

Covenant Commentary on the Black Manifesto (1969)¹

These texts originally appeared in the August 1, 1969, issue of the *Covenant Companion*, following the 1969 Covenant Annual Meeting approval of a recommendation brought by the Executive Board to establish a fund for “poverty-stricken black Americans”² in response to the Black Manifesto. The *Companion* issue began with the text of the Manifesto,³ followed by commentary by Worth Hodgins, Robert L. Sloan Jr., and Wesley Nelson. Text introducing the Manifesto and commentary disclaimed, “It should be understood that this presentation is neither a commendation nor a condemnation of the document. The views expressed in the commentary are personal views, elicited and graciously supplied in the interest of clarifying some of the issues involved. No official position with regard to ‘The Black Manifesto’ is intended or supplied” (p. 4). President Milton Engebretson’s report on the Covenant fund followed.

Texts are reprinted here in their original order; language has been lightly edited in conformity to current conventions.

¹ Reprinted from the *Covenant Companion* (August 1, 1969): 8–10, 12, 15. Introduction and annotations by Hauna Ondrey.

² For minutes pertaining to the recommendation, amendment, and adoption of the new fund, see *Covenant Yearbook 1969*, 157–58, 164–65. A fuller account with analysis is provided in Hauna Ondrey, “The Covenant Responds to the Black Manifesto (1969),” *Covenant Quarterly* 77, nos. 2–3 (2019): 3–30.

³ Minus its original introduction. This version is accessible through the Archives of the Episcopal Church digital exhibit, *The Church Awakens: African Americans and the Struggle for Justice*, <https://episcopalarchives.org/church-awakens/items/show/202>. For full text of the document, see Robert S. Lecky and H. Elliott Wright, ed., *Black Manifesto: Religion, Racism, and Reparations* (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1969), 114–26. For further information on the Black Manifesto, see especially this volume and its appendices.

Reparations

Worth V. Hodgin, director of urban ministries for the Central Conference of the Evangelical Covenant Church of America⁴

The Black Power movement, clearly observable by mid-1966, with its emphasis upon pride, self-determination, and black solidarity, completed the destruction of integration as the controlling idea of the black community (but not the white community) in the US. It is time for white churchmen to face this fact. The black quest for integration has come to an end. If it ever rises again it will not be within the framework of white control and the subordination of blacks. The Black Power movement was the reality from which the Manifesto emerged.

The fact is, as Malcolm X made clear, white Christians never really believed in integration. The desperate appeals of black leaders like King, Wilkens, and Young, received only token responses from the church.

If the involvement of the American churches in slavery and their subsequent exploitation of blacks is fact, and if, despite our theology and ethics of integration, the white religious community was unable to make it work, then a deep spiritual and material injury has been committed upon black people in this nation. The white church cannot push aside the bold fact of its burden of guilt.

This is the message of the Black Manifesto and subsequently of the black caucuses of nine (including Roman Catholic) predominantly white denominations. The Manifesto calls for reparations from the white churches as an effective redress for their share in the institution of slavery and benefits of black oppression. To this point Dr. Luke Mingo, a warm evangelical and president of the Illinois Conference (150,000 member-

⁴ Worth V. Hodgin (1920–2011) was originally ordained in the Wesleyan Church and transferred his congregation (Rocklin Covenant Church, California) and ordination to the Covenant in 1949. He served churches in California and Washington before becoming director of urban ministry for the Central Conference in 1966.

ship) of the National Baptist Church, stated in Chicago recently, “While we disagree with the revolutionary rhetoric of Forman, black evangelicals are united with him on the central issue of the Manifesto. The danger is, that white people will get ‘hung-up’ on the rhetoric of the Manifesto and will not deal with the real issue.”⁵

It is no secret that the white church has been and is today deeply entrenched in the system of white oppression. Many of the laymen who sit on the governing boards of wealthy white churches are the absentee owners and directors of those structures which have kept black people in deprivation and powerlessness. Many white home owners refuse to sell to black buyers. Many white churches own thousands of acres in the South where black sharecroppers, desperately in need of land, are being forced off into the already crowded urban ghettos. The Kerner report states: “what white Americans have never fully understood—but what the Negro can never forget—is that white society is deeply implicated in the ghetto. White institutions created it, white institutions maintain it, and white society condones it.”⁶ In face of the facts the idea of the churches paying reparations is neither offensive nor ridiculous.

