

# The One and the Many: What Can Be Learned from a Black Hermeneutic

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**H**ow can unity be conceived amid the diversity of creation? What is the ground of unity, and how does one recognize it? To what extent is there room for diversity? This ancient problem of the one and the many extends even to the church of Jesus Christ. We encounter a ground for the unity of the church in Ephesians 4:4–6 (ESV), “There is one body and one Spirit—just as you were called to the one hope that belongs to your call—one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all who is over all and through all and in all.” Concurrently, the biblical text provides a ground for the integrity of individuals who make up the church, the many, in the body imagery of 1 Corinthians 12:12–13 (ESV), “For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ. For in one Spirit we were all baptized into one body—Jews or Greeks, slaves or free—and all were made to drink of one Spirit.” In this same chapter Paul warns that division in the body is harmful; if one part does not function or is disregarded by other members, the whole body suffers (12:22–26).

We might apply Paul’s body imagery to individual churches (the many) comprising the one church of Jesus Christ (the whole). For the purposes of this reflection, I consider churches sharing a particular racial or ethnic heritage as together forming one part of the larger body of the universal

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church. If the contribution of this part is not accepted, or is too quickly assumed to be non-essential, then the church as a whole suffers. Though many areas could be analyzed under this question of the one church and its many members, the focus of this article is on the potential contribution of black hermeneutics to the church.

To further set the stage, I will borrow from the North African bishop Augustine of Hippo (d. 430 CE). In his classic work, *On Christian Doctrine*, Augustine delineates the twofold task of biblical hermeneutics: “There are two things which all treatment of the scriptures is aiming at: a way to discover what needs to be understood, and a way to put across to others what has been understood.”<sup>1</sup> In other words, the pastor or teacher must first understand the text’s message and, second, determine the most effective means of communicating this message to a specific audience. Thus, for Augustine the task of biblical hermeneutics has not been accomplished until the message has been communicated clearly. This entails the art of rhetoric, or persuasion.

The art of rhetoric bridges the *content* of Scripture and the *context* in which its content is communicated. Effective communication of Scripture’s message, then, requires an awareness of the sociocultural, political, economic, and religious context of one’s audience. Wrong analysis of these settings will negatively affect the discovery of the text’s meaning, its communication to the church, and its reception. The interpreter of Scripture is also shaped by a sociocultural, political, economic, and religious milieu. For this reason the hope of accomplishing the hermeneutical task depends ultimately on the entire church studying and proclaiming together. If one part is missing or rendered inoperative, the entire process is compromised.

To put it differently, the task of biblical interpretation extends beyond the study of Scripture to include cultural hermeneutics. To employ the definition of Elizabeth Sung, cultural hermeneutics is “the theory, theology, and practice of interpreting cultural (and social) systems.”<sup>2</sup> This type of study is necessarily interdisciplinary, requiring the perspectives of multiple investigators. As in the church, limited voices risk limited conclusions.

Within this article I seek to demonstrate how a black hermeneutic can contribute not only to the particular life and ministry of the black church but also to the one church wherever it is found. I draw from the

1. Augustine, *De doctrina christiana*, 1.1.1.

2. Email to author, February 1, 2015.

disciplines of black and womanist theology, both of which stress “the black experience” as a unique starting point for biblical interpretation and theology. Elsewhere I have provided the following description of the black experience:

There are a number of aspects that make up the black experience, including stories, tales, and sayings of African Americans that have developed as they have endured existence in a racist society. These expressions of life may also be in the form of songs, poems, narratives, and music. The black experience is about uncovering reasons to affirm African American personhood, culture, and values when much in the surrounding sociocultural setting undervalues such manifestations. These positive affirmations contribute to the development of communal structures that keep members of the community from despair and inactivity.<sup>3</sup>

It is this realm of experience that gives rise to a black hermeneutic. Womanist theology engages in critical reflection on the distinct experience of black women. While acknowledging the co-experience of racism with black men, Jacquelyn Grant insists that sexism “has a reality and significance of its own because it represents that peculiar form of oppression suffered by Black women at the hands of Black men.”<sup>4</sup>

In affirming black experience as fertile ground for a black hermeneutic, there must be additionally a means of evaluating this “experience” itself. At this juncture, I will only mention two critical elements that can provide an evaluative lens for “experience” while also recognizing it as a valid contributor to the church’s biblical instruction and application. These are the Scriptures and the theological formulations of the church constructed over centuries of life and ministry. I will have more to say below on the contribution of the historic church. Incorporating these two foundational elements, we can confirm the specificity of James H. Evans’s claim that “The sources of African-American theological affirmations are the Bible, the traditions of African-American worshipping congrega-

3. Bruce L. Fields, *Introducing Black Theology: Three Crucial Questions for the Evangelical Church* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2001), 16.

