

BLACK THEOLOGY AND THE BLACK WOMAN

Jacquelyn Grant

LIBERATION THEOLOGIES HAVE ARISEN out of the contexts of the liberation struggles of Black Americans, Latin Americans, American women, Black South Africans, and Asians. These theologies represent a departure from traditional Christian theology. As a collective critique, liberation theologies raise serious questions about the normative use of Scripture, tradition, and experience in Christian theology. Liberation theologians assert that the reigning theologies of the West have been used to legitimate the established order. Those to whom the church has entrusted the task of interpreting the meaning of God's activity in the world have been too content to represent the ruling classes. For this reason, say the liberation theologians, theology has generally not spoken to those who are oppressed by the political establishment.

Ironically, the criticism that liberation theology makes against classical theology has been turned against liberation theology itself. Just as most European and American theologians have acquiesced with the oppression of the West, for which they have been taken to task by liberation theologians, some liberation theologians have acquiesced in one or more oppressive aspects of the liberation struggle itself. Where racism is rejected, sexism has been embraced. Where classicism is called into question, racism and sexism have been tolerated. And where sexism is repudiated, racism and classicism are often ignored.

Although there is a certain validity to the argument that any one analysis—race, class, or sex—is not sufficiently universal to embrace the needs of all oppressed peoples, these particular analyses, nonetheless, have all been well presented and are crucial for a comprehensive and authentic liberation theology. In order for liberation theology to be faithful to itself, it must hear the critique coming to it from the perspective of the Black woman—perhaps the most oppressed of all the oppressed.

I am concerned in this chapter with how the experience of the Black woman calls into question certain assumptions in liberation theology in general and Black theology in particular. In the Latin American context this has already been done by women such as Beatriz Melano Couch and Consuelo Urquiza. A few Latin American theologians have begun to respond. Beatriz Couch, for example, accepts the starting point of Latin American theologians, but criticizes them for their exclusivism with respect to race and sex. She says:

we in Latin America stress the importance of the starting point, the praxis, and the use of social science to analyze our political, historical situation. In this I am in full agreement with my male colleagues . . . with one qualitative difference. I stress the need to give importance to the different cultural forms that express oppression; to the ideology that divides people not only according to class, but to race and sex. Racism and sexism are oppressive ideologies which deserve a specific treatment in the theology of liberation.¹

More recently, Consuelo Urquiza called for the unification of Hispanic-American women in struggling against their oppression in the church and society. In commenting on the contradiction in the Pauline Epistles, which undergird the oppression of the Hispanic-American woman, Urquiza said: "At the present time all Christians will agree with Paul in the first part of [Galatians 3:28] about freedom and slavery that there should not be slaves. However, the next part of this verse . . . has been ignored and the equality between man and woman is not accepted. They would rather skip that line and go to the epistle to Timothy [2:9–15]."² Women theologians of Latin background are beginning to do theology and to sensitize other women to the necessity of participating in decisions that affect their lives and the life of their communities. Latin American theology will gain from these inputs that women are making to the theological process.

Third World and Black women³ in the United States will soon collaborate in an attack on another aspect of liberation theology—feminist theology. Black and Third World women have begun to articulate their differences and similarities with the feminist movement, which is dominated by white American women who until now have been the chief authors of feminist theology. It is my contention that the theological perspectives of Black and Third World women should reflect these differences and similarities with feminist theology. It is my purpose, however, to look critically at Black theology as a Black woman in an effort to determine how adequate is its conception of liberation for the total Black community. Pauli Murray and Theresa Hoover have in their own ways challenged Black theology.

I want to begin with the question: "Where are Black women in Black theology?" They are, in fact, invisible in Black theology and we need to know why this is the case. Because the Black church experience and Black experience in general are important sources for doing Black theology, we need to look at the Black woman in relation to both in order to understand the way Black theology has applied its conception of liberation. Finally, in view of the status of the Black woman vis-à-vis Black theology, the Black church and the Black experience, a challenge needs to be presented to Black theology. This is how I propose to discuss this important question.

THE INVISIBILITY OF BLACK WOMEN IN BLACK THEOLOGY

In examining Black theology it is necessary to make one of two assumptions: (1) either Black women have no place in the enterprise, or (2) Black men are capable of speaking for us. Both of these assumptions are false and need to be discarded. They arise out of a male-dominated culture that restricts women to certain areas of the society. In such a culture, men are given the warrant to speak for women on all matters of significance. It is no accident that all of the recognized Black theologians are men. This is what might be expected given the status and power accorded the discipline of theology. Professional theology is done by those who are highly trained. It requires, moreover, mastery of that power most accepted in the definition of manhood, the power or ability to "reason." This is supposedly what opens the door to participation in logical, philosophical debates and discussions pre-

supposing rigorous intellectual training, for most of history, outside the “women’s sphere.” Whereas the nature of men has been defined in terms of reason and the intellect, that of women has to do with intuition and emotionalism. Women were limited to matters related to the home while men carried out the more important work, involving use of the rational faculties.⁴ These distinctions were not as clear in the slave community.⁵ Slaves and women were thought to share the characteristics of emotionality and irrationality. As we move further away from the slave culture, however, a dualism between Black men and women increasingly emerges. This means that Black males have gradually increased their power and participation in the male-dominated society, while Black females have continued to endure the stereotypes and oppressions of an earlier period.

