

TO SUFFER AND TO OVERCOME:
THE ECCLESIOLOGY OF JAMES CONE AND KARL BARTH

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THESIS

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Table of Contents

Introduction	3
Barth the Red Pastor	5
Cone, the Black Church and the White World	9
Contexts in Conversation	15
Encounter with the Word of God	19
The <i>Kerygmatic</i> Ministry of the Church	30
A Scriptural Case Study	34
The Mission of the Church and God’s Mission	42
Works Cited	49

Introduction

James Cone and Karl Barth have very different but ultimately complementary views of the Church. A survey of the two theologians' work reveals an emphasis in Cone's writing on the Church as a community characterized by and participating in the suffering of Christ, and an emphasis in Barth's writing on the Church as a community characterized by and participating in the victory of Christ. It would seem that these two points of view are conflicting. However, since both theologians take as a point of departure the historical and theological reality of the incarnation of the Word of God, there is an intersection between their views of the Church. In the incarnation of Jesus Christ, we see the convergence of suffering and triumph, both the reality of death and the promise of resurrection. Jesus Christ, in the incarnation, is God's statement of solidarity with those who suffer, those who are oppressed. The Kingdom of God is ultimately a kingdom of the oppressed. God with and for God's people is the God who has shown willingness to suffer alongside those who suffer. Jesus is the God who suffers and who overcomes. The Church, which is the ongoing incarnation of Jesus Christ in the world, must suffer in order to experience the restoration of all things to their right relationship with God. The Church achieves the nexus of its praxis and its *kerygma* when it proclaims that, while suffering is not the last word in the life of the Church, suffering is necessary in order to experience ultimate triumph over the kingdoms of this world. The Church participates in Christ's final victory because the Church shares in Christ's suffering. There is no resurrection if there is no cross.

Here the ecclesiological viewpoints of Barth and Cone come into conversation and find common ground with one another. This essay will examine Barth and Cone in their particular contexts as theologians, as teachers, and as pastors in order to articulate their ecclesiological perspectives as they relate to the goal and mission of the Church. To accomplish this, I will put

Barth and Cone in conversation with one another. While separated from one another at a great distance by location and experience, Barth and Cone interact intellectually at a high level of agreement. While a detailed analysis of their theological perspectives may reveal many places in which the two writers take different directions in their thought, there is a certain harmony in their work that reveals how closely related their theologies really are. Their respective points of view in many ways need one another in order to be complete.

Barth and Cone were formed theologically first and foremost as members of particular faith communities. Each accepted a call to proclaim God's word within his faith community, and, as an academic theologian, each envisioned his ministry as one which would speak for and to the Church at large as well as the particular community in which he was formed. Cone and Barth were churchmen before they were theologians, and each offers his theology as a gift to the Church. Barth has written, and I am confident that Cone would agree, "When theology confronts the Word of God and its witnesses, its place is very concretely in the *community*, not somewhere in empty space."¹ Barth and Cone's theology and churchmanship are inseparable. In choosing to speak to the Church, rather than addressing the secular world, both men display their love for the Church, and their belief that the Church alone, as the incarnation of Jesus Christ, has power to transform the secular world.

There is no significant difference for Barth and Cone between the pulpit and the pen, the congregation and the classroom, the parish hall and the lecture hall. The voice of the theologian is the voice of one crying in the wilderness, proclaiming the kingdom of God. For both men, the theologian's task is to paint a picture of the kingdom of God and to call the Church to account

¹ Karl Barth, *Evangelical Theology: An Introduction* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1979), 37.

when it fails to embrace the word of God and the promise of God's kingdom. Barth and Cone have never ceased in their ministry of the proclamation of the Word of God.

As we will see, both men's theological points of view were shaped by their experiences as members and leaders of faith communities. Their theologies, in large part, are both systematic and practical and are based on the need both men identified for a reform of the Church's life and order as well as its witness and mission. This is not to say that Cone and Barth have no interest in the secular world or the matters that confront it. Quite to the contrary, both theologians recognize an acute need for the world at large to encounter the liberating Word of God, and both theologians understand the Church to be the organ through which the Word of God must be proclaimed to the world. Cone and Barth preach to the Church so that the Church might better preach to the world.

Barth the Red Pastor

The impact Karl Barth's decade in pastoral ministry had on his theological development cannot be overstated. "Barth's life and work are inseparable, and his writings need to be read in the light of his biography and vice versa."² In 1911, Barth began his pastoral ministry in earnest, in a small town in northern Switzerland. "At quite an early stage, Barth's theological interest was largely concentrated on, and thus reduced to, his parish work, and he became less and less inclined to pursue his own course of research along the lines of liberal theology."³ Barth's ten years as pastor in Safenwil were seminal. It was during this time that Barth abandoned his liberal theological ideals in part as a response to his exposure to the Swiss social democratic movement

² J. B. Webster, *The Cambridge Companion to Karl Barth* (Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 1.

³ Eberhard Busch, *Karl Barth: His Life From Letters and Autobiographical Texts* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1976), 68.

and his intense involvement in the social, economic, and political lives of his town and of his congregation.

Safenwil is a village in a small canton in the northernmost region of Switzerland. At the time Barth was serving as pastor, the town was in the midst of a sea change. The ground was shifting socially and economically as the village contended with the transition from a rural to industrial lifestyle. The town's economy was supported at that time by the lumber and textile industries. A sawmill, dye factory, a knitting mill and weaving plant were all located in the town. Around three quarters of the workforce in Safenwil was employed in one of these factories, which were owned by families that were prominent in both the church and the community at large.⁴ Barth's advocacy on behalf of those who worked in these plants put him at odds with the wealthier members of his parish and the community.

Barth, along with his friend and fellow pastor Eduard Thurneysen, became a religious socialist. "My interest in theology ... in the industrial village of Safenwil [had to] give place to other things," Barth wrote. "My position on the community led me to be involved in socialism, and especially in the trade union movement."⁵ Barth's eventual membership in the Swiss Social Democrat party earned him the nickname "the Red Pastor" from members of his congregation. He was particularly concerned with the low wages paid in the industrial plants in Safenwil. He supported the organization of workers into labor unions with advice and lectures; he "refused to recognize the distinction between rich and poor."⁶

⁴ Ibid., 69.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Thomas C. Oden, *The Promise of Barth: The Ethics of Freedom* (Philadelphia: Lippincott, 1969), 24.

The outbreak of the first World War finally dissolved Barth's loyalty to the liberal theological tradition in which he had been educated and to which he had held in the early years of his pastoral ministry. In World War I Barth saw the disastrous intermingling of religion and nationalism, the "collusion of mainstream theology and the ideology of war."⁷ On the very day that hostilities broke out in Europe, a group of ninety-three German intellectuals issued a statement publically supporting Kaiser Wilhelm II, "identifying themselves before all the world with [his] war policy."⁸ Among the signatories to this document Barth was horrified to find many of his own teachers and theological mentors. Looking back on this event toward the end of his career, Barth remarked "An entire world of theological exegesis, ethics, dogmatics, and preaching, which up to that point I had accepted as basically credible, was thereby shaken to the foundations, and with it everything which flowed at that time from the pens of the German theologians."⁹

This crisis led Barth to reevaluate his previously held theological and political positions. His previous liberalism had been weighed and found wanting. "I suddenly realized," he wrote, "that I could not any longer follow either their [his former teachers'] ethics and dogmatics or their understanding of the Bible and history."¹⁰ Barth also became disillusioned with socialism, seeing the outbreak of war as a failure of European socialism. Despite his disillusionment, Barth became a member of the Swiss Social Democrat party in 1915, though he remained critical of the movement. "He made it clear that since war had broken out, both Christianity and socialism were in need of 'reformation' and that each required the other."¹¹

⁷ Webster, 3

⁸ Busch, 81.

