

69 Cone, *Black Theology and Black Power*, 53. Cf. Paul Tillich, "You are Accepted," in Paul Tillich, *Shaking of the Foundations* (New York, NY: Scribner's, 1976), 153–63. For the connection between new creation and justification in a Pauline theology of the cross, see Jürgen Moltmann, "Justification and New Creation," in Jürgen Moltmann, *The Future of Creation: Collected Essays*, trans. Margaret S. Kohl (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 1979), 149–71.

Finally, for Cone, the Christian message as a prophetic critique of the idolatry of white racism in the United States means denying whiteness and affirming blackness. Yet this is not explicitly related to physical skin color, but rather an existential commitment of the heart. "To be black means that your heart, your soul, your mind, and your body are where the dispossessed are."⁷⁰ Therefore, Cone's understanding of "blackness" and "whiteness" is symbolic-ontological in the Tillichian sense.⁷¹ This symbolic-ontological description of blackness is related to Cone's understanding of reconciliation, wherein "white people are prepared to deny themselves (whiteness), take up the cross (blackness), and follow Christ (black ghetto)."⁷² Cone thus associates whiteness (and the corresponding systemic oppression of white racism) with a denial of the cross, blackness explicitly with Christ's cross, and Christian discipleship with following Christ in the ghetto. While Cone is not arguing that white people should literally change their skin color, he does advocate that white people should stand with oppressed black people. By so doing, white people follow the crucified Christ who is symbolically present in the ghetto and can be healed from their complicity as perpetrators in the systemic sin of racism.⁷³

The Continuing Relevance of Cone's *Black Theology and Black Power* for the United States and Beyond

It may seem at first as if Cone's *Black Theology and Black Power* is a product of its time and cannot be applied to the contemporary political and theological scene either in the United States or elsewhere, given its original genesis amid

⁷⁰ Ibid., 151.

⁷¹ Cone's symbolic-ontological understanding of blackness connects to Tillich's understanding of theological language as symbolic language. Cone's indebtedness to Tillich on this point becomes clear in his *A Black Theology of Liberation*, published in 1970. See James H. Cone, *A Black Theology of Liberation*, 40th Anniversary Edition (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2010), 7–8. For a concise summary of Tillich's understanding of symbol, see Paul Tillich, *Systematic Theology, Volume 2: Existence and the Christ* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1957), 9–10.

⁷² Cone, *Black Theology and Black Power*, 150.

⁷³ This symbolic-ontological understanding of blackness is behind Cone's argument in *A Black Theology of Liberation* that God is black. See Cone, *A Black Theology of Liberation*, 67.

the Civil Rights and Black Power eras.⁷⁴ However, the question remains if the United States has truly dealt with the history of systemic racism perpetuated against people of color both through overt forms of oppression such as slavery, lynching, and the forced migration of Native Americans to reservations, and covert oppression such as Jim Crow segregation laws. With the birth of the #BlackLivesMatter movement in 2013, the worldwide protests connected to the death of George Floyd in 2020, and the current political turmoil in the United States (also seen in Europe) around immigration where the majority of migrants are people of color the answer seems to be a resounding “no.” Further, legal theorist Michelle Alexander has written of a “New Jim Crow,” in which black people in the US are disproportionately targeted by the criminal justice system through being subjected to the death penalty at higher rates than their white counterparts and receiving harsher penalties than white people for using recreational drugs. All of this critiques the myth that the United States is a post-racial society, wherein black people particularly and people of color overall can now enjoy the same privileges as their Caucasian neighbors of European descent.⁷⁵

Given this situation, Cone’s *Black Theology and Black Power* has renewed relevance for anyone who cares about re-framing a Lutheran theology of the cross to connect mystical-sapiential and prophetic theological motifs toward justice for the oppressed in the name of Jesus Christ. Cone’s early theology shows that the content for a contemporary constructive theology of the cross is found in the creative tension between the cross and oppressed black people in the United States in particular and oppressed people of color in general. Overall, Cone’s stress on Jesus Christ’s solidarity with oppressed people of color from the black experience as he understood it “transfigures”⁷⁶ a Lutheran theology of the cross for the twenty-first century to be attuned to concrete situations of global oppression, in order that a cruciform Word of healing hope for victims and perpetrators of oppression can be given.

74 See again n. 22 above.

75 See Michelle Alexander, *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness* (New York, NY: The New Press, 2010, 2012), 7–9, 98–102, 178–221, and Jennings, “St. Augustine and Malcolm X as Theological Figures in Relation to a Contemporary *Theologia Crucis* in Solidarity with the #BlackLivesMatter Movement,” 67.