When sexual dualism has finally run its course in the Black community (and I believe that it has), it will not be difficult to see why Black women are invisible in Black theology. Just as white women formerly had no place in white theology, except as the receptors of white men’s theological interpretations, Black women have had no place in the development of Black theology. By self-appointment, or by the sinecure of a male-dominated society, Black men have deemed it proper to speak for the entire Black community, male and female.

In a sense, Black men’s acceptance of the patriarchal model is logical and to be expected. Black male slaves were unable to reap the benefits of patriarchy. Before emancipation they were not given the opportunity to serve as protector and provider for Black women and children, as white men were able to do for their women and children. Much of what was considered “manhood” had to do with how well one could perform these functions. It seems only natural that the postemancipation Black men would view as of primary importance the reclaiming of their property—their women and their children. Moreover, it is natural that Black men would claim their “natural” right to the “man’s world.” But it should be emphasized that this is logical and natural only if one has accepted without question the terms and values of patriarchy: the concept of male control and supremacy.

Black men must ask themselves a difficult question. How can a white society characterized by Black enslavement, colonialism, and imperialism provide the normative conception of women for Black society? How can the sphere of the woman, as defined by white men, be free from the evils and oppressions that are found in the white society? The important point is that in matters relative to the relationship between the sexes, Black men have accepted without question the patriarchal structures of the white society as normative for the Black community. How can a Black minister preach in a way that advocates St. Paul’s dictum concerning women while ignoring or repudiating his dictum concerning slaves? Many Black women are enraged as they listen to “liberated” Black men speak about the “place of women” in words and phrases similar to those of the very white oppressors they condemn.

Black women have been invisible in theology because theological scholarship has not been a part of the woman’s sphere. The first of the above two assumptions results, therefore, from the historical orientation of the dominant culture. The second follows from the first. If women have no place in theology, it becomes the natural prerogative of men to monopolize theological concerns, including those relating specifically to women. Inasmuch as Black men have accepted the sexual dualisms of the dominant culture they presume to speak for Black women.

Before final dismissal of the two assumptions, a pertinent question should be raised. Does the absence of Black women in the circles producing Black theology necessarily mean that the resultant theology cannot be in the best interest of Black women? The answer is obvious. Feminist theologians during the past few years have shown how theology done by

men in male-dominated cultures has served to undergird patriarchal structures in society.⁶ If Black men have accepted those structures, is there any reason to believe that the theology written by Black men would be any more liberating of Black women than white theology was for white women? It would seem that in view of the oppression that Black people have suffered, Black men would be particularly sensitive to the oppression of others.⁷

James Cone has stated that the task of Black theology "is to analyze the nature of the gospel of Jesus Christ in the light of oppressed black people so they will see the gospel as inseparable from their humiliated condition, bestowing on them the necessary power to break the chains of oppression. This means that it is a theology of and for the black community, seeking to interpret the religious dimensions of the forces of liberation in that community."⁸ What are the forces of liberation in the Black community and the Black church? Are they to be exclusively defined by the struggle against racism? My answer to that question is No. There are oppressive realities in the Black community that are related to, but independent of, the fact of racism. Sexism is one such reality. Black men seek to liberate themselves from racial stereotypes and the conditions of oppression without giving due attention to the stereotypes and oppressions against women that parallel those against Blacks. Blacks fight to be free of the stereotype that all Blacks are dirty and ugly, or that Black represents evil and darkness.⁹ The slogan "Black Is Beautiful" was a counterattack on these stereotypes. The parallel for women is the history of women as "unclean," especially during menstruation and after childbirth. Because the model of beauty in the white male-dominated society is the "long-haired blonde," with all that goes along with that mystique, Black women have an additional problem with the Western idea of "ugliness," particularly as they encounter Black men who have adopted this white model of beauty. Similarly, the Christian teaching that woman is responsible for the fall of *mankind* and is, therefore, the source of evil has had a detrimental effect on the experience of Black women.