4. “Black Theology and Black Women,” in James H. Cone and Gayraud S. Wilmore, *Black Theology: A Documentary History, 1966-1979* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1982), 422.

tions, African-American culture, and the African-American worldview.”<sup>5</sup> Thus, a black church possesses a richness that need not always assume a strict “hermeneutic of suspicion,” as voiced by British black theologian Anthony G. Reddie. For Reddie the black interpreter must “read the Bible in an ideological way, looking with suspicion and thinking critically at how the power relations and structures are in evidence in the text.”<sup>6</sup> To do so, the reader interrogates the text with questions such as, “Who has power in this story?” “Who is disadvantaged?” “Who benefits or who loses out?” and “How is God’s liberative presence displayed in the text?”<sup>7</sup> A black hermeneutic should draw from some of Reddie’s concerns, but if too suspicious of all particulars in Scripture, it may blunt Scripture’s capacity to evaluate “experience,” and thus threaten the hermeneutical task for which this experience comprises one source. Against the backdrop of a potentially distorted hermeneutic, the black church, itself, would be hindered in its ministerial task as Augustine counseled centuries ago:

The interpreter and teacher of the divine scriptures, therefore, the defender of right faith and the hammer of error, has the duty of both teaching what is good and unteaching what is bad; in this task of speaking it is his duty to win over the hostile, to stir up the slack, to point out to the ignorant what is at stake and what they ought to be looking for.<sup>8</sup>

### **What Can Be Learned from a Black Hermeneutic?**

A black hermeneutic is a construct of slave narratives, sermons, songs, and the voices of countless faithful believers in the Lord Jesus Christ trying to make sense of Scripture and God’s action in their lives amid various forms of oppression. A black hermeneutic, then, is not only a way of reading and communicating the messages of the Bible; it is also a way of interpreting the complexities of life. It is interpreting a life full of joy and sorrow, of faith in God and times of doubt and darkness. Scripture is then interpreted and communicated through this interpretation of life’s complexities. What can the church at large learn from this interpretation? I offer four suggestions.

5. James H. Evans, *We Have Been Believers: An African-American Systematic Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1992), 27.

6. Anthony G. Reddie, *Black Theology* (London: SCM Press, 2012), 98–99.

7. Ibid.

8. Augustine, *De doctrina christiana*, 4.4.6.

First, the church can benefit from the presumption of holism that characterizes a black hermeneutic, in both its reading of Scripture and life's multiplicity. The interconnectedness of the sacred and the secular is assumed: all aspects of life bear the marks of, and are subject to, the divine. Womanist thinkers are particularly helpful on this point. Delores Williams, incorporating Alice Walker's definition of "womanist," argues that a womanist is "committed to survival and wholeness of entire people, male and female."<sup>9</sup> J. Deotis Roberts compares the holistic ministry of the black church to the Jewish synagogue:

The black church, like the synagogue, is the center of life for many black people. It nurtures and sustains them psychologically and spiritually. In some cases there is provision for food, shelter, and health. All the concerns for the nurture of the young—their education, talent, and skill development—are high priorities.<sup>10</sup>

Evans roots this sense of life's interconnectedness in the African influence on black Christianity, noting that it encompasses the spiritual realm: "The participation of the ancestors and the living dead in the life of the community, along with the supreme value placed on procreation and the birth of children, means that the community in African traditional thought is held together by the power of ancient memory and immediate anticipation."<sup>11</sup> Because all relationships are extremely important, all forms of oppression are resisted as violations of proper human relationship. Such oppression leads not only to the dehumanization of the oppressed but also to the desensitizing and dehumanization of the oppressor.

Because of life's interconnectedness, even early black theologians rejected a bifurcation between theology and politics that enabled white Christians to confess certain doctrines while denying or limiting their socio-political application. If, for example, one affirms that all human beings are made in the image of God, what then is the ground for denigrating the personhood and worth of another in order to maintain racially

9. Williams cites Walker's words from *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens: Womanist Prose* (San Diego: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1983) in "Womanist Theology: Black Women's Voices" in James H. Cone and Gayraud S. Wilmore, *Black Theology: A Documentary History, 1980-1992* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1993), 265.