⁹ Webster, 3.

¹⁰ Oden, 25.

¹¹ Busch, 83.

In this crucible, Barth found himself needing to forge a new way of looking at his ministry and at theology in general. He “continued to be strongly affected by the confusion into which theology, socialism and this his own previous thinking had been thrown as a result of the war.”¹² Barth was convinced that a complete reimagining of theology was necessary to correct what had failed in the liberal Protestant tradition. “We must begin all over again,” he wrote, “with a new *inner* orientation to the primitive basic truths of life: only this can deliver us from the chaos arising from the failure of conservative or revolutionary proposals and counter-proposals.”¹³ Barth’s was not a crisis of faith, *per se*, but one of discovery, a moment of clear understanding that the Church must, in a sense, rediscover God in order to remain faithful. In a lecture titled “The Righteousness of God,” given on January 16, 1916, Barth puts it this way, “Above all, it will be a matter of our recognizing God once more as God ... This is a task alongside which all cultural, social, and patriotic duties are child’s play.”¹⁴

For Barth, this problem of recognition, this need to rediscover God for God’s self, not the image into which God had been formed by human beings, took its most tangible form in his approach to preaching. He was beset by the problem of how to speak of God. What can one say of God, especially of the God who now confronted Barth? This God was wholly unrecognizable through the lens of his previous theological convictions. If he was to preach the reality of this God he would have to find a new theological language that would give him the vocabulary he needed. And so, Barth turned to scripture, and sought new language in the Word of God.

This return to Scripture marked the beginning of a new era in Barth’s theological development. The fruits of those first few years of labor with the biblical text would ultimately

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Ibid., 89.

¹⁴ Ibid.

result in Barth's seminal work *Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans*, and would form the basis of all Barth's theological development that was to come.

Cone, the Black Church and the White World

James Cone was formed in the womb of Macedonia African Methodist Episcopal (AME) Church. Macedonia was the spiritual home for many of the 400 black people that lived in the rural Arkansas town of Bearden, who were outnumbered two-to-one by whites. In the era of segregation in which Cone grew up, there was a persistent, insidious undertone of oppression and even violence that resided beneath the surface of every interaction between the races in that community. As Cone recalls in his memoir *My Soul Looks Back*, "The struggle to survive with dignity was not easy for any of the four hundred blacks of Bearden. The nearly eight hundred whites reminded them daily who was in charge of things."¹⁵

Cone learned from his father, Charles Cone, both the necessity for personal strength and resistance to the daily oppression African Americans experienced at the hands of the Bearden whites as well as the potential for violent reprisal that such resistance held. Mr. Cone refused to accept the conventional wisdom of his day that "white is right." Such a notion infuriated him, and he refused to give any ground when it came to protecting his personal dignity or the dignity of this family. In *My Soul Looks Back* Cone recalls a simple but highly impactful way his father demanded respect for his wife from white people. Though it was customary in that time in Bearden for whites to address blacks using only their first names and for blacks to address whites with the honorific "Mister" or "Missus," Mr. Cone only ever introduced his wife as "Mrs. Cone." If a white person demanded to know her first name, it wasn't offered. This simple act of

¹⁵ James H. Cone, *My Soul Looks Back* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1986), 21.

resistance forced the socially powerful whites to recognize, even if for only a moment, the human dignity of a black woman.¹⁶ Cone's father would not allow his wife to be referred to as "girl," nor would he let people address him as "boy."¹⁷

In 1950, Charles Cone filed a lawsuit against the Bearden School District on the grounds that the segregated schools were not equal. Cone's memoir tells the story: "After the Supreme Court decision of 1954, my father's suit became a case for the integration of the schools. Absolute madness seemed to enter the minds and hearts of the white folks in Bearden at the very idea of blacks and whites going to the same schools."¹⁸ There was talk of lynching Cone's father, so great was the anger felt at his presumption to upset the *status quo*. Mr. Cone did not back down. He refused to remove his name from the lawsuit, and, though his family and friends urged him to, he refused to leave town to ensure his personal safety. The life, experience and witness of his parents have indelibly marked Cone and, on some very important level, set the trajectory of his life's work. As he writes:

The universal manifestation of courage and resistance that I saw in my father's life continues to make anything that I might achieve seem modest and sometimes insignificant. At most, what I say and do are just dim reflections of what my parents taught and lived. If they, risking livelihood and life, could make a stand against the white folks of Bearden, cannot I, protected by tenure and doctorate, at least say a few words and do a few things that represent the truth of black life?¹⁹

At home, young James Cone learned the value of resistance to oppression; most particularly he learned the value of resisting white injustice against black persons. It was at Macedonia AME that he experienced the power of resistance "joined with faith in God's

¹⁶ Ibid., 17.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Ibid., 21.

¹⁹ Ibid.

righteousness.”²⁰ It was at church that Cone encountered a faith that was restorative for persons who experienced destruction in just about every other aspect of their lives. In the presence of the divine, the black folk of Bearden had their humanity restored and were renewed for a seemingly never-ending struggle for dignity and recognition. “After being treated as things for six days of the week, black folk went to church on Sunday in order to affirm and experience another definition of their humanity. ... Everybody became somebody, and there were no second-class people at Macedonia.”²¹

Macedonia African Episcopal Church was a refuge from the oppression, injustice and indignity that made up day-to-day life for its congregants. It was also the court of last resort for a group of people who had their rights and dignity trampled on by the majority. When all else had failed and the cause seemed not only lost but hopelessly lost, the believers gathered at Macedonia turned to their Lord. “In their struggle to affirm their dignity and also survive, there were many times when that possibility seemed to vanish and the future seemed closed ... when the people of Macedonia had their backs up against the wall and all human resources appeared exhausted, they did not hesitate to turn to the Lord in prayer.”²²

In the community of faith gathered together in prayer, young James Cone saw the reality of a God who was present with those who suffered. At Macedonia, he experienced the liberating and restoring faith of those who were bound and determined that life would not be beaten out of them. God was with them and that meant they were a people, called together in the name of God, who would not be shaken in the face of oppression, or deterred when the going was tough. God

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Ibid., 23

²² Ibid.

was hope for the hopeless and the believers at Macedonia AME were certain that God was on their side. The faith of Macedonia AME was deeply impactful for Cone:

The black Church introduced me to the essence of life as expressed in the rhythm and feelings of black people in Bearden, Arkansas. At Macedonia African Methodist Episcopal Church, I encountered the presence of the divine Spirit, and my soul was moved and filled with an aspiration for freedom. I responded to the black Church experience by offering myself for membership at Macedonia when I was only ten and by entering the ministry at the early age of sixteen.²³

Cone's experience in Bearden outside Macedonia was equally formative. His encounters with white people in the small town were constant reminders that black people were not to set their own agenda. "White people did everything within their power to define black reality, to tell us who we were," he writes.²⁴ This constant struggle for identity over against the identity that whites attempted to force upon blacks in Cone's little hometown was a source of confusion for blacks and cognitive dissonance for whites. The white folk of Bearden "thought of themselves as 'nice' white folks."²⁵ Those "nice" white folks he encountered set the bar for their "nice-ness" at the threshold of active violence against blacks. Because "they did not lynch or rape niggers"²⁶ they believed themselves to be exonerated of the oppression being carried out against black people. Many of these "nice" whites were in regular attendance at Sunday worship. "They honestly believed that they were *Christian* people, faithful servants of God."²⁷ The reality of the social and religious exclusion of blacks from the white world apparently did not strike these "nice" white folk as ironic.