Like that of all oppressed peoples the self-image of Blacks has suffered damage. In addition they have not been in control of their own destiny. It is the goal of the Black liberation struggle to change radically the socioeconomic and political conditions of Black people by inculcating self-love, self-control, self-reliance, and political power. The concepts of self-love, self-control, self-reliance, and political participation certainly have broad significance for Black women, even though they were taught that, by virtue of their sex, they had to be completely dependent on *man*; yet while their historical situation reflected the need for dependence, the powerlessness of Black men made it necessary for them to seek those values for themselves.

Racism and sexism are interrelated just as all forms of oppression are interrelated. Sexism, however, 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. It is important to examine this reality of sexism as it operated in both the Black community and the Black church. We will consider first the Black church and second the Black community to determine to what extent Black theology has measured up to its defined task with respect to the liberation of Black women.¹⁰

THE BLACK CHURCH AND THE BLACK WOMAN

I can agree with Karl Barth as he describes the peculiar function of theology as the church's "subjecting herself to a self-test." "She [the church] faces herself with the question of truth, i.e., she measures her action, her language about God, against her existence as a Church."¹¹

On the one hand, Black theology must continue to criticize classical theology and the white church. But on the other hand, Black theology must subject the Black church to a "self-test." The task of the church, according to James Cone, is threefold: (1) "It proclaims the reality of divine liberation. . . . It is not possible to receive the good news of freedom and also keep it to ourselves; it must be told to the whole world . . ."; (2) "It actively shares in the liberation struggle"; (3) It "is a visible manifestation that the gospel is a reality. . . . If it [the church] lives according to the old order (as it actually has), then no one will believe its message."¹² It is clear that Black theology must ask whether or not the Black church is faithful to this task. Moreover, the language of the Black church about God must be consistent with its action.¹³ These requirements of the church's faithfulness in the struggle for liberation have not been met as far as the issue of women is concerned.

If the liberation of women is not proclaimed, the church's proclamation cannot be about divine liberation. If the church does not share in the liberation struggle of Black women, its liberation struggle is not authentic. If women are oppressed, the church cannot possibly be "a visible manifestation that the gospel is a reality"—for the gospel cannot be real in that context. One can see the contradictions between the church's language or proclamation of liberation and its action by looking both at the status of Black women in the church as laity and Black women in the ordained ministry of the church.

It is often said that women are the "backbone" of the church. On the surface this may appear to be a compliment, especially when one considers the function to the backbone in the human anatomy. Theresa Hoover prefers to use the term "glue" to describe the function of women in the Black church. In any case, the telling portion of the word backbone is the word "back." It has become apparent to me that most of the ministers who use this term have reference to location rather than function. What they really mean is that women are in the "background" and should be kept there. They are merely support workers. This is borne out by my observation that in many churches women are consistently given responsibilities in the kitchen, while men are elected or appointed to the important boards and leadership positions. While decisions and policies may be discussed in the kitchen they are certainly not made there. Recently I conducted a study in one conference of the African Methodist Episcopal Church that indicated that women are accorded greater participation on the decision-making boards of smaller rather than larger churches.¹⁴ This political maneuver helps to keep women "in their place" in the denomination as well as in the local congregations. The conspiracy to keep women relegated to the background is also aided by the continuous psychological and political strategizing that keeps women from realizing their own potential power in the church. Not only are they rewarded for performance in "backbone" or supportive positions, but they are penalized for trying to move from the backbone to the head position—the leadership of the church. It is by considering the distinction between prescribed support positions and the policy-making, leadership positions that the oppression of Black women in the Black church can be seen more clearly.

For the most part, men have monopolized the ministry as a profession. The ministry of women as fully ordained clergypersons has always been controversial. The Black church fathers were unable to see the injustices of their own practices, even when they paralleled the injustices in the white church against which they rebelled.

In the early nineteenth century, the Reverend Richard Allen perceived that it was unjust for Blacks, free and slaves, to be relegated to the balcony and restricted to a special time to pray and kneel at the communion table; for this he should be praised. Yet because of his

acceptance of the patriarchal system Allen was unable to see the injustice in relegating women to one area of the church—the pews—by withholding ordination from women as he did in the case of Mrs. Jarena Lee.¹⁵ Lee recorded Allen's response when she informed him of her call to "go preach the Gospel":

He replied by asking in what sphere I wished to move in? I said, among the Methodists. He then replied, that a Mrs. Cook, a Methodist lady, had also some time before requested the same privilege; who it was believed, had done much good in the way of exhortation, and holding prayer meetings; and who had been permitted to do so by the verbal license of the preacher in charge at the time. But as to women preaching, he said that our Discipline knew nothing at all about it—that it did not call for women preachers.¹⁶

Because of this response, Jarena Lee's preaching ministry was delayed for eight years. She was not unaware of the sexist injustice in Allen's response.