10. J. Deotis Roberts, *The Prophethood of Black Believers* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1994), 29.

11. Evans, *We Have Been Believers*, 144.

oriented socio-political constructs? The fiery abolitionist, David Walker, for example, would write about some southern preachers:

They think it is no harm to keep them in slavery and put the whip to them, and why cannot we do the same!—They being preachers of the gospel of Jesus Christ, if it were any harm, they would surely preach against their oppression and do their utmost to erase it from the country; not only in one or two cities, but one continual cry would be raised in all parts of this confederacy, and would cease only with the complete overthrow of the system of slavery, in every part of the country.<sup>12</sup>

Walker vehemently attacked such preachers because of the devastating inconsistency between what they preached concerning biblical truth in some areas while being culturally captivated in the matter of slavery.

Second, a black hermeneutic contributes to challenging the hermeneutical hegemony of the dominant academic culture. The recognition is now standard that exegetical skill does not prevent exegetes' socioculturally shaped priorities and values from influencing their interpretations. For this reason the contribution of minority biblical and theological scholars is critical for a fuller understanding of Scripture. In calling for this contribution, I am not diminishing interpretive practices foundational to dominant culture academic communities. Rather, I seek to advocate for the necessary presence—and not only presence, but voice—of scholars and pastors of multiple racial-ethnic backgrounds at the hermeneutical table. The term voice suggests respect, the genuine acknowledgment of possible contributions made to the discussions. One thinks here of Riggins R. Earl Jr.'s assessment that "Black protest theology dared challenge Whites' claim to know God apart from their ethnic others in the Black community."<sup>13</sup> This may be difficult for some members of the dominant culture to accept, but for the church's sake, such acceptance of minority voices is a matter worth considering with all sincerity. The desire to understand and communicate biblical truth as fully as possible should motivate careful attention to minority interpretations.

12. David Walker, "Our Wretchedness in Consequence of the Preachers of Religion" in *African American Religious History*, ed. Milton C. Sernett (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1999), 196.

13. Riggins R. Earl, Jr., "Black Theology and the Year 2000" in *Black Theology*, Vol. 2, 54.

Cain Hope Felder notes that not only is the Sunday eleven o'clock hour still the most segregated hour in the United States, but that during this hour racial and ethnic groups bring God and Scripture into their preset, socializing structures.<sup>14</sup> Felder delivers a needed warning concerning the "valorization" of any racial/ethnic group above another, which engenders the "tendency to subvert the Bible's vision and authority."<sup>15</sup> Susan Sontag argues that the role of a black hermeneutic is twofold: to dismantle the world that undergirds American Christianity and to help African American Christians to see themselves as God sees them.<sup>16</sup> This "dismantling" is black hermeneutics' contribution to challenging the givenness of the dominant Christian culture's hermeneutic.

Third, the history of oppression that informs a black hermeneutic can highlight dissonance between faith claims and action, thus serving as a call to knowledge of God matched by obedience to his will. Take Scripture's teaching regarding humanity as created in the image of God (Genesis 1:26–27). The *imago Dei* is a ground of unity for all human beings, even while this humanity is manifested diversely in each human being, in the many. Regardless of the diverse manifestations of God's image among the many, as image-bearers all persons are of equal worth before God. Action consonant with this confession should be most evident in the church of Jesus Christ. To treat human beings as human beings, with respect and dignity, is one of the surest tests for authenticity of any faith claim.

Recall Frederick Douglass's scathing appraisal of Rigby Hopkins, a minister and slaveholder. After condemning the so-called "Christianity" of the slaveholders, Douglass exposes the utter hypocrisy of Hopkins, who never missed an opportunity to whip any slave who committed any small violation of his will.

And yet there was not a man anywhere round, who made higher professions of religion, or was more active in revivals,—more attentive to the class, love-feast, prayer and preaching meetings, or more devotional in his family—that prayed earlier, later, louder, and longer—than this same reverend slave-driver, Rigby Hopkins.<sup>17</sup>

14. Cain Hope Felder, "Cultural Ideology, Afrocentrism and Biblical Interpretation," in *Black Theology*, Vol. 2, 186.

15. *Ibid.*, 187.

16. Evans, *We Have Been Believers*, 23.

17. Frederick Douglass, *The Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass*, 1845.

It could be argued fairly that this extreme example is inappropriate to this paper precisely because it is so extreme. Such an egregious manifestation of dehumanization is more easily recognized and condemned. More insidious forms, however, often go unseen and unacknowledged. One may render the “other” invisible, for example, by working and acting as though a black person, or black people, were not present. A lack of personal address, lack of eye contact, an ignoring of presence can be every bit as dehumanizing as blatant hostility.