However foolish the Manifesto’s demands may seem, the concept of reparations has by no means been rejected in modern times. According to *Encyclopedia Americana*, reparations are a form of compensation to repair or mend for injury to another, and are usually monetary in form, paid out of political interest or out of moral duty and concern for the general welfare.

The *Encyclopedia Britannica*, reports that Great Britain, France, the Netherlands, and the United States received reparations from Japan after the hostilities of 1864; Spain from Peru in 1869; and the United States again from China in 1900. West Germany assumed the liability of two billion dollars for victims of the Nazi persecution.

Gordon C. Bjork, in the June 24, 1968, issue of *Christianity and Crisis*, writes, “The estate of one generation in our society is passed to

⁵ Hodgin organized a panel discussion for Chicago area pastors, held June 2, 1969. Mingo was a panelist. See Ondrey, “The Covenant Responds,” 13–14.

⁶ The Kerner Report was published in 1968 by the National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders, commissioned in 1967 by President Lyndon Johnson in the wake of racial riots July 1967. The report asked three questions: “What happened? Why did it happen? What can be done to prevent it from happening again?” The report’s “basic conclusion” was that “Our nation is moving toward two societies, one black, one white—separate and unequal.” Read the full report at <http://www.eisenhowerfoundation.org/docs/kerner.pdf>.

the next after the subtraction of liabilities incurred. By the same logic the debts incurred by our white forefathers in the deprivation of Negroes by slavery and discrimination calls for the repayment of debts from our massive inheritance. It is a repayment of accrued liabilities because part of the inheritance was accumulated by the systematic under-payment of a minority that was suppressed by law and violence.”⁷

Dr. Ernest Campbell, minister of Riverside Church, was the first churchman, following the publication of the Manifesto, to point out the theological meaning of reparations. “From the beginning,” he wrote in the June 1 issue of *Tempo*, “The Christian church has taught that restitution is an essential part of penitence. You don’t simply say, ‘I’m sorry’ to a man you’ve robbed. You return what you stole, or your apology takes on a hollow ring...”⁸

Repentance is sorrow for sin against God and involves a purpose of amendment. It is clear that such amendment is related to the concept of reparations. Reparations are an essential part of the idea of Christian repentance.

Campbell goes on to say, “Reparations, restitution, call it what you will. We subscribe to the conviction that given the heinous mistreatment that black people suffered in this country at the hands of white people in the slave economy, and given the lingering handicaps of that system that still works to keep the black man at a disadvantage in our society, it is just and reasonable that amends be made by many institutions in society—including, and perhaps especially, the church.”⁹

No institution in American society has confessed its guilt as often as the church. It has written ten thousand empty pronouncements regarding social justice. If reparations are really an acceptable form of repentance, then white American churches have the duty to express their sincerity by repaying their debts which have accrued through slavery and black subjugation.

The great wealth that churches have accumulated (C. Stanley Lowell estimates church assets at 160 billion dollars), has become a liability.

⁷ Gordon C. Bjork, “Poverty, Race, and Social Justice,” *Christianity and Crisis* (June 24, 1968): 147.

⁸ Ernest Campbell, “Wherein Lies the Shame? A Parish Minister Speaks to the Challenge,” *Tempo* 1, no. 16 (June 1, 1969): 5. Available at https://archive.org/details/pts_tem-pocouncilchur_3439_v1tov3.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 5, 9.

God's word to the Laodiceans is appropriate for us, "I am rich, I need nothing...but you are wretched, pitiable, poor, blind, and naked" [cf. Revelation 3:17].

The time may be at hand for the cleansing of the temple. Scripture warns, "judgment is to begin in the household of faith" [1 Peter 4:17a]. It may be that with all his militancy and rudeness, James Forman is being used by God to declare to the churches, "this night your soul is required of you; and the things you have prepared, whose will they be?" [Luke 12:20].

Force and Violence

*Robert L. Sloan Jr., chair of Community Covenant Church,
Minneapolis, Minnesota*¹⁰

When we as Christians deny a segment of our community an opportunity to voice their dissent and injustices against oppressing conditions, we generate new grievances and new demands.

The appearance of the Black Manifesto challenging the church to economic action has created bitterness and resentment among churchmen, both laity and clergy. It is hard to decide whether this bitterness is racist in nature, or solely in resentment to militant groups outside the church. If we are concerned about the violent language of the Manifesto, I feel we are only looking for patches in the robe of Christianity.