Oh how careful ought we be, lest through our by-laws of church government and discipline, we bring into disrepute even the word of life. For as unseemly as it may appear nowadays for a woman to preach, it should be remembered that nothing is impossible with God. And why should it be thought impossible, heterodox, or improper for a woman to preach, seeing the Saviour died for the woman as well as the man?¹⁷

Another "colored minister of the gospel," Elizabeth, was greatly troubled over her call to preach, or more accurately, over the response of men to her call to preach. She said:

I often felt that I was unfit to assemble with the congregation with whom I had gathered, I felt that I was despised on account of this gracious calling, and was looked upon as a speckled bird by the ministers to whom I looked for instruction, some [of the ministers] would cry out, "you are an enthusiast," and others said, "the Discipline did not allow of any such division of work."¹⁸

Sometime later, when questioned about her authority to preach against slavery and her ordination status, she responded that she preached "not by the commission of men's hands: if the Lord had ordained me, I needed nothing better."¹⁹ With this commitment to God rather than to a male-dominated church structure she led a fruitful ministry.

Mrs. Amanda Berry Smith, like Mrs. Jarena Lee, had to conduct her ministry outside the structure of the A.M.E. Church. Smith described herself as a "plain Christian woman" with "no money" and "no prominence."²⁰ But she was intrigued with the idea of attending the General Conference of 1872 in Nashville, Tennessee. Her inquiry into the cost of going to Nashville brought the following comments from some of the A.M.E. brethren:

"I tell you, Sister, it will cost money to go down there; and if you ain't got plenty of it, it's no use to go"; another said:

"What does she want to go for?"

"Woman preacher; they want to be ordained," was they reply.

"I mean to fight that thing," said the other.

"Yes, indeed, so will I" said another.²¹

The oppression of women in the ministry took many forms. In addition to not being granted ordination, the authenticity of “the call” of women was frequently put to the test. Lee, Elizabeth, and Smith spoke of the many souls they had brought to Christ through their preaching and singing in local black congregations, as well as in white and mixed congregations. It was not until Bishop Richard Allen heard Jarena Lee preach that he was convinced that she was of the Spirit. He, however, still refused to ordain her. The “brethren,” including some bishops of the 1872 General Conference of the A.M.E. Church, were convinced that Amanda Berry Smith was blessed with the Spirit of God after hearing her sing at a session held at Fisk University. Smith tells us that “the Spirit of the Lord seemed to fall on all the people. The preachers got happy.” This experience brought invitations for her to preach at several churches, but it did not bring an appointment to a local congregation as pastor or the right of ordination. She summed up the experience in this way: “after that many of my brethren believed in me especially as the question of ordination of women never was mooted in the Conference.”²²

Several black denominations have since begun to ordain women.²³ But this matter of women preachers having the extra burden of proving their call to an extent not required of men still prevails in the Black church today. A study in which I participated at Union Theological Seminary in New York City bears this out. Interviews with Black ministers of different denominations revealed that their prejudices against women, and especially women in the ministry, resulted in unfair expectations and unjust treatment of women ministers whom they encountered.²⁴

It is the unfair expectations placed upon women and blatant discrimination that keeps them “in the pew” and “out of the pulpit.” This matter of keeping women in the pew has been carried to ridiculous extremes. At the 1971 Annual Convocation of the National Conference of Black Churchmen,²⁵ held at the Liberty Baptist Church in Chicago, I was slightly amused when, as I approached the pulpit to place my cassette tape recorder near the speaker, Walter Fauntroy, as several brothers had already done, I was stopped by a man who informed me that I could not enter the pulpit area. When I asked why not, he directed me to the pastor who told me that women were not permitted in the pulpit, but that he would have a man place the recorder there for me. Although I could not believe that explanation a serious one, I agreed to have a man place it on the pulpit for me and returned to my seat in the sanctuary for the continuation of the convocation. The seriousness of the pastor’s statement became clear to me later at that meeting when Mary Jane Patterson, a Presbyterian Church executive, was refused the right to speak from the pulpit.²⁶ This was clearly a case of sex discrimination in a Black church—keeping women “in the pew” and “out of the pulpit.”

As far as the issue of women is concerned, it is obvious that the Black church described by C. Eric Lincoln has not fared much better than the Negro church of E. Franklin Frazier.²⁷ The failure of the Black church and Black theology to proclaim explicitly the liberation of Black women indicates that they cannot claim to be agents of divine liberation. If the theology, like the church, has no word for Black women, its conception of liberation is inauthentic.