Fourth, intimately related to the third, is the need to embrace our divine imaging in all aspects of relationship building and maintenance. There have been, and still are many, who hold that the divine image in which we are made is largely the immaterial or spiritual dimension of our being. Augustine, for example, argued that the image “refers to the interior person, where reason and intellect reside.”<sup>18</sup> Augustine finds this further supported by the fact that humans walk upright: “This signifies that our mind ought to be raised up toward those things above it, that is, to eternal spiritual things. It is especially by reason of the mind that we understand that the human person was made to the image and likeness of God, as even the erect form of the body testifies.”<sup>19</sup> Thomas Aquinas also located the image in a human being’s intellect or reason.<sup>20</sup> Karl Barth understood the image in terms of being able to have an “I-Thou” interaction between beings as indicated by the fact that both male and female were created in the *imago Dei*.<sup>21</sup> Other examples could be cited, but views range from an emphasis on the immaterial (mind, intellect) to functional interpretations of the image.<sup>22</sup>

While not dismissing these immaterial or functional understandings of the *imago Dei*, I want to insist on the *totality* of our being as constituting the image of God. This has two applications I want to flesh out because of their relevance to the black community and their impact on the effective ministry of the black church. The first application explores the significance of the body; the second addresses the communal implications of the *imago Dei*.

I begin with words Malcolm X still shouts through the printed page:

18. Augustine, *Against the Manichees*, 1.17.28.

19. *Ibid.*

20. Anthony Hoedema, *Created in God’s Image* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1986), 36.

21. *Ibid.*, 49.

22. See Millard J. Erickson, *Christian Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2013), 465-67.



Because those who oppress know that you can't make a person hate the root without making them hate the tree. You can't hate your own and not end up hating yourself. And since we all originated in Africa, you can't make us hate Africa without making us hate ourselves. And they did this very skillfully. And what was the result? They ended up with 22 million Black people here in America who hated everything about us that was African. We hated the African characteristics. We hated our hair. We hated our nose, the shape of our nose, and the shape of our lips, the color of our skin. Yes we did. And it was you who taught us to hate ourselves simply by shrewdly maneuvering us into hating the land of our forefathers and the people on that continent.<sup>23</sup>

Much has happened to cultivate the embrace of our “Africanisms,” especially since the 1960s with Malcolm X and others advocating the embrace of our black bodies, as James Brown sang “Say It Loud—I’m Black and I’m Proud.” To this day, however, womanist theologians in particular speak of the need to embrace who we are and how we look. Many of us readily declare “Black is beautiful,” but with a high Black on black crime rate, is there still a danger that a type of self-hatred may be in play still?

All human beings need to revisit the biblical truth that we are made in the image of God and our bodies are indeed precious and should be treasured in all their various shapes, sizes, and colors. As Evans reminds us, the spiritual life is always embodied: “The body is not a hindrance but a vehicle for the true expression of the spiritual. This spiritual essence is, for all practical purposes, inseparable from the body, because both make up the totality of the human person.”<sup>24</sup>

Because we are made in God’s image, we are communal beings. This should not be surprising because the God who made us subsists in community as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit (Matthew 28:18-20). Each of us needs others to become and do all that we are created to become and to do. Relationships are precious because we are designed to function in community. No one “makes it” on his or her own. To embrace our full humanity is to embrace others in community.

23. Malcolm X, “Not Just an American Problem, but a World Problem,” in *Malcolm X: The Last Speeches*, ed. Bruce Perry (London: Owen, 1969), 166.

24. Evans, *We Have Been Believers*, 101.

## What Can a Black Hermeneutic Learn?

Just as the church can learn from the contribution of a black hermeneutic, so too can that hermeneutic learn from the larger church. Already alert to the impact of the interpreter's situatedness, a black hermeneutic must engage in continuous scrutiny of its *own* hermeneutical lenses, pursuing means of accountability and self-evaluation. I here offer two potential sources for this self-evaluation. I call first for balance between the theoretical and the practical in biblical study and ministry, and second for fuller engagement with the Christian tradition.