²³ James H. Cone, *God of the Oppressed* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1997), 1-2.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 2

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 3

²⁶ *Ibid.*

²⁷ *Ibid.*

The extreme disconnect between the lived reality of black people in Bearden and the way the whites thought of their own behavior led black Christians to assume they had not been converted.²⁸ Cone himself came to believe this as a young college student in Little Rock, Arkansas, although he assumed that a simple encounter with the content of the Scriptures would suffice to convince white people of the errors of their ways. He describes his reasoning: “Once confronted with the gospel and the demands that it lays upon all Christians, then whites would cease their racism, I thought, because their Christian identity was more important to them than their humiliation of blacks.”²⁹ Because he was firmly convinced that the cruelties committed by white people against blacks were born purely of ignorance, and that whites would not dare to continue in such behavior once they were made aware of the truth of the gospel, Cone determined to share this gospel message with white people. On one such occasion he sat down on a public bus next to an elderly, pious-looking white woman. As soon as Cone sat down, the matronly lady got up and found another seat, cursing angrily at him. Cone went over to her and said, “Madam, you look like a Christian . . . How could you say the things you said to me when Jesus said that what you do to the Least you do to him?” ‘You are not Jesus,’ she replied with hate and violence in her eyes. ‘Get the hell out of my face, you nigger!’³⁰

This experience, among others, led Cone to reflect on the nature of religious belief and its impact on behavior. He realized that “religion did not automatically make people sensitive to human pain and suffering.”³¹ It seemed that whites, even (perhaps especially) white Christians were in need of conversion. But how could they be converted? While his brothers and sisters in

²⁸ Cone, *My Soul Looks Back*, 25.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Ibid., 26.

³¹ Ibid.

the black church left it up to the Holy Spirit, Cone himself was determined to study the problem by immersing himself in theology and history.³² “How could both black and white churches be Christian,” he wondered, “if they took opposite stands and both claimed Christ and the Bible as the basis of their views?”³³

Cone completed a degree in Religion and Philosophy at Philander Smith College in Little Rock, serving as an AME pastor as he studied, and then made his way to Chicago to enter a graduate program at what is now Garrett-Evangelical Theological Seminary. At Garrett he encountered institutionalized racism at a level he had not experienced before. Determined to prove the white professors and administrators who predicted his failure wrong, he pursued and completed a Ph.D. in theology. However, as Cone reflects in *My Soul Looks Back*, the most difficult aspect of graduate school was not the course work or the writing, but staying in and concentrating on school at the height of the civil rights movement.³⁴ For Cone, the civil rights movement was cause for reflecting on the practical applications for the study of theology. What, ultimately, did it matter? “How could I write papers about the Barth-Bruner debates on natural theology while black people were being denied the right to vote?” Cone asked.³⁵ He was determined to relate systematic theology to the black struggle for freedom from oppression.

In 1968, as he was preparing for a lecture at Elmhurst College, Cone decided to write a manifesto that would link Black Power with the Gospel of Christ. Fully aware of the move he was making, Cone was prepared to strike out in a new direction that would cut ties with the white interpretation of Christianity he had been taught at Garrett:

³² Ibid.

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Ibid., 36.

³⁵ Ibid.

I purposely intended to be provocative in much the same way that Barth was when he rebelled against liberal theology. As Barth had turned liberal theology up-side-down, I wanted to turn him right-side-up with a focus on the black struggle in particular and oppressed people generally. . . . I was angry not with Barth but only with European and North American Barthians who used him to justify doing nothing about the struggle for justice. I have always thought that Barth was closer to me than to them. But whether I was right or wrong about where Barth would stand on the matter, the truth was that I no longer was going to allow privileged white theologians to tell me how to do theology. The writing of the essay provided the occasion for me to declare my liberation from the bondage of white theology.³⁶

Having declared his independence, Cone's theological project could begin in earnest. As Barth had before him, Cone turned to Scripture to search for a word to speak about God. For him, as it had for Barth, this meant seeking truth in the scripture that conformed to the revelation of God in Jesus Christ. Cone's entire project has revolved around expounding this revelation of God made incarnate in order to set people free. "The hermeneutical principle for an exegesis of the Scriptures is the revelation of God in Christ as the liberator of the oppressed."³⁷

Contexts in Conversation

While the contexts that formed James Cone and Karl Barth are different, there are certain affinities that bear highlighting here. Both theologians were formed by their experience as members and leaders within faith communities. Both were profoundly impacted by a thirst for justice for those who did not have access to justice. Both are deeply interested in social and economic equity for all persons. Both look to Scripture as the source for language for speaking a word about God. Both see the incarnation of the Word of God as the primary hermeneutical key

³⁶ Ibid., 44-45.

³⁷ James H. Cone, "Biblical Revelation and Social Existence." In *From Christ to the World: Introductory Readings in Christian Ethics*, eds. Wayne G. Boulton, Thomas D. Kennedy, and Allen Verhey (Grand Rapids, Mich.: W.B. Eerdmans, 1994), 58.

for interpreting the written Word of God. Cone provides a useful framework for comparing his own work to that of Barth:

As strange as it may appear to both blacks and whites, the appeal of Karl Barth's theology to my mind and heart was directly related to the control which black religion exerted over my theological consciousness. Three focuses of Barth's theology made his conceptual structure useful in analyzing the black religious experience. They were his emphases upon the threefold form of the Word of God: The Word of God as preached, the written Word of God, and the Revealed Word of God. In Barth's theology, Jesus Christ is the Revealed Word of God. He is the one without whom we cannot speak of God. The Bible is the written form of the Word of God. It is the witness to the Word made flesh. Preaching is the Word of God proclaimed. Each of these manifestations of the Word is interrelated, with Jesus Christ being the foundation of their unity.³⁸

In particular, Barth's incarnational Christology resonates with Cone. Christ the revealed word of God is the "Friend and Savior" of the oppressed, "the most dominant motif in the black Christian experience."³⁹ Further, Jesus' experience of the cross defines, in the black Church, his role and status as Friend and Savior. At Calvary, Christ experiences the distilled rage of humanity and through the experience of oppression, of unjust accusation, suffering and death, redeems humankind from the sin and evil that enslaves humanity. Even more important for black Christians is the solidarity that God in Jesus Christ enters into with those who suffer. Cone describes this in *The Cross and the Lynching Tree* as he recalls the kind of preaching he heard in the black church as a youngster in Bearden. "Black ministers preached about Jesus' death more than any other theme because they saw in Jesus' suffering and persecution a parallel to their own encounter with slavery, segregation, and the lynching tree."⁴⁰

For both Cone and Barth the community of faith is called together by God in order to encounter God's Word revealed, written and proclaimed. This encounter fundamentally

³⁸ Cone, *My Soul Looks Back*, 81.