THE BLACK EXPERIENCE AND THE BLACK WOMAN

For the most part, Black churchmen have not dealt with the oppression of Black women in either the Black church or the Black community. Frederick Douglass was one notable exception

in the nineteenth century. His active advocacy for women's rights was a demonstration against the contradiction between preaching "justice for all" and practicing the continued oppression of women. He, therefore, "dared not claim a right [for himself] which he would not concede to women."²⁸ These words describe the convictions of a man who was active both in the church and in the larger Black community. This is significant because there is usually a direct relationship between what goes on in the Black church and the Black secular community.

The status of Black women in the community parallels that of Black women in the church. Black theology considers the Black experience to be the context out of which its questions about God and human existence are formulated. This is assumed to be the context in which God's revelation is received and interpreted. Only from the perspective of the poor and the oppressed can theology be adequately done. Arising out of the Black power movement of the 1960s, Black theology purports to take seriously the experience of the larger community's struggle for liberation. But if this is, indeed, the case, Black theology must function in the secular community in the same way as it should function in the church community. It must serve as a "self-test" to see whether the rhetoric or proclamation of the Black community's struggle for liberation is consistent with its practices. How does the "self-test" principle operate among the poor and the oppressed? Certainly Black theology has spoken to some of the forms of oppression that exist within the community of the oppressed. Many of the injustices it has attacked are the same as those that gave rise to the prophets of the Old Testament. But the fact that Black theology does not include sexism specifically as one of those injustices is all too evident. It suggests that the theologians do not understand sexism to be one of the oppressive realities of the Black community. Silence on this specific issue can only mean conformity with the status quo. The most prominent Black theologian, James Cone, has recently broken this silence.

The Black church, like all other churches, is a male-dominated church. The difficulty that Black male ministers have in supporting the equality of women in the church and society stems partly from the lack of a clear liberation-criterion rooted in the gospel and in the present struggles of oppressed peoples. . . . It is truly amazing that many black male ministers, young and old, can hear the message of liberation in the gospel when related to racism but remain deaf to a similar message in the context of sexism.²⁹

It is difficult to understand how Black men manage to exclude the liberation of Black women from their interpretation of the liberating gospel. Any correct analysis of the poor and oppressed would reveal some interesting and inescapable facts about the situation of women within oppressed groups. Without succumbing to the long and fruitless debate of "who is more oppressed than whom?" I want to make some pointed suggestions to Black male theologians.

It would not be very difficult to argue that since Black women are the poorest of the poor, the most oppressed of the oppressed, their experience provides a more fruitful context for doing Black theology. The research of Jacquelyne Jackson attests to the extreme deprivation of Black women. Jackson supports her claim with statistical data that "in comparison with black males and white males and females black women yet constitute the most disadvantaged group in the United States, as evidenced especially by their largely unenviable educational occupational, employment and income levels, and availability of marital partners."³⁰ In other

words, in spite of the “quite insignificant” educational advantage that Black women have over Black men, they have “had the greatest access to the worst jobs at the lowest earnings.”³¹ It is important to emphasize this fact in order to elevate to its rightful level of concern the condition of Black women, not only in the world at large, but in the Black community and the Black church. It is my contention that if Black theology speaks of the Black community as if the special problems of Black women do not exist, it is no different from the white theology it claims to reject precisely because of its inability to take account of the existence of Black people in its theological formulations.

It is instructive to note that the experience of Black women working in the Black power movement further accented the problem of the oppression of women in the Black community. Because of their invisibility in the leadership of the movement, they, like women of the church, provided the “support” segment of the movement. They filled the streets when numbers were needed for demonstrations. They stuffed the envelopes in the offices and performed other menial tasks. Kathleen Cleaver, in a *Black Scholar* interview, revealed some of the problems in the movement that caused her to become involved in women’s liberation issues. While underscoring the crucial role played by women as Black power activists, Kathleen Cleaver, nonetheless, acknowledged the presence of sex discrimination.

I viewed myself as assisting everything that was done. . . . The form of assistance that women give in political movements to men is just as crucial as the leadership that men give to those movements. And this is something that is never recognized and never dealt with. Because women are always relegated to assistance and this is where I became interested in the liberation of women. Conflicts, constant conflicts came up, conflicts that would rise as a result of the fact that I was married to a member of the Central Committee and was also an officer in the Party. Things that I would have suggested myself would be implemented. But if I suggested them the suggestion might be rejected. If they were suggested by a man the suggestion would be implemented.