Regarding the first, Evans uses the language of hermeneutical and praxiological balance. He warns against black religion neglecting either, retaining instead a commitment to holistic ministry:

On one side, the devaluation of the hermeneutical aspect can lead to a rampant anti-intellectualism in black religion that not only destroys its critical edge, but abandons its historic radical intellectual tradition. On the other side, a rejection of the praxiological aspect can lead to a dispassionate sterility in black religion that blunts its imaginative and emotive creativity.<sup>25</sup>

A black hermeneutic jeopardizes its potential to contribute to the church in general if it does not scrutinize Scripture both through its particular, experiential lens and with academic rigor that engages the larger academic community. This commitment to academic integrity cuts the ground under any who would dismiss as intellectually inferior studies engaging an explicitly black hermeneutic. Moreover, rigor in study will be increasingly required as members in the black churches become more educated and sophisticated in thought. At the same time, this hermeneutic must always be informed by the practicalities of ministry, attuned to a grass-roots understanding of people's day-to-day lives.

Additionally, a black hermeneutic—and the community for which and from which it arises—must continually give ear to the voices of Christian history. The early church fathers, for example, may be too quickly dismissed because of their inattention to oppression and dehumanization as understood by contemporary black and womanist thinkers. James Cone, for example, expresses concern that these ancient Christian leaders failed to recognize liberation as the essence of ethics for the God

25. *Ibid.*, 24.

of Scripture.<sup>26</sup> In support of this assertion, Cone offers Augustine's view of slavery, somewhat correctly identifying Augustine's conviction that "slavery was due to the sinfulness of slaves. Therefore he admonished 'slaves to be subject to their masters . . . ' serving 'them with a good-heart and a good will . . .'"<sup>27</sup> In *The City of God*, from which Cone's observation is derived, Augustine states: "The first cause of slavery, therefore, is sin, with the result that man is made subject to man by the bondage of this condition, which can only happen by the judgment of God, in whom there is no unrighteousness and who knows how to assign different punishments according to the merits of the offenders."<sup>28</sup> Slavery, then, is a manifestation of sin, though God may use it to punish those in need of correction. There is no hint of slavery being limited to a particular race.

Yet this provides a fitting example of my own concern. That is, if we dismiss ancient Christian writings as unserviceable rather than engaging them more deeply, we risk forgoing doctrinal precision along with the godly application of knowledge which is wisdom. Augustine continues his discussion by offering a moral interpretation followed by an eschatological interpretation: "Clearly it is a happier lot to be enslaved to a man than to be enslaved to lust: in fact it is the very lust for domination itself, to mention no others, that ravages the hearts of mortals by exercising the most savage kind of domination over them."<sup>29</sup> The worst kind of bondage, then, is to be a slave to one's own lust. Here is a thought worthy of consideration. Augustine's eschatological interpretation that follows states, "so that, if they cannot be freed by their masters, they can at least make their own slavery free in a sense, that is, by serving their masters not with cunning fear but with faithful love, until all unrighteousness passes away, all human rule and power are brought down, and God is all in all [cf. 1 Corinthians 15:28]."<sup>30</sup>

Admittedly, Augustine was a product of his time, as were all Christian thinkers throughout the history of the church. But when a writer is read in the church 1600 years after his death, there are good reasons for this continued attention. We would do well to take a second look when a part of the Christian tradition initially seems useless or even offensive.

26. James H. Cone, *God of the Oppressed*, rev. ed. (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1997), 183.

27. *Ibid.*, 182.

28. Augustine, *City of God*, 19.15.

29. *Ibid.*

30. *Ibid.*

In any era, the church in all its diverse manifestations was doing great things. It was also doing some horrible things. Should the Lord tarry, one wonders what kind of evaluation the church of today will receive?

## **Conclusion**

The fulfillment of the hermeneutical task requires serious study of the biblical text to determine its message. The task, however, is not complete until there is the careful communication of the message to an audience in its situatedness. If the analysis of one or the other is awry, the hermeneutical task is impeded. The fulfillment of both requires multiple participants. If the black church and its hermeneutic are not given voice in the analysis of both the biblical text and the sociocultural environment, the hermeneutical task is dramatically hindered. It is hindered not only for the black church but for the entire church.

The black church and the church of the present dominant culture run the risk of neglecting the root system of the Christian faith. The dominant culture church runs the risk of missing love for all family members through the claim of defending the truths of the faith. The black church, with black theology as an example, runs the risk of neglecting the wisdom of the historic church. Borrowing from the thought of Malcolm X, it is difficult to love the church in all its manifestations, and it is difficult for the church to function, if the roots themselves are neglected.