76 See Westhelle, *Transfiguring Luther*, and n. 27 above.

In the United States (and arguably also in Europe), Cone's early theology can offer healing and hope for the victims and perpetrators of the idolatry of systemic white supremacy, if we are willing to heed his impassioned and prophetic critiques akin to Malcolm X and then work for just and nonviolent change in the vein of Martin Luther King, Jr.⁷⁷ Like the biblical prophets before him, Cone employs strong rhetoric in his early theology to wake his readers up from our respective slumbers around racism in particular and systemic-political sin in general. Once we have been awakened by Cone, have learned from him to seek Christ's presence as hidden in the literal "passions" of oppressed black people, and have died to systemic whiteness, we can begin to consider how to build just and nonviolent societies in solidarity with the most vulnerable among us. For this task, we will be aided both by Martin Luther King, Jr. and the so-called "peace theologians" from the twentieth century for the work of prophetic, nonviolent change.⁷⁸

Jesus Christ, incarnate, crucified, and risen, sends us into the world to be blessed peacemakers, that we might be called "children of God" (Matt. 5:9). Regardless of our skin color, if we have the courage to follow the Black Christ into the ghettos of contemporary existence, we will find healing and hope through the one who brings the "peaceable kingdom" (Is. 11:1-9) and the "new creation" (2 Cor. 5:17) that we all might have life and have it abundantly in his name (John 10:10). Living into abundant life in the Black Christ means victims and perpetrators of the idolatry of systemic white supremacy particularly and global oppression overall can find healing, hope, and

77 It is helpful to note that Cone's angry, prophetic tone in his early theology akin to Malcolm X calmed in his later works as he moved toward Martin Luther King, Jr.'s integrationist approach to racial justice, even while his theological argumentation remained passionate and engaged for the sake of oppressed black people in the United States and oppressed people of color worldwide. See Jennings, *Transfiguring a Theologia Crucis through James Cone*, 257.

78 See Stanley Hauerwas, *Performing the Faith: Bonhoeffer and the Practice of Nonviolence* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic & Brazos Press, 2004), 169-84; James Wm. McClendon, Jr., *Systematic Theology, Volume 1: Ethics*, revised ed. (Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 2002), 86-89, 301-26; Jeffrey D. Meyers (ed.), *The Way of Peace: A. J. Muste's Writings for the Church* (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2016), 20-29, 171-88, 245-61; James Melvin Washington (ed.), *A Testament of Hope: The Essential Writings and Speeches of Martin Luther King, Jr.* (New York: HarperCollins, 1986), 5-19, 12-20, 54-63, 217-20, 253-58, 313-30, and John Howard Yoder, *The Politics of Jesus*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1994), 1-20, 89-92, 228-47.

reconciliation “beyond tragedy.”⁷⁹ James Cone points us to this reconciling, healing, and hopeful abundant life in the Black Christ, both in the United States and beyond.

Conclusion

Martin Luther was not a liberation theologian in the twentieth or twenty-first century sense of this term, and James H. Cone did not set out to write an explicit theology of the cross in his *Black Theology and Black Power*. However, through a method of close reading that synthesized literary criticism, reception history and historical theology, hermeneutics, and ethics, the present article has attempted to show where traces of a theology of the cross might still be found in this book. We have investigated Cone’s theologizing for the sake of oppressed black people in relation to a prophetic expansion of Luther’s understanding of theology as “wisdom,” Cone’s reception, synthesis, and development of twentieth-century European theologians in his early Christology who can all be placed within the tradition of the theology of the cross, his collective-political and eschatological expansion of the “happy exchange,” and places in Cone’s text where he references the early Luther and re-interprets the classic Pauline-Lutheran themes of “neighbor love” and “new creation.” If the arguments presented here are justifiable, then Cone’s early theology contributed to the ongoing tradition of the theology of the cross. Further, the whole of Cone’s theology from his doctoral dissertation on Karl Barth’s anthropology in 1965 to *The Cross and the Lynching Tree* in 2011 can now be incorporated as material for a contemporary Lutheran theology of

79 This argument follows Cone’s understanding of reconciliation in *Cross and the Lynching Tree* that is akin to Martin Luther King, Jr., and which is a change from his earlier position in *God of the Oppressed*, where he argues for reconciliation between blacks and whites in a tone akin to Malcolm X. See Cone, *God of the Oppressed*, 225; James H. Cone, “Black Theology on Revolution, Violence, and Reconciliation,” *Union Seminary Quarterly Review* 31:1 (1975), 5–14; 13–14; Cone, *Cross and the Lynching Tree*, 165, and Reinhold Niebuhr, *Beyond Tragedy: Essays on the Christian Interpretation of History* (New York, NY: Scribner’s, 1937), 153–69. Cf. Miroslav Volf, *The End of Memory: Remembering Rightly in a Violent World*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2021).

the cross attuned to oppressed black people in the United States particularly, and oppressed people worldwide in general, that connects mystical-sapiential and prophetic theology.⁸⁰

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