It seemed throughout the history of my working with the Party, I always had to struggle with this. The suggestion itself was never viewed objectively. The fact that the suggestion came from a woman gave it some lesser value. And it seemed that it had something to do with the egos of the men involved. I know that the first demonstration that we had at the courthouse for Huey Newton I was very instrumental in organizing; the first time we went out on the soundtracks, I was on the soundtracks; the first leaflet we put out, I wrote; the first demonstration, I made up the pamphlets. And the members of that demonstration for the most part were women. I’ve noticed that throughout my dealings in the black movement in the United States, that the most anxious, the most eager, the most active, the most quick to understand the problem and quick to move are women.³²

Cleaver exposed the fact that even when leadership was given to women, sexism lurked in the wings. As executive secretary of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), Ruby Doris Robinson was described as the “heart beat of SNCC.” Yet there were the constant conflicts, the constant struggles that she was subjected to because she was a woman.³³

Notwithstanding all the evidence to the contrary, some might want to argue that the central problem of Black women is related to their race and not their sex. Such an argument

then presumes that the problem cannot be resolved apart from the Black struggle. I contend that as long as the Black struggle refuses to recognize and deal with its sexism, the idea that women will receive justice from that struggle alone will never work. It will not work because Black women will no longer allow Black men to ignore their unique problems and needs in the name of some distorted view of the "liberation of the total community." I would bring to the minds of the proponents of this argument the words of President Sekou Touré as he wrote about the role of African women in the revolution. He said, "if African women cannot possibly conduct their struggle in isolation from the struggle that our people wage for African liberation, African freedom, conversely, is not effective unless it brings about the liberation of African women."³⁴ Black men who have an investment in the patriarchal structure of white America and who intend to do Christian theology have yet to realize that if Jesus is liberator of the oppressed, all of the oppressed must be liberated. Perhaps the proponents of the argument that the case of Black women must be subsumed under a larger cause should look to the South African theologians Sabelo Ntwsa and Basil Moore. They affirm that "Black theology as it struggles to formulate a theology of liberation relevant to South Africa, cannot afford to perpetuate any form of domination, not even male domination. If its liberation is not human enough to include the liberation of women, it will not be liberation."³⁵

A CHALLENGE TO BLACK THEOLOGY

My central argument is this: Black theology cannot continue to treat Black women as if they were invisible creatures who are on the outside looking into the Black experience, the Black church, and the Black theological enterprise. It will have to deal with the community of believers in all aspects as integral parts of the whole community. Black theology, therefore, must speak to the bishops who hide behind the statement "Women don't want women pastors." It must speak to the pastors who say, "My church isn't ready for women preachers yet." It must teach the seminarians who feel that "women have no place in the seminary." It must address the women in the church and community who are content and complacent with their oppression. It must challenge the educators who would reeducate the people on every issue except the issue of the dignity and equality of women.

Black women represent more than 50 percent of the Black community and more than 70 percent of the Black church. How then can an authentic theology of liberation arise out of these communities without specifically addressing the liberation of the women in both places? Does the fact that certain questions are raised by Black women make them any less Black concerns? If, as I contend, the liberation of Black men and women is inseparable, then a radical split cannot be made between racism and sexism. Black women are oppressed by racism and sexism. It is therefore necessary that Black men and women be actively involved in combating both evils.

Only as Black women in greater numbers make their way from the background to the forefront will the true strength of the Black community be fully realized. There is already a heritage of strong Black women and men upon which a stronger nation can be built. There is a tradition that declares that God is at work in the experience of the Black woman. This tradition, in the context of the total Black experience, can provide data for the development of a holistic Black theology. Such a theology will repudiate the God of classical theology who is presented as an absolute patriarch, a deserting father who created Black men and women and then "walked out" in the face of responsibility. Such a theology will look at

the meaning of the total Jesus Christ Event; it will consider not only how God through Jesus Christ is related to the oppressed men, but to women as well. Such a theology will “allow” God through the Holy Spirit to work through persons without regard to race, sex, or class. This theology will exercise its prophetic function and serve as a “self-test” in a church characterized by the sins of racism, sexism, and other forms of oppression. Until Black women theologians are fully participating in the theological enterprise, it is important to keep Black male theologians and Black leaders cognizant of their dereliction. They must be made aware of the fact that Black women are needed not only as Christian educators but as theologians and church leaders. It is only when Black women and men share jointly the leadership in theology and in the church and community that the Black nation will become strong and liberated. Only then will there be the possibility that Black theology can become a theology of divine liberation.

One final word for those who argue that the issues of racism and sexism are too complicated and should not be confused. I agree that the issues should not be “confused.” But the elimination of both racism and sexism is so crucial for the liberation of Black persons that we cannot shrink from facing them together. Sojourner Truth tells us why this is so. In 1867 she spoke out on the issue of suffrage and what she said at that time is still relevant to us as we deal with the liberation of Black women today.