No American, white or black, can escape the consequences of the continuing social and economic decay that will ultimately lead to violent disorder. We can no longer repress the symptoms of violence. We must look at our attitudes toward the poor and our motivation as it relates to others in terms of business practices. Violence never brings permanent peace and it solves no social problems; it merely creates new and more complicated ones. Martin Luther King pointed this out very clearly when he said, “Violence is immoral because it thrives on hatred rather than love. It destroys community and makes brotherhood impossible. It leaves society in monologue rather than dialogue.”¹¹

From our history of slavery the black man has had to react to violent

¹⁰ In addition to serving as chair of Community Covenant Church, Robert L. Sloan (1935–) was a charter member of that congregation and had attended the 1969 Annual Meeting as its delegate. Sloan was a member of the original committee of African American Covenanters selected to oversee the fund established at that meeting and brought its inaugural report to the 1970 Annual Meeting. He would go on to serve on many Covenant boards, including the Boards of Benevolence and of Church Growth and Evangelism.

¹¹ Martin Luther King Jr., “The Quest for Peace and Justice,” Nobel Lecture, December 11, 1964.

repressive measures forced on him by our racist society. Segregation and poverty are forced on our black youth so as to destroy opportunity, enforce failure and dependence on welfare. Resentment against society in general, and white society in particular, is the result. This leads us to question ourselves.

We as Christians must decide which is worse: the violence in the street or the problems that have sent the radical into the street to react violently. Violence should not be mentioned or condemned as a tool of change because it is in opposition to change. It creates fear, bitterness, and resentment.

It is regrettable that the wealth and power of the “church” has not, to this day, come out as a leader of this country’s oppressed minorities. If the “church” does not participate actively in the struggle of an oppressed people for economic, technological, and social justice, it will lose the loyalty of millions. Therefore, we can no longer remain silent behind our stained-glass windows.

In 1967 we were forced to take note of a polarization of our community into two separate societies, one white and one black, separate and unequal.¹² Due to the continued breakdown of interracial communication, we may now be faced with a more violent situation than we faced in the summer of 1967.¹³

We have seen the ghetto created by the exodus from the inner city to the suburbs by some of the more affluent. This exodus has brought about the rape of the inner-city tax base, educational and technological facilities, and in their place has been left decay.

In the early years of the civil rights struggle, the black man could not perceive victory in a violent struggle. He was unarmed, unorganized, untrained, and most important, psychologically unprepared for the violent spilling of blood. There is no principle or code to which a man with honor or integrity may subscribe. Some of the more radical are saying, “The principle of self-defense should be applied if attacked.”

Some of us Christians who search for an excuse to condone lack of action and non-participation in a troubled world can look at the Black Manifesto as a justification for apathy.

¹² This is the language of the Kerner Commission report. See n. 6 above.

¹³ Violent protests marked the summer of 1967, climaxing with rioting in Newark and Detroit in July. See Kerner Report.

Those of us who are concerned about action to eliminate injustice, as pertaining to blacks, have mingled feelings about a Black Manifesto telling us how we should implement our economic resources. However, we rejoice that the Black Manifesto has shed light on the deprivation in the community.

We as Christians ought to go forward with a renewed sense of zeal because we have been challenged to action leading to the betterment of our brotherhood.

May God grant that our action lead to increased dignity for all of mankind.

Financial Control

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Theological Seminary, director of evangelism,
Evangelical Covenant Church of America¹⁴*

The question of who shall be responsible for distributing any funds raised for the black community is one that will require the most careful consideration from every angle. Premature judgments and tendencies to over-simplify this issue can be very harmful to the entire Christian cause. There is a great deal of information that must be gathered before decisions can be made.

It would seem, for one thing, that if we appropriate the funds we should determine how they are to be spent. Responsible action should require that we be assured of responsible distribution of the funds we have appropriated. But there are a number of special situations that prevail in relation to the black community that make this matter quite complex. We are still woefully ignorant of the real issues related to race. In spite of what we may think, none of us is free from concepts and feelings that make it difficult to make decisions with complete objectivity. In order to make sure of such objectivity, therefore, distribution of funds must be done in close consultation with the black community itself.