³⁹ James H. Cone, *The Cross and the Lynching Tree* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 2011), 58.

⁴⁰ Cone, *The Cross and the Lynching Tree*, 75.

transforms the community. It is the encounter with the Word of God that makes the gathered community of faith the incarnation of Jesus Christ. The Church that encounters the Word of God becomes itself an incarnation of the Word of God, the primary way in which God's Word continues to be revealed to the world.

Both Cone and Barth are theologians of the Word, and they have in their work a shared emphasis on the centrality of Jesus Christ in the life and proclamation of the Church. This emphasis on the incarnational reality of Jesus is most clear in both of the theologian's later work: for Cone, *The Cross and the Lynching Tree*; for Barth *The Humanity of God*. However, affinities between the two theologians do not fully bridge the divide in their distinct points of view. It is important to note the gulf between them in order to more fully appreciate the lines of theological thought they share.

The primary point of disagreement between Barth and Cone can be summed up in the idea of particularity versus universality. As we will see later in this essay, the primary methodological problem in both theologians has to do with the way they handle issues of particularity and universality. Barth errs on the side of universality; he fails to, in any meaningful way, particularize his conception of Christianity and of the Church. For Barth, particularity does not enter into the conversation because to particularize the Word of God is to prioritize other matters above the Word itself, to move the locus of Christianity away from God, and God's self-revelation. In Barth's theology, God always move towards humankind, and humankind acts in response to God's revelation of God's self. Barth goes so far as to posit:

Christianity is not a religion. For whatever is human about it, all the manifestations in which it may resemble a religion, are merely an echo or reflection of a movement that does not proceed from man or have to be carried out by him, but happens to him and has to be responded to by him, a movement by a being of an entirely different kind. ... 'Christian', properly understood, means being governed by the message of Jesus Christ, the liberating discovery of God's gracious move towards humanity. But such discovery is

an event, not a condition or institution, and thus is not an attribute with which human creations can be endowed or by which they can be distinguished.⁴¹

God, and God's self-revelation in the Word, is the first and last for Barth, and must come before and supersede everything, including experience and culture. God's revelation is universal, unable to be contained within any human experience, construct, or institution.

Cone, on the other hand, so particularizes the Word of God within the black experience that it becomes extremely difficult to universalize. Cone's conception of Christianity and the Church is rooted in God's self-revelation in Jesus Christ, to be sure; but, in Cone's theology, God's self-revelation is mediated through the black experience. Cone is clear that in his mind the particularity of black experience comes before any move to universality. Cone explicitly claims this in the revised preface to the second edition of his book *God of the Oppressed*. In that introductory essay, Cone addresses white theologians' response to black liberation theology.

While most white theologians ignored black liberation theology ... a few engaged black theology ... They were not put off by black theology's rage or its accent on blackness, for they realized that there was much justification for it. Still, these theologians pressed for the universality of the Christian gospel which could not be limited by the particularity of the black experience. I insisted that there is no universality that is not particular, no knowledge of God's revelation in the U.S. that did not arise out of the black struggle against white supremacy.⁴²

Cone's theology begins with experience, with the particularity of the black experience. In the same preface quoted above, Cone goes on to say "I am black first—and everything else comes after that. This means that I read the Bible through the lens of a black tradition of struggle and not as the objective Word of God."⁴³ Cone contextualizes God's self-revelation. Because God is revealed (in the particular context of U.S. culture) through the black experience, the locus of

⁴¹ Karl Barth, *Fragments Grave and Gay* (London: Collins, 1971), 28-29.

⁴² Cone, *God of the Oppressed*, ix.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, xi.

Christianity is the particularity of a human experience in which God is revealed. As Cone put it in his 2015 Martin Luther King Jr. lecture at Duke University, “The heart of the Christian faith is the cross of Jesus, the one who shed his blood as the crucified victim in Jerusalem. And no one can understand this Jesus and the saving power of his blood without seeing him through the experience of crucified peoples today.”⁴⁴

While Cone and Barth share as a point of departure the incarnation of God in Jesus Christ, they do not share a view on how God’s self-revelation is to be interpreted, with Barth universalizing and Cone particularizing the interpretation. While this creates a chasm between the two theologians that seems untraversable, there are bridges of thought between them, which we will explore in the remainder of this essay.

Encounter with the Word of God

In Barth’s theology, Christ is the incarnation of God; specifically, Christ is God in partnership with humankind. However, this partnership must be qualified. God is always the superior partner.⁴⁵ God is the primary actor, the first mover, in the relationship. God’s free election of God’s self sets the stage for God’s partnership with humanity. “In Jesus Christ man’s freedom is wholly enclosed in the freedom of God. Without the condescension of God, there would be no exaltation of man.”⁴⁶ Christ represents God’s election of God’s self as “God, Lord, Shepherd, Savior, and Redeemer” of humankind.⁴⁷ God’s freedom is a “freedom for love,”⁴⁸ and God

⁴⁴ James H. Cone, “The Cry of Black Blood.” Lecture, Martin Luther King, Jr. Lecture from Office of Black Church Studies, Duke Divinity School, April 1, 2015.

⁴⁵ Karl Barth, *The Humanity of God* (Richmond: John Knox Press, 1960), 45.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 48.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 79.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 48.

exercises this freedom by reaching out toward humankind and to attach God's self to humanity in togetherness with us. Jesus is therefore truly Emmanuel, God with us. God exercises divine freedom on behalf of humanity and, through Jesus Christ, sets humankind free to live into the full potential of humanity. This freedom to be fully human, fully God's creature, is also an invitation into partnership with God. "God insists on man's participation in his reconciling work. He wants man, not as secondary God, to be sure, but as a truly free follower and co-worker, to repeat his divine 'Yes' and 'No.'"⁴⁹

Barth's incarnational Christology is reflected in his ecclesiology. The Church is the incarnation of Christ. Like Christ, the Church shows forth the humanity of God. In this theological move, Barth brings the entire human experience back into line with the divine experience. God's life encompasses the entirety of the human experience. Cone makes this claim explicitly. "The finality of Jesus lies in the totality of his existence in complete freedom as the Oppressed One who reveals through his death and resurrection that God is present in all dimensions of human liberation."⁵⁰ The God who is wholly other is also immediately present, with and for humanity; God is close. Through the ministry of Jesus, especially his death and resurrection, which "are the consummation of his earthly ministry with the poor,"⁵¹ God demonstrates solidarity with humankind. This solidarity transcends the particular situation or circumstance of any individual or group. Each particular concern is resident in the universal as expressed by the communion of saints, which encounters the Word of God attested in Scripture,

⁴⁹ Ibid., 81.

⁵⁰ James H. Cone, *A Black Theology of Liberation* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 2010), 124.