I feel that if I have to answer for the deeds done in my body just as much as a man, I have a right to have just as much as a man. There is a great stir about colored men getting their rights, but not a word about the colored women; and if colored men get their rights, and not colored women theirs, you see the colored men will be masters over the women, and it will be just as bad as it was before. So I am for keeping the thing going while things are stirring; because if we wait till it is still it will take a great while to get it going again.³⁶

Black women have to keep the issue of sexism “going” in the Black community, in the Black church, and in Black theology until it has been eliminated. To do otherwise means that they will be pushed aside until eternity. Therefore, with Sojourner Truth, I’m for “keeping things going while things are stirring.”

NOTES

1. Beatriz Melano Couch, remarks on the feminist panel of Theology in the Americas Conference in Detroit in August 1975, printed in *Theology in the Americas*, ed. Sergio Torres and John Eagleson (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1976), 375.

2. Consuelo Urquiza, “A Message from a Hispanic-American Woman,” The Fifth Commission: A Monitor for Third World Concerns IV (June–July 1978) insert. The Fifth Commission is a commission of the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the USA (NCC), 475 Riverside Drive, New York, N.Y.

3. I agree with the Fifth Commission that “the Third World is not a geographical entity, but rather the world of oppressed peoples in their struggle for liberation.” In this sense, Black women are included

in the term “Third World.” However, in order to accent the peculiar identity, problems, and needs of Black women in the First World or the Third World contexts, I choose to make the distinction between Black and other Third World women.

4. For a discussion of sexual dualisms in our society, see Rosemary Ruether, *New Woman/New Earth* (New York: Seabury Press, 1975), chap. 1; and *Liberation Theology* (New York: Paulist Press, 1972), 16ff. Also for a discussion of sexual (social) dualisms as related to the brain hemispheres, see Sheila Collins, *A Different Heaven and Earth* (Valley Forge, Pa.: Judson Press, 1974), 169–70.

5. Angela Davis, “Reflections on the Black Woman’s Role in the Community of Slaves,” *The Black Scholar* 4, no. 3 (December 1971): 3–15. I do take issue with

Davis's point, however. The Black community may have experienced "equality in inequality," but this was forced on them from the dominant or enslaving community. She does not deal with the inequality within the community itself.

6. See Sheila Collins, *A Different Heaven and Earth*, Rosemary Ruether, *New Woman/New Earth*, Letty Russell, *Human Liberation in the Feminist Perspective* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1974); and Mary Daly, *Beyond God the Father* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1973).

7. Surely the factor of race would be absent, but one would have to do an in-depth analysis to determine the possible side effect on the status of Black women.

8. James Cone, *A Black Theology of Liberation* (Philadelphia: J. B. Lippincott, 1970), 23.

9. Eulaho Baltazar discusses color symbolism (white is good; black is evil) as a reflection of racism in the white theology that perpetuates it. *The Dark Center: A Process Theology of Blackness* (New York: Paulist Press, 1973).

10. One may want to argue that Black theology is not concerned with sexism but with racism. I will argue in this chapter that such a theology could speak only half the truth, if truth at all.

11. Karl Barth, *Church Dynamics*, 1, part 1, 2.

12. Cone, *Black Theology*, 230–32.

13. James Cone and Albert Cleage do make this observation of the contemporary Black church and its response to the struggles against racism. See Cleage, *The Black Messiah* (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1969), passim; and Cone, *Black Theology*, passim.

14. A study that I conducted in the Philadelphia Conference of the African Methodist Episcopal Church, May 1976. It also included sporadic samplings of churches in other conferences in the First Episcopal District. As for example, a church of 1,660 members (500 men and 1,160 women) had a trustee board of 8 men and 1 woman and a steward board of 13 men and 6 women. A church of 100 members (35 men and 65 women) had a trustee board of 5 men and 4 women and a steward board of 5 men and 4 women.

15. Jarena Lee, *The Life and Religious Experience of Jarena Lee: A Colored Lady Giving an Account of Her Call to Preach the Gospel* (Philadelphia, 1836), printed in Dorothy Porter, ed., *Early Negro Writing 1760–1837* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1971), 49–514.

16. Jarena Lee, *The Life and Religious Experience of Jarena Lee*, 503. Carol George in *Segregated Sabbaths* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1973), presents a very positive picture of the relationship between Jarena Lee and Bishop Richard Allen. She feels that

by the time Lee approached Allen, he had "modified his views on woman's rights" (129). She contends that since Allen was free from the Methodist Church he was able to "determine his own policy" with respect to women under the auspices of the A.M.E. Church. It should be noted that Bishop Allen accepted the Rev. Jarena Lee as a woman preacher and not as an ordained preacher with full rights and privileges thereof. Even Carol George admitted that Lee traveled with Bishop Allen only "as an unofficial member of their delegation to conference sessions in New York and Baltimore," "to attend," not to participate in them. I agree that this does represent progress in Bishop Allen's view as compared to Lee's first approach; on the second approach, he was at least encouraging. Then he began "to promote her interests" (129). But he did not ordain her.

