

## Introduction

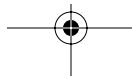
The church is perhaps the most studied organism in history and the social sciences. This general statement is no less true for the African American church. Over the years, many scholars have probed the origins, functions and activities of the African American church. For the most part, these authors and their studies have been concerned with locating the African American church in particular historical contexts and discerning its contribution to black social and civic life.

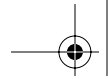
While the works of W. E. B. DuBois, E. Franklin Frazier, C. Eric Lincoln, and others have been particularly well received and useful for understanding the church in historical and sociological terms, the seminal work of these writers and others has stopped well short of tracing the *theological* understandings and contributions of African Americans and the African American church. In other words, what should be studied as the most central characteristic of the church—its theology—has been for the most part neglected by scholarly research and writing. The thing that makes the church the church—its understanding of God's nature, work and interaction with man—has not received sufficient attention as either a subject unto itself or as a motivating factor in more plentiful historical and sociological studies. As James Cone insists, "A community that does not analyze its existence theologically is a community that does not care what it says or does. It is a community with no identity."<sup>1</sup>

The present work is an attempt to contribute to much-needed theological reflection both *inside* the African American context and *between* African American and other ethnic communities. By "theology," I generally mean the

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<sup>1</sup>James H. Cone, *A Black Theology of Liberation, Twentieth Anniversary Edition* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1986), pp. 8-9.



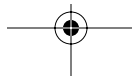


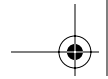
study and knowledge of God. Moreover, this book is concerned with *Christian* theology in the African American context rather than the broader topic of African American religion, so it takes the Bible as the authoritative and normative source for theology. The term *theology* is applied to academic discourse (e.g., systematic theologies), applied or practical works (e.g., sermons and lectures), and to what might be called Christian folk thought (e.g., slave songs and testimonies). To be certain, varying levels of specificity and elasticity of concepts are found in these repositories of African American Christian theology. Nonetheless, the academic, practical and folk productions reveal much about how African Americans think about, experience and explain the nature and ways of God in the world. From them a more robust picture emerges for consideration. Here, then, “theology” is what is believed, taught and confessed in various forms by African Americans.<sup>2</sup>

The presentation of a coherent study of the theological reflections and contributions of African Americans and the African American church must take advantage of and set in dialogue various sources. A survey of African American theology is immediately confronted by either the absence of African Americans *doing* theology or the relative lack of source material from the earliest periods. In contrast to the development of the white European and American churches from the 1500-1900s, the African American church was not primarily engaged in the production of written intellectual theology *per se*. For much of this period, African Americans were either barred from the academies of theology or legally prohibited from acquiring an education of any sort. In addition, many of those who escaped the educational and physical oppression of slavery in the U.S. chose very different educational and career paths. Consequently, the early African American church is largely without a cadre of technical, writing theologians; thus an easy approach to surveying African American theology via a review of such writings is not available for the

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<sup>2</sup>Here, I'm following the framework advanced by Jaroslav Pelikan in his magisterial five-volume history of Christian doctrine, *The Christian Tradition: A History of the Development of Doctrine* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1971-1991), pp. 1-10. Pelikan identifies what is “believed” as the doctrines present in devotion, spirituality and worship; what is “taught” as the content of the word of God extracted by exegesis and communicated through proclamation and instruction; and what is “confessed” as the testimony of the church in polemics, apologetics, creed and dogma. This corresponds roughly to the professional writings of academic theology; the sermons and teachings of Christian leaders; and the songs, poetry and other literary work of African Americans in this present volume.

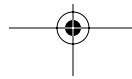




earliest period of that history. One is left to extract from other sources a summary of the beliefs expressed in narrative, testimony and song.

But despite the absence of academic theologians, one should not conclude that African Americans were either uneducated theologically or completely inactive in theological reflection. In the African American experience, the persons most likely “doing” theology were preachers and civic leaders as opposed to the academically trained theologians of the “white church.” While European and American theologians contended with intellectual threats to Christian theology, African Americans developed their theological understandings in the crucible of the slave experience. Early African American Christian theology was birthed and grew up in the context of American chattel slavery and the Colonial experience. Consequently, one has to look not in the academy but in sermons, slave narratives, political speeches and popular writings for traces of the early beliefs of African Americans since the 1700s. In these sources one can trace a set of theological ideas and convictions arguably as important and influential in lived experience than more precise, academic statements. These sources vary in depth, intention and representativeness, but are collectively a good collage of African American beliefs. And when set in “dialogue” with later academic theologians, great potential for tracing a story emerges—a story not necessarily of cause and effect, but of vision and revision based to some degree on the historical and social settings in which African Americans found themselves.