⁵¹ Ibid.

made present in Jesus Christ and revealed in the ongoing *kerygma* of the Church. The Church is “the community that participates in Jesus Christ’s liberating work in history.”⁵²

Barth is quite clear that the community of faith is called together by the Word of God; and the community is called together in order to encounter the Word of God. In this community the faithful find their voice and thus their witness. The character of the Church is thus primarily identified by its witness to and proclamation of the Word of God made flesh, the Unknown made known, God’s “Yes” to humankind.⁵³ “In the Message of Salvation of Jesus Christ, this Hidden, Living God has revealed Himself, as He is.”⁵⁴ This witness and proclamation transforms the gathered community, and the community has a transforming impact on the world. The Church redefines humanity in terms of God’s “Yes.” The Church, the communion of saints, the congregation of the faithful, is the human and finite proclamation of the infinite and incorruptible Kingdom of God. Cone characterizes the gathering of the faithful specifically as a redefinition of black humanity in terms of God’s “Yes” over against the oppressive “No” of white society. “On the Sabbath, the first day of the week, black people went to church in order to experience another definition of their humanity.”⁵⁵

The very human-ness of the Church highlights the triumphant and transcendent nature of the Kingdom. In this way the Church itself stands in confrontation to the Gospel: “the last human possibility confronts the impossible possibility of God.”⁵⁶ Here Barth’s early attempt at defining the character and nature of the Church is dialectical, and argumentative. He goes so far as to set

⁵² Ibid., 138.

⁵³ Karl Barth, *The Epistle to the Romans* (London: Oxford University Press, 1968), 331.

⁵⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁵ Cone, *God of the Oppressed*, 12.

⁵⁶ Barth, *Romans*, 332.

the Church and the Gospel as opposing forces—over against one another—that are ultimately nullifying: “the Gospel dissolves the Church, and the Church dissolves the Gospel.”⁵⁷ Cone comes at it from a different angle, but arrives at a similar conclusion. “The Church as a fellowship is a visible manifestation that the Gospel is a reality.”⁵⁸

The reality and implications of the Word made flesh express themselves throughout the story of Jesus’ life and in the ongoing story of the Body of Christ, the church. It must be the Incarnation, the Gospel that comes to humankind, the revealing of the hidden-ness of God, that forms and maintains the Body of Christ. It is within the context of this gathering that the character of the Church is defined. Cone puts it well when he states simply “Christian theology begins and ends with Jesus Christ.”⁵⁹ The Church also begins and ends with Jesus Christ, the Incarnate Word. The gathered community encounters—it confronts and is confronted by—the reality of God as expressed by the Word of God: revealed, written and preached.

The community that gathers to become the body of Christ does not gather in a vacuum, nor does it leave the world, along with the cares and struggles that reside there, outside the gathered community. This is particularly evident in the Black church, according to Cone. All of the realities of day-to-day life also find an expression within the context of the gathered worshiping community. “The moan, the shout, and the rhythmic bodily responses to prayer, song, and sermon are artistic projections of the pain and joy experienced in the struggle of freedom. ... In these ‘churchly expressions,’ among others, the divine One informs and becomes present in black reality and is best defined in terms of black people’s response in body and spirit

⁵⁷ Barth, *Romans*, 333.

⁵⁸ Cone, *A Black Theology of Liberation*, 82.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 116.

to that divine source believed to be greater than themselves.”⁶⁰ Or, as Barth expresses it, “We also glory in our tribulations. We do not recognize that final consolation and resting-place only when our inner and outer life runs so smoothly and hopefully that boast almost rises to our lips. Our hope of the glory of God moves on a higher plane.”⁶¹ Within the community of faith, there is room for groaning as well as rejoicing, for suffering and adulation. There is room in the gathering of the faithful for both lament and “Alleluia.” In fact, Barth says, the community of the faithful is a community that has an expectation of suffering:

In the peace of God there is a sighing and murmuring and weakness. These words turn and rend those babblers who desire all Christians to be strong and not weak. Christians are full of longing; and they cry in their misery: Abba, Father! To human reason this is a poor meaningless little word. But Paul says, where that cry is heard, there are the children of God. We need not always be strong; for did not God permit His Son to be submerged in the misery of the Cross? And will he treat the members of Christ otherwise? There is a suffering and sinking, a being lost and a being rent asunder, in the peace of God.⁶²

The Church, the communion of saints, is not only a community that expects to suffer, it is, *fundamentally*, a community of the oppressed in James Cone’s ecclesiology. Jesus is the Oppressed One; God stands in solidarity with the oppressed. The community is, therefore, a community that suffers and that overcomes. “In the mystery of God’s revelation, black Christians believed that just knowing that Jesus went through an experience of suffering in a manner similar to theirs gave them faith that God was with them, even in suffering on lynching trees, just as God was present with Jesus in suffering on the cross.”⁶³

The Church by its very nature and character, as the incarnation of Jesus Christ, the oppressed one, stands in solidarity with the oppressed, for the Church is also oppressed. The

⁶⁰ Cone, *God of the Oppressed*, 21.

⁶¹ Barth, *Romans*, 154.

⁶² *Ibid.*, 155.

⁶³ Cone, *The Cross and the Lynching Tree*, 21.

Church's encounter with the Word of God must send it back into the world as the voice of solidarity for those experiencing oppression in any of its forms. "To receive 'the power of God unto salvation' places persons in a state of Christian existence, making it impossible for them to sit still as their neighbors are herded off to prison camps."⁶⁴ How one responds to hearing the Word of liberation is most important.⁶⁵ Those who respond to God's revelation appropriately will take action for the liberation of the oppressed. "To hear Jesus' Word of liberation requires a radical decision ... that defines theology as a weapon in the struggle of the little ones for liberation."⁶⁶ Cone points out that the experience of the Black church and of Black people in America creates an environment in which theories about Jesus' nature are trumped by the lived experience of the people of faith in which an encounter with the revelation of God in Jesus Christ is a moment of liberation and hope in the midst of oppression and despair. Cone characterizes this as the "particularity" of how the black church expresses the Gospel of Jesus Christ. The black church proclaims the Gospel of Jesus Christ as the revelation of God's "Yes" in a manner consistent with the lived experience of that community. In striking contrast to Barth, Cone's project begins with the black experience; it begins in particularity. The incarnational and eschatological meaning of the Word of God is appropriated in the experience and worship of the gathered, local, *particularized*, community of faith:

In order for theologians to recognize the particularity of black religion, they must imagine their way into the environment and the ethos of black slaves ... enduring the stress of human servitude, while still affirming their humanity. The record shows clearly that black slaves believed that just as God had delivered Moses and the Israelites from Egyptian bondage, God will also deliver black people from American slavery. And they expressed that theological truth in song. ... As theologians, we must ask: What is the source and meaning of freedom expressed in [these spirituals]? ... In this context, freedom is

⁶⁴ Cone, *A Black Theology of Liberation*, 137.

⁶⁵ Cone, *God of the Oppressed*, 47.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 48.

eschatological. It is the anticipation of freedom, a vision of a new heaven and a new earth.⁶⁷

Cone uses the community of faith, the Church, as a way to attempt to move between the particular to the universal. “The only way people can enhance their vision of the universal,” Cone writes, “is to break out of their cultural and political boxes.”⁶⁸ It is only in encountering the Word of liberation and responding to it that outsiders to the black experience can find truth “expanded beyond the limits of white culture.”⁶⁹ The Church’s encounter with the Word of God is of primary importance for any move from individual to corporate, from particular to universal and back again. “Through the reading of Scripture, the people hear other stories about Jesus that enable them to move beyond the privateness of their own story; through faith because of divine grace, they are taken from the present to the past and then thrust back into their contemporary history with divine power to transform the sociopolitical context.”⁷⁰ The Church’s encounter with the Word of God is what, at the most fundamental level, forms the Church into the Body of Christ; it is what unites individual believers and erases individual particularities and subsumes them into the universal expression of the Church, which itself dissolves before the reality of the Word of God.