We, as Christians, are understandably disturbed by what seems to us to be the subversive nature of some of the documents in which demands for funds are made. We cannot escape the responsibility of doing all we can to make sure these funds will not be diverted into channels which will subvert the cause for which Christ gave his life. This in itself will require

¹⁴ Wesley W. Nelson (1910–2003) was professor of pastoral studies at North Park Theological Seminary (1960–1976) and director of evangelism for the Covenant (1968–1973), prior to which he had pastored Covenant congregations in San Pedro, Stockton, and Oakland, California; Tacoma, Washington; and Chicago, Illinois.

careful investigation. In our attempt to understand the issues we must not be unaware of the conditions under which this language was produced. We must remember that the Negro was brought from his country by violence, by people who raised no questions about subverting *his* values. We must remember that the church did not consistently take a stand against slavery. The church has generally shown little understanding of the problems even of innocent children growing up in the ghetto, and it has not been consistent in its insistence on equal rights for the Negro. The black race, seeing all this, has now become strong enough to begin to assert its demands. Against this background, we can hardly expect anything but revolutionary language.

Black leaders have said that the purpose of the revolutionary language was to get the attention of the white man. When we see the issue through the eyes of the black man, we find it to be far more complex than we had thought, and we must seek to discover whether the black leaders who eventually come to control propose a revolution which will merely change the status quo and guarantee full equality with the white man, or whether they are actually bent on destroying the present order and taking full control of government and economic institutions.

We have an interesting parallel in the case of the Russian Revolution. In 1905 the workers made certain demands of the Czarist government. By modern standards those demands were very moderate. However, the Czarist government was threatened by the revolutionary nature of the demands, rejected them, and in the conflict that followed many of the workers were killed. Had the government sought to understand the workers and to concern themselves with their problems, there would probably have been no Communist Revolution. Since the church supported the government, the Russian Revolution was godless and anti-church. To pay no attention to the demands of the Black Manifesto, to insist on distributing funds without consulting black leadership, to turn the funds over to the black community without concern for their proper use, would be no less [ir]responsible then.

The Covenant Church now has one of its finest opportunities to enter into conversation with the black leadership.¹⁵ Our immigrant background disassociates us from much (but not all) of the tensions from slavery

¹⁵ For a snapshot of the demographics of Covenant congregations and ministerium in 1969, see Ondrey, "The Covenant Responds," 9–13.

days.¹⁶ The fact that we are somewhat disassociated from traditional American church life, that we are a small group, and that we have practically no endowments or large commercial holdings, makes us much less of a threat to the black man. It doesn't make us any less racist, but it makes it much more difficult for us to exercise our racism, and we can face the issue with Christian weakness. To work with black leaders in the distribution of funds we have raised could open the doors of mission in a way we have never known before. Here is an area that the Holy Spirit could bless. As we work side by side, God can work, and Christ can become Lord and Savior of many people, both black and white, and a whole new relationship could develop. Of course it involves a risk. Faith always involves risk. Shall we take this risk, launch out, and permit this to become one of our most glorious hours?

¹⁶ The swell of Swedish immigration post-dated the Civil War. Fewer than 15,000 Swedes emigrated prior to 1865; by contrast half a million arrived in the United States in the fourteen-year period between 1879 and 1893—a full half of the total number that emigrated between 1850 and 1930.

The Annual Meeting Decision on Aid to Black America

*Milton B. Engebretson, president*¹⁷

The Annual Meeting took action to request all Covenanters to give one dollar [\$6.87¹⁸] this year to help alleviate suffering and conditions of poverty currently being experienced by some black Americans, and to continue the same request each year until a total of \$335,000 [\$2,301,558.65] has been given. The funds received are to be distributed through responsible agencies to be determined by a committee of black Covenanters appointed by the Executive Board. This, in essence, is what was decided.

What does this action mean?

It means that we have been awakened to a crying human need within the boundaries of our own country. Having become increasingly aware of the poverty in which many Negroes live and the indignities which many are forced to endure, the Annual Meeting decided to try to do something about it. It also realized regretfully that very little has been done heretofore. We also know that we can help by sharing with them from what God has entrusted to our care, and that helping them is consistent with the teachings of the New Testament. “But if anyone has the

¹⁷ Milton B. Engebretson (1921–1996) was the sixth president of the Covenant (1967–1986). Prior to assuming this position, he had served as Covenant secretary (1962–1967) and pastored Covenant congregations in Kansas and Minnesota. Engebretson was the first Covenant president who was not Swedish American as well as the first not born into the Covenant. As such he “was a Covenanter by choice and adoption and not by birth. He was hence closer to the growing number of adopted Covenanters than his predecessors.” Karl A. Olsson, *A Family of Faith* (Chicago: Covenant Publications, 1975), 129.

¹⁸ Bracketed dollar amounts indicate sums when adjusted for inflation to March 2019 value, US Department of Labor, Bureau of Labor Statistics, CPI Inflation Calculator, https://www.bls.gov/data/inflation_calculator.htm.

world's goods and sees his brother in need, yet closes his heart against him, how does God's love abide in him? Little children, let us not love in word or speech but in deed and truth (1 John 3:17–18).