**Premise.** The present work attempts to trace the development of African American theology from its earliest manifestations in the slave narratives, slave songs, sermons and popular writings from the 1700s to current reflections and contributions. The white evangelical church of the 1700s is largely credited with giving birth to the African American church in the plantation south. Missionaries and evangelists associated with Baptist and Methodist churches were the first to make successful inroads into the religious lives of African Americans. Contrary to what might be supposed given the prohibition of education, reading and writing among slaves, early black Christians evidenced a rather sophisticated and clear theological corpus of thought. This clarity of early theological insight produced perhaps the most authentic expression of Christianity in American history, forming the basis for the African American church’s engagement in both the propagation of the gospel and social justice activism.





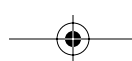
However, over time, especially following emancipation from slavery through the Civil Rights era, the theological basis for the church's activist character was gradually lost and replaced with a secular foundation. The church became less critical theologically and increasingly more concerned with social, political and educational agendas. Disentangled from its evangelical and Reformed theological upbringing, the church became motivated by a quest for justice for justice's sake rather than by the call and mandate of God as expressed in more biblical understandings of Christianity. Secularization overtook the African American church, along with its "white" counterpart.

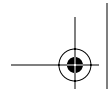
As secularization took root, the predominant framework for understanding the African American church shifted from theology to sociology and was influenced by the work of W. E. B. DuBois, E. Franklin Frazier, and others. With an emphasis on a sociological framework for studying the church, the African American church came to be understood primarily as a social institution and self-help organization with a vague spiritual dimension, rather than as a spiritual organism born of God's activity in the world. This is not to imply that the church has not always played a major role in educational, social and political agendas, but to point out the loss of a God-centered understanding of why such pursuits were appropriate for the church.

As a consequence of theological drift and erosion, the black church now stands in danger of losing its relevance and power to effectively address *both* the spiritual needs of its communicants *and* the social and political aspirations of its community. In effect, cultural concerns captured the church and supplanted the biblical faithfulness that once characterized it. It has lost the law and the gospel, and stands in danger of lapsing into spiritual rigor mortis. The present work is undertaken as a reminder to the church of its rich theological past and as a call for the church to reclaim its effectiveness by returning to a proper theocentric view of itself and the world.

**Method.** Were the theological contributions of several African American theologians and church leaders abundant and codified according to the traditional themes of Christian theology, especially from 1700-1900, one might simply review the work of these leading thinkers. However, for much of African American church history an easily identifiable corpus is not readily available, making the work of historical theology more difficult.

An undertaking of this type requires a method that is one part historical





and one part literary review. Mark Noll has outlined the history and important shifts in American Protestant evangelical Christianity and identified five periods: the Revolutionary era, evangelicalism, and second Great Awakening (1750-1800); the rise of “evangelical America” and American denomination-ism (1800-1865); the decline of Protestant America (1865-1920); the emergence of Modernism and Liberalism (1920-1960); and the Civil Rights era and Postmodernism (1960-present). These periods of American and church history provide an important backdrop for understanding the interaction of African American theology with the ideas of other segments of Christianity and philosophy.<sup>3</sup>

The present work adopts a historical framework that roughly aligns the timelines of the African American experience with Protestant, evangelical Christianity in America and Europe. I have opted for this framework (1) as a method for displaying the convergence and departure of these two Christian traditions and (2) as a method for locating important literary works and thinkers in the context of broader church history. Each chapter is organized into five periods:<sup>4</sup>

Early Slavery Era Through Abolition Era (1600-1865)

Reconstruction, “Jim Crow” Segregation, Great Migration and the “New Negro” Movement (1865-1929)

Depression and World War II (1930-1949)

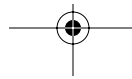
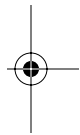
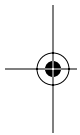
Civil Rights Era (1950-1979)

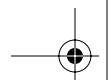
End of Century, Postmodern Era (1980-present)

Significant shifts in the treatment, freedom and mobility of African Americans characterize each period of African American history. For each era, the major theological contributions of key African American thinkers, preachers and writers are examined for their representativeness of, and impact on, the trajectory of the black church’s theology. One key criterion for selecting persons for inclusion was the availability of a body of written material to survey.

<sup>3</sup>Mark A. Noll, *A History of Christianity in the United States and Canada* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1992).