The church does not exist outside of the reality of the Incarnation of Jesus Christ. But still we sometimes struggle to discern the Body of Christ apart from institution. How do we differentiate between the Body of Christ and the Body Politic? Theologian Letty Russell says it well: “The church has no nature of its own because its existence is derivative from Christ’s

⁶⁷ Ibid., 10-11.

⁶⁸ Ibid., 49.

⁶⁹ Ibid.

⁷⁰ Ibid., 102

presence.”⁷¹ Barth is even more explicit. “The community is the earthly-historical form of existence of Jesus Christ Himself.”⁷² The Body of Christ is marked by the presence of Christ and by its participation in Christ’s work of making all things new. The Church is the Church insofar as it receives the Incarnation of Jesus Christ and thereby participates in the renewal and reconciliation of all things. As Barth puts it: “Because He is, it is; it is, because He is.”⁷³ This reality has strong implications for the character of the Church. For example, throughout the epistles we see New Testament writers appealing to the Incarnation as the basis for unity in the diversity of the earliest bodies of believers. The writer to the Ephesians appeals to an audience of Jews and Gentiles to be reconciled to one another and live in harmony because Jesus, through the cross, has erased the distinctions that previously separated them. Cone uses this very scripture to claim, “the Church, by definition, contains no trace of racism.”⁷⁴ It is Christ, through his life, death, burial, resurrection, and ascension, who calls the Church into being and sustains the Church in its ministry and work in the world. All other distinctions, characteristics and missions must be left aside. The Church is nothing neither more nor less than “the subjective realization of the atonement.”⁷⁵ Barth is very clear that this is accomplished only through the working of the Holy Spirit within the community of faith:

If this is to take place in the Christian community and Christian faith, if man is to will what of himself he cannot will and do what of himself he cannot do, then it must be on the basis of a particular address and gift, in virtue of a particular awakening power of God, by which he is born again to this will and ability, to the freedom of this action, and

⁷¹ Letty Russell, “Why Bother with Church.” In *Essentials of Christian Theology*, edited by William C. Placher (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2003), 243

⁷² Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics: The Doctrine of God, Part 1*, vol. 4 (London; New York: T&T Clark, 2004), 661.

⁷³ Ibid.

⁷⁴ James H. Cone, *Black Theology and Black Power* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1997), 70.

⁷⁵ Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics: The Doctrine of God, Part 1*, vol. 2 (London; New York: T&T Clark, 2004), 386–387.

under the lordship and impulse of which he is another man, in defiance of his being and status as a sinner.⁷⁶

It is God and God alone who calls together and empowers the Church, the body of Christ, through the indwelling of the Holy Spirit. Thus, the locus of authority in the community of faith is not situated within the institution itself. Christ is the head of the church and its sure foundation and cornerstone. Barth puts it in no uncertain terms when he writes, “The Christian religion is the predicate to the subject of the name of Jesus Christ.”⁷⁷ Barth offers a summary view of the rubric for life in the church, centered on the revelation of the Word: “We are not free in the church to say anything just because we like it. ... Instead, we are bound to the Word of God. It is our duty to frame our proclamation in conformity with it.”⁷⁸ Barth’s view of the Incarnation of the Word of God is in full effect here. God has revealed God’s self; what was once hidden has now been made plain. The mark of the true and faithful church is fidelity to the Word, in proclamation and in practice. Revelation is ongoing in the faithful church. In this sense, the church becomes an Incarnation of Christ in the world. The real and manifest presence of the Word made flesh. However, the community of faith only remains so inasmuch as it continues to confront and be confronted by the Word of God. As Cone puts it, “The importance of Scripture as the witness to Jesus Christ does not mean that Black Theology can therefore ignore the tradition and history of Western Christianity. It only means that our study of that tradition must be done in the light of the Truth disclosed in Scripture as interpreted by black people.”⁷⁹ The ongoing confrontation of the people of God and the Word of God is a dialectic that places Scripture and experience into

⁷⁶ Barth, *Church Dogmatics: The Doctrine of God, Part 1*, vol. 4, 645.

⁷⁷ Barth, *Church Dogmatics: The Doctrine of God, Part 1*, vol. 2, 347.

⁷⁸ Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics: The Doctrine of the Word of God, Part 2*. Vol. 1, (London; New York: T&T Clark, 2004), 3.

⁷⁹ Cone, *God of the Oppressed*, 29.

conversation with one another. The rubric of this dialogue is the revelation of God in Jesus Christ. “Scripture, in the black experience is a *source* of the Truth but not the Truth itself. Jesus Christ is the Truth and stands in judgment over all statements about truth.”⁸⁰ The Church, then, under the Lordship of Jesus Christ, is both particular and universal. In his explication of the Apostles’ Creed, Barth is quite plainspoken on this issue. “*Credo ecclesiam* means that I believe that the congregation to which I belong ... is the one, holy, universal Church. If I do not believe this here, I do not believe it at all.”⁸¹

In their ecclesiological points of view, Barth and Cone are both attempting to recapture, within the context of a community a faith, a sense of God's immanence. The “wholly other” God is transcendent, and, as such, confined to an “eternity” or spiritual realm that had little contact with earthly affairs. Deity in this sense is a prison. A God who is only transcendent is not truly free to act in relationship to humankind; such a God is, at best, an observer of the creation, rather than an active participant in it. A corrective to this is the idea of God’s immanence, “the infinite expressing itself in the finite.”⁸² Barth's emphasis on God’s humanity, which Cone picks up on, moves the action back toward the immediate and earthy. God is near, immanent. Likewise Cone breaks God out of the prison of deity. Cone frees God to be with and for the oppressed. For Cone, “the immanence of God means that God always encounters us in a situation of historical liberation.”⁸³ Thus the humanity of God, for Cone, is particularly expressed in the experience of Jesus Christ as the oppressed one. Jesus is “an oppressed being who has taken on that very form of human existence that is representation of human misery.”⁸⁴ One might argue that Barth’s

⁸⁰ Ibid., 31

⁸¹ Karl Barth, *Dogmatics in Outline* (New York: Harper Perennial, 1959), 144.

⁸² Cone, *A Black Theology of Liberation*, 81.

⁸³ Ibid., 80.

⁸⁴ Ibid., 129.

emphasis on the *generic* humanity of God is a move that prioritizes the universal and Cone's emphasis on the particular nature of the oppressed is weighted toward the particular. However, I believe both theologians are attempting to move God from "out there" to "right here" in the life and experience of the Christian community. This is not entirely possible; there is a limit to the power of language to express the fullness of God's being with and for humanity. The message of the Gospel is always particular and universal, individual and corporate, transcendent and immanent. As Cone puts it:

The Christian gospel is God's message of liberation in an unredeemed and tortured world. As such, it is a transcendent reality that lifts our spirits to a world far removed from the suffering of this one. It is an eschatological vision, an experience of transfiguration ... And yet the Christian gospel is more than a transcendent reality, more than "going to heaven when I die, to shout salvation as I fly." It is also an immanent reality—a powerful liberating presence among the poor right now in their midst, "building them up where they are torn down and propping them up on every leaning side." The gospel is found wherever poor people struggle for justice, fighting for their right to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.⁸⁵

Both Barth and Cone have a methodological problem in that they struggle with how to make their theologies both universal and particular at the same time. Barth tends toward universality to the neglect of particularity; Cone nurtures the particularity of the black experience but sometimes fails to successfully universalize his theological claims. Despite these methodological deficiencies, it is possible to see the attempts that both theologians make to address the roles of particularity and universality in their respective theologies.