17. Jarena Lee, *The Life and Religious Experience of Jarena Lee*, 129.

18. "Elizabeth: A Colored Minister of the Gospel," printed in Bert James Loewenberg and Ruth Bogin, eds., *Black Women in Nineteenth-Century American Life* (University Park, Pa.: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1976), 132. The denomination of Elizabeth is not known to this writer. Her parents were Methodists, but she was separated from her parents at the age of eleven. However, the master from whom she gained her freedom was Presbyterian. Her autobiography was published by the Philadelphia Quakers.

19. "Elizabeth: A Colored Minister of the Gospel," 133.

20. Amanda Berry Smith, *An Autobiography: The Story of the Lord's Dealings with Mrs. Amanda Smith, the Colored Evangelist* (Chicago: Meyer and Brother, 1893); printed in Loewenberg and Bogin, eds., *Black Women*, 157.

21. Amanda Berry Smith, *An Autobiography*, 158.

22. Amanda Berry Smith, *An Autobiography*, 159.

23. The African Methodist Episcopal Church started ordaining women in 1948, according to the Reverend William P. Foley of Bridgestreet A.M.E. Church in Brooklyn, New York. The first ordained woman was Martha J. Keys. The African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church ordained women as early as 1884. At that time, Mrs. Julia A. Foote was ordained deacon in the New York Annual Conference. In 1894, Mrs. Mary J. Small was ordained deacon, and in 1898, she was ordained elder. See David Henry Bradley Sr., *A History of the A.M.E. Zion Church*, vol. (part) II, 1872–1968 (Nashville: The Parthenon Press, 1970), 384, 393. The Christian Methodist Episcopal Church enacted legislation to ordain women in the 1970 General Conference. Since then

approximately seventy-five women have been ordained. See the Reverend N. Charles Thomas, general secretary of the C.M.E. Church and director of the Department of the Ministry, Memphis, Tennessee. Many Baptist churches still do not ordain women. Some churches in the Pentecostal tradition do not ordain women. However, in some other Pentecostal churches, women are founders, pastors, elders, and bishops. In the case of the A.M.E.Z. Church, where, women were ordained as early as 1884, the important question would be what happened to the women who were ordained? In addition, all of these churches (except for those that do give leadership to women) should answer the following questions: Have women been assigned to pastor "class A" churches? Have women been appointed as presiding elders? (There is currently one woman presiding elder in the A.M.E. Church.) Have women been elected to serve as bishop of any of these churches? Have women served as presidents of conventions?

24. Yolande Herron, Jacquelyn Grant, Gwendolyn Johnson, and Samuel Roberts, "Black Women and the Field Education Experience at Union Theological Seminary: Problems and Prospects" (New York: Union Theological Seminary, May 1978).

25. This organization continues to call itself the National Conference of Black Churchmen despite the protests of women members.

26. NCBC has since made the decision to examine the policies of its host institutions (churches) to avoid the reoccurrence of such incidents.

27. E. Franklin Frazier, *The Negro Church in America*; C. Eric Lincoln, *The Black Church since Frazier* (New York: Schocken Books, 1974), *passim*.

28. Printed in Philip S. Foner, ed., *Frederick Douglass on Women's Rights* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press), 51.

29. James Cone, "Black Ecumenism and the Liberation Struggle," delivered at Yale University, February 16–17, 1978, and Quinn Chapel A.M.E. Church, May 22, 1978. In two other papers he has voiced concern on women's issues, relating them to the larger question of liberation. These papers are: "New Roles in the Ministry: A Theological Appraisal" and "Black Theology and the Black Church: Where Do We Go from Here?" Both papers appear in James Cone, *For My People: Black Theology and the Black Church* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1984).

30. Jacquelyne Jackson, "But Where Are the Men?," *The Black Scholar*, 30.

31. Jacquelyne Jackson, "But Where Are the Men?,"

32. Kathleen Cleaver was interviewed by Sister Julia Herve, 55–56.

33. Kathleen Cleaver was interviewed by Sister Julia Herve, 55.

34. Sekou Touré, "The Role of Women in the Revolution," *The Black Scholar*, no. 6 (March 1975): 32.

35. Sabelo Ntwasa and Basil Moore, "The Concept of God in Black Theology," in *The Challenge of Black Theology in South Africa*, ed. Basil Moore (Atlanta, Ga.: John Knox Press, 1974), 25–26.

36. Sojourner Truth, "Keeping the Things Going While Things Are Stirring," printed in *Feminism: The Essential Historical Writings*, ed. Miriam Schneir (New York: Random House, 1972), 129–30.

An earlier version of this work appeared in *For My People: Black Theology and the Black Church*, ed. James Cone (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1984).