It means that we are concerned enough to act.

The delegates realized that to act on this issue at this time would be a bit risky. The Covenant's motives for asking her people to give could be interpreted by some as bowing to the threats of black militants or submitting to demands for reparations made by the National Black Economic Development Conference in the "Black Manifesto." The action taken can in no way be construed as any such response. In fact, the preface to the recommendation stated clearly that we were, "not in sympathy with nor approving the philosophy and language of the Manifesto."¹⁹

A representative from the NBEDC made an appearance at the meeting and was given time to present his cause. *But our action had been taken before he came. So the word "reparations" does not apply to the Annual Meeting's action.* All the publicity given the Manifesto by news media may have indirectly affected the timing, but the Covenant first showed its concern when it raised \$5,600 [\$38,473.82] at last year's banquet for "Operation Bootstraps" in Chicago.

News reports have, however, already misrepresented our action and intentions and will probably do so again. Perhaps this is the price that must be paid to extend a helping hand in this age of controversy and deeply-felt sentiments.²⁰ The delegates, by their strong affirmative vote on the action, declared themselves willing to take that risk in order to get started with help, and I am proud to be numbered with them.

¹⁹ *Covenant Yearbook 1969*, 157. Though Engebretson frames misinterpretation as a possibility, he knows well from letters already received that the fund has been viewed precisely in this manner, with some correspondents threatening discontinuance of financial support in consequence. In his responses to letters charging the Covenant with supporting "communist," "anti-American," and "militant" groups through the NBEC, Engebretson consistently affirmed the Covenant's action. To one concerned Covenanter, for example, he wrote, "I am, however, glad that the threats against the government and the church by their group did not deter the Covenant from taking a firm stand." Milton B. Engebretson to Mildred Holmberg, July 17, 1969. Record Series 1/2/6, Box 3, Folder 11, CAHL.

²⁰ The Covenant was featured in the *Chicago Daily Defender* of June 23, 1969, primarily to serve as a foil to the negative response of the Catholic archdiocese in Chicago. The article quotes Holmes, "The Catholic Church of Chicago brags of having more than 90,000 black members, but still refuses to deal with the demands of the Black Manifesto, which was created to meet the needs of the black community" (Joseph L. Turner, "Militant Raps Cody Reparations Stand"). Reportedly, Holmes found this response

It means that the Commission on World Relief is authorized to do its best to call to our attention the needs and request all Covenanters to share. The request is voluntary and the goal reachable. The \$67,000 [\$460,311.73] can be given in addition to the \$61,000 [\$419,089.78] anticipated again for world relief. I am glad for the action that was taken.

Our mission is the propagation of the Gospel of Jesus Christ, in accordance with the precepts laid down by Christ and his apostles. Our prime objective is still, and I trust always will remain, bringing people to Christ for salvation. But if I understand the New Testament correctly, one of the first projects undertaken by the apostles was to solicit funds to help the needy.

Our action also gives credence to the historical fact that evangelicals both started and promoted benevolent work in this world. Check out the origin of orphanages, hospitals, the YMCA, and the Salvation Army. We, at this Annual Meeting, picked up the lead, the consequences of which could yield tremendous results to the glory of Jesus Christ and the enhancement of the image of his church on earth.

I trust the foregoing gives some clarity on the matter. We want all to be conversant with the facts, as some news releases may variously report our action.

The amount requested can be attained. In fact, if you will put that dollar aside when you finish this article, to hold for the day of offering, the job will be half done by nightfall.²¹

especially incomprehensible when contrasted with the response of other denominations. He referenced his interaction with the Church Federation of Chicago and the Covenant: "The Evangelical Covenant Church," Holmes said, "which is historically Swedish, and has only 50 black members out of 65,000 in the Chicago area [in fact 67,000 members in all of US and Canada in 1969], invited me to come and read the Manifesto to them. I was warmly received, and the Manifesto was accepted: they even made me a voting member of their organization's decision-making body." The clipping was sent to Engebretson from Craig Anderson via Wesley Nelson, with Anderson's suggestion that the Covenant might be wiser to leave inaccuracies uncorrected. Memo from Wesley Nelson, Record Series 1/2/6, Box 3, Folder 11, CAHL.

²¹ For response to the fund, which fell far short of the initial optimism Engebretson expresses here, see Ondrey, "The Covenant Responds," 17–22.