Cone and Barth agree that the church is a particularization of the universal. The Church is a temporal expression of eternal things. It is a sign, and thus has an important but ultimately specific and therefore *limited* function. "All these things which are, and can be, no more than

⁸⁵ Cone, *The Cross and the Lynching Tree*, 155.

signs, out to point to that which eternally precedes and extends infinitely beyond them.”⁸⁶ The particularity of the Church is why it must ultimately dissolve. The Church encounters the Word of God in order to be subsumed into it. The Word of God is the last word, the ultimate statement of truth and the only measure of the Church’s success or failure in carrying out its mission. The Church must dissolve before the Word of God, in the Revelation of God’s self in the incarnate, written and proclaimed Word of God.⁸⁷ In the Church, subsumed as it is into the Word revealed, written and proclaimed, eternity and temporality must co-exist. “And so the transcendent and the immanent, heaven and earth, must be held together in critical, dialectical tension, each one correcting the limits of the other. The gospel is in the world, but it is not of the world.”⁸⁸ The Gospel, embodied in the Church, then confronts the kingdoms of the world in its *kerygmatic* ministry.

The *Kerygmatic* Ministry of the Church

The *kerygmatic* ministry of the Church is a ministry that is formed first and foremost in the community’s encounter with the Word of God; the proclamation ministry is exercised by the Church as a community of the oppressed speaking in solidarity with all those who must hear and accept the Word of liberation that has been revealed in Jesus Christ. There is an inherently practical nature to the Church’s identity and mission that must find its expression in the ministry of proclamation.

Barth hints at this in *The Humanity of God* when he critiques 19th century theology. If theology is nothing other than thinking and speaking about God, Barth muses, it reduces God to

⁸⁶ Barth, *Romans*, 131.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, 333.

⁸⁸ Cone, *The Cross and the Lynching Tree*, 156.

an object that can be dissected, studied, uncovered and understood. This approach objectifies God and in so doing diminishes humanity. Further, it relegates theology to an exercise in historical survey of religious life, rather than a vibrant and active part of religious life itself; that is to say, this theology has no stake in human experience. When God is objectified, God is no longer the one who creates and sustains; if God is no longer subject but object then relationship with God is no longer possible. When relationship with God is destroyed, human relationships to each other will suffer as well. Barth's approach is better. His proposed theological anthropology, or "the-anthropology," makes both humankind and God subjects and therefore able to relate to one another. God as subject is able to reveal God's self to humanity. Humanity both receives revelation and pursues it through seeking to understand God and human. The church's proclamation ministry is an expression of this dual subjectification: the proclamation of the Church must tell the truth about both God and humanity in order to fully express the revelation of the Word of God in the preaching of the Gospel message. Both Calvin and Augustine are writing of this pursuit when they claim that knowledge of God and self-knowledge are wholly interrelated.

Theology in this vein begins with relationship. God, the divine subject reveals God's self to humankind—the movement, the revelation, is from subject to subject. This now provides a vantage point for the questions and provisional answers that theological inquiry seeks. The Church becomes the venue in which the dialogue between God and humankind occurs. In her book *Thinking about God*, Dorothy Soelle begins at this point. She quotes Karl Rahner's definition of theology: "the conscious effort of the Christian to hearken to the actual verbal revelation which God has promulgated in history."⁸⁹ Soelle uses this definition to bolster her

⁸⁹ Dorothy Soelle, *Thinking About God* (New York: T&T Clark, 1997), 1.

claim (expanding on Barth) that the object of theology is the relationship between God and human beings. Proclamation always occurs in the context of the Church as the fullest expression of God's relationship to humanity. And the Church, in its encounter with the Word of God, expresses the proper orientation of this relationship. The Church, which encounters the Gospel in order to be dissolved by it, recognizes that God is the superior partner.⁹⁰ It is God who has self-elected to be the one who creates and redeems all things.

From the vantage point of this relationship, the Church asks questions that have meaning for human existence. This theology speaks from and for a community—it has a specific character that comes from the relationships in which it is formed. This theology seeks to understand the revelation of God's self through God's interaction with the human community. Revelation is primary; and relationship, especially as expressed in the life of the community, is the substrate where revelation occurs. The preacher speaks, not as an authority on God, but as a voice of the community of faith that participates in the larger human community. This is how Barth ultimately characterizes the *kerygma*, the herald's call. In this capacity, the church, within its preaching ministry, can ask relevant questions and seek answers; faith seeks understanding for the *community* in which it resides.

In the context of community, theology asks questions. The most fundamental question theology can ask has to do with the nature of the community itself: Is this community an authentic representation of God's revelation of God's self through the incarnation of Jesus Christ? Put another way, proclamation challenges the community to examine its message, its practice and its mission. The preaching ministry of the Church begins as self-examination. The

⁹⁰ The language of God as "superior partner" is used throughout this essay. The idea is well developed in Barth's theology. Of particular interest for this paper is the way the idea is introduced in *Epistle to the Romans* and fully developed in *The Humanity of God*.

preached Word of God causes the community of faith to ask of itself whether or not it is fully embodying the reality of the incarnation of Jesus Christ, God's self-disclosure as the One who is with and for humanity, and particularly those who suffer oppression. In the ministry of proclamation, the community of faith expresses itself at the deepest and most fundamental level. One, the preacher, speaks the proclamation of the Word, but it is spoken in the name of the community. The Word gathers and confronts the community, but it is also, in the *kerygmatic* ministry, spoken and proclaimed *on behalf of* the community. Cone describes the preaching event in the context of black religion. "When dealing with the sermon, we must listen to the proclamation of the gospel as disclosed in the black Word. ... The Word and its proclamation in the black Church is more than the conceptualization of theological doctrine. ... The black sermon arises out of the totality of the people's existence—their pain and joy, trouble and ecstasy."⁹¹

Theological inquiry necessarily moves both inward and outward. As the community continuously reexamines and reevaluates itself, it also examines its role in the larger human community. Questions like these arise: Is the gospel informing the practice of this community? Is this community a voice for the liberation of the oppressed in the larger human community? Is this community calling to account the institutional structures of oppression it encounters?

These important questions shape the way the community of faith, the Church, responds to the world. But it is important to recognize that these questions are only made possible by the interpretation and proclamation of God's revelation of God's self in the community of faith. God's self-revelation must be proclaimed inside and outside of the community in order for the work of liberation and reconciliation to continue in the world. The church carries out the task of

⁹¹ Cone, *God of the Oppressed*, 31

proclamation in order that a full understanding of God's revealed and incarnate Word can be brought to bear in the world and in order to carry out the church's mission of participating in God's ongoing work: reconciling all creation to God, the creator and sustainer of all things.