<sup>4</sup>Adapted from Milton C. Sernett, *African American Religious History: A Documentary Witness* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1999), pp. 482-87.





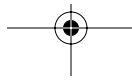
The volume attempts to present these thinkers and leaders “in their own words,” so written materials were essential. This selection criterion produced some lamentable omissions. For example, Richard Allen is arguably one of the most important figures in African American Christian history. Yet, he receives only passing treatment because not much of his theological and sermon material remains. But on the whole, the figures included not only left source material but also exerted significant influence on their peers and subsequent generations.

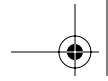
I attempt to maintain some continuity of themes (doctrines) across each time period by examining the contributions of key thinkers to the doctrines of revelation, God, man, Jesus Christ, salvation and the Holy Spirit through each era of African American history. The evolution of the church’s doctrinal understanding of these themes is examined with particular emphasis on points of convergence and divergence from historical orthodox Christian theology.<sup>5</sup> Orthodox Christian theology, a Reformed theology in particular, serves as the baseline for judging the strength of African American beliefs for two reasons. First, the earliest generation of African American writers generally held to a broadly Reformed perspective as a result of their early contact with Calvinistic Baptist and Anglican missionaries and because this theology shaped the wider Colonial and American society at the hands of New England Puritans. Second, the Reformed understanding, especially the Reformed doctrines of revelation, God and salvation, best represent the biblical teaching on these subjects. So, for historical and theological reasons the Reformed heritage of African Americans is used as the starting point for tracking the decline in African American ideas about God.

A Reformed starting point and bias notwithstanding, an attempt is made to let the writers speak for themselves by resisting the temptation to impose an interpretation on the authors’ words. Too much of the work that focuses on the theological perspectives of slave testimonies, for example, superimposes meanings and conclusions not clearly present in the original texts. To the best

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<sup>5</sup>By “historical orthodox Christian theology” I refer to that body of teaching generally accepted by Christians throughout church history and generally reflected in the great ecumenical creeds and confessions of the church before the great split of Roman and Eastern Orthodox churches. I also refer to the recovery of biblical truth achieved during the Protestant Reformation of the 1500s and 1600s which placed emphasis on the authority and sufficiency of Scripture in matters of faith and conduct and “justification by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone for the glory of God alone.”





of my ability, I have let authorial intent govern the presentation of included perspectives. I have tried to first make clear what an author intends to say in a given work and only after doing so to then evaluate the contribution and impact of that work on the strength or weakness of theology in African American Christianity. Without doubt, I have done this imperfectly and only ask the reader to charge any errors to my head and not to my heart.

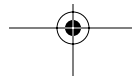
The emphasis throughout the book is not on a detailed social, political or ecclesial history, but on the theological ideas themselves. So, the chapters are organized according to the typical heads of a systematic theology. Some readers will want more historical detail. For them, I've attempted to call attention to general references that may be helpful. The choice to organize the chapters by the theological headings leads to some repetition, but I pray any redundancy is outweighed by the potential of learning from the writers and sources as they're set in "dialogue" over these major theological issues. Moreover, I pray that the organization of the book helps shift the focus and conversation in the church to theology itself and to some extent away from history.

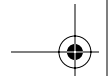
Each chapter concludes with a reflection on the slide from orthodoxy to cultural captivity occurring over the three hundred years of African American Christianity and an assessment of the impacts that slide made on the black church. Some consider African American theology to have been without critique for most of its history.<sup>6</sup> Certainly there will be many who disagree with some of the critiques offered. Perhaps the concluding comments in each chapter will provide some stimulus for the beginning or expansion of critique and discussion across various traditions.

My hope and prayer is that this work might contribute to a reformation among African American churches, where sound theology is recovered and once again given prominence in our understanding of church history and in our contemporary practice. African Americans are a people who care deeply about history. I pray that this volume contributes significantly to our understanding of this rich theological heritage while providing critical insights for reassessment and careful appropriation of biblical truth. And most impor-

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<sup>6</sup>For example, see Ken Jones, "The History of the Black Church," Carl F. H. Henry Forum Lecture delivered October 26, 2003, at the Capitol Hill Baptist Church in Washington, D.C. Available at <[www.capitolhillbaptist.org](http://www.capitolhillbaptist.org)>.





tantly, I pray that this small volume would in some measure bring glory to God the Father and his beloved Son Jesus Christ, who loved the world in such a way as to shed his own blood for the redemption of our souls.

Soli Deo Gloria.