The Church's ministry of proclamation ultimately must conform to the Word of God. The *kerygmatic* ministry must proclaim "God, who confronts all human disturbance with an unconditional command 'Halt,' and all human rest with an equally unconditional command 'Advance'; God, the 'Yes' in our 'No' and the 'No' in our 'Yes.'"⁹²

A Scriptural Case Study

Barth and Cone both center their work on an encounter with the Word of God. The church is always encountering the threefold word of God: preached, written and revealed in the Incarnation of Jesus Christ. It will be illuminating at this point in our conversation between Barth and Cone to attempt a reading of scripture using a hermeneutic that combines their points of view before moving on to look ahead to what this combined vision might say to the Church today. This "scriptural case study" focusses on Matthew 18. This section of Matthew's gospel account provides us with several images of the Kingdom of Heaven. These are metaphors we can use to describe the community of faith, the Church. This chapter is rich in provocative material, and there is not space in this exercise for anything but a brief discussion of the highlights. I hope that this brief excursus into the biblical text will help to concretize the ideas I have put forward in the preceding pages.

I want to start near the middle of the chapter and move from the inside out to unpack the chapter using the Barth/Cone hermeneutical key. We begin with a passage that is familiar to just

⁹² Barth, *Romans*, 331.

about anyone who has spent much time in the Church. In Matthew 18:20 Jesus says to his disciples “Where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them.”⁹³ This is a comforting saying; and we often use it to remind one another of Christ’s presence even in the smallest gathering of believers. But the context of this oft-quoted passage is frequently overlooked. Reading just a few verses before in the text reveals the startling truth of the situation Jesus is describing: interpersonal sin and its consequence, broken relationships. If we look at verse 20 in a fuller context, it becomes clear that the promise of Christ’s presence is more robust than the single verse quoted above might lead us to believe:

If another member of the church sins against you, go and point out the fault when the two of you are alone. If the member listens to you, you have regained that one. But if you are not listened to, take one or two others along with you, so that every word may be confirmed by the evidence of two or three witnesses. If the member refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church; and if the offender refuses to listen even to the church, let such a one be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector. Truly I tell you, whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven. Again, truly I tell you, if two of you agree on earth about anything you ask, it will be done for you by my Father in heaven. For where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them. (Mat 18:15-20)

Christ’s statement about his own presence in the midst of two or three believers comes on the heels of a description of interpersonal sin, broken fellowship and exclusion. There is conflict and turmoil. There is a sense of violence here. The Body is broken. Yet, even in the midst of this broken community, Christ is present. The gathered community, no matter how small, no matter how torn apart by division or strife, still encounters and is confronted by the presence of Christ, the Word of God. This is the most powerful case for ecumenism. As Barth puts it, “If we believe the Holy Spirit in [our particular, concrete] Church, then even in the worst cases we are not absolutely separated from other congregations. The truly ecumenical Christians . . . are those who

⁹³ All scripture quotations are New Revised Standard Version (NRSV).

in their respective Churches are quite concretely in the Church.”⁹⁴ The community, however localized it may be, that is called together by the Word of God, that is confronted by the Word and submits itself to the Word, is promised the blessing of Christ’s continued presence within the gathering. The community that remains faithful to the Word becomes a means which effects the ongoing Incarnation of the Word.

Christ’s promise of presence has a legal or authoritarian connotation as well. The community gathered around and confronted by the Word is granted power and authority. Whatever the community determines has temporal and spiritual authority. The community speaks with Christ’s voice. Christ has delegated to his church the power to bind and to loose, the power to excommunicate and to forgive. That authority is granted to even the least, to the smallest gathering, to even just two or three. Presence and authority go hand in hand. The Incarnation empowers the church. The risen Christ is present with and in the church. But what is the right use of the authority that comes with Christ’s presence in the community of faith?

If we move backward in chapter 18 to look at verse ten, we come to the parable of the shepherd who leaves his ninety-nine sheep on the mountain and goes to search for the one who has gone astray. As we expand the context, Christ’s model for the church becomes even more clear. Jesus tells his disciples that God does not want to lose any of the “little ones.” In Jesus’ description of the Kingdom of Heaven, there is more joy in recovering even just one lost sheep than there is in keeping the entire flock. The point of the flock, Jesus seems to be saying, is to welcome the lost sheep. Perhaps this is why Jesus has endowed the remnant (two or three, gathered in his name) with the power of “binding” and “loosing.” Could it be that the authority of “binding” and “loosing” is the power to welcome the lost, the little ones, in the name and

⁹⁴ Barth, *Dogmatics in Outline*, 143.

person of Jesus Christ. The authority given to the Church is the authority to stand with and for the oppressed and declare God's solidarity with them. Cone goes so far as to declare this solidarity as the mark of the true Church. "The Church must live according to its preaching. This is what Bonhoeffer had in mind when he called the Church 'Christ existing as a community.'"⁹⁵

Moving still further toward the beginning of the chapter, to verses eight and nine, we find a harrowing description of the high stakes of failing to stand with the little ones painted in gruesome colors. It is better to be weighted down and thrown into the sea than to fail the little ones. Those who put obstacles, stumbling blocks, between the little ones and God are subject to God's judgment. All obstacles must be removed. Jesus is so serious about this that he goes so far as to recommend self-mutilation over allowing one's self to become tripped up. If your hand or foot or eye causes you to stumble, Jesus says, you're better off maiming yourself than to risk "eternal fire." It's better to enter into eternal life disabled, Jesus says, than risk damnation with your whole body intact.

Let's take one more step, all the way to the beginning of the chapter. Here is Christ's admonition to his disciples that they must become like little children in order to enter the kingdom of heaven. Tied to that admonition is the pronouncement that welcoming a child in the name of Jesus is the same thing as welcoming Jesus himself. The image of the child here is provocative. As Tom Wright points out, in the ancient near eastern culture "children were frequently seen as only half-human ... It is significant that in some languages, including the Greek in which the New Testament is written, the words for 'child' are mostly neither masculine nor feminine, but neuter: the child wasn't a 'he' or a 'she', but simply an 'it'.⁹⁶ These children,

⁹⁵ Cone, *A Black Theology of Liberation*, 140.

⁹⁶ Tom Wright, *Matthew for Everyone, Part 2: Chapters 16-28* (London: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, 2004), 27.

the little ones, the least and most vulnerable of society, are the ones Jesus identifies himself with. All of Matthew 18 stems from Christ's answer to the question his disciples pose here at the beginning of the chapter: "Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?" Jesus answers by calling a child into the center of the group as he makes the earthshaking pronouncement: whoever can become as vulnerable as a child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven; whoever welcomes such a child in Christ's name, receives Christ himself. The Kingdom of Heaven is a kingdom of the oppressed. This is the context in which Christ grants the authority to bind and loose in his name.

The famous verse 20 sits in the middle of a rich discourse that fully explicates the nature of the Kingdom of Heaven. Beginning with the elevation of a child as the icon of his followers, Jesus describes a kingdom that is characterized by solidarity with the most vulnerable and with those who are oppressed; that privileges the one who is lost, and goes out to find the lost one, even if it means leaving many behind; that places authority in the hands of a remnant; that values forgiveness many hundreds of times over and above what may be considered prudent (18:22).

Jesus lays out a model for a church that seeks to further God's kingdom on earth as it is in heaven. He paints a picture of a faith community that practices vulnerability and solidarity with the oppressed, that is itself oppressed. This is a church whose authority begins with its encounter and confrontation with the Word of God. This church is an Incarnational community, called together by the Word of God and in which Christ is present. This Incarnational community is the beloved community. Christ is present, the Church prays, and he grants its requests (18:19). Prayer in this community "is the spirit that is evident in all oppressed communities when they know they have a job to do."⁹⁷

⁹⁷ Cone, *A Black Theology of Liberation*, 141.

At the close of Chapter 18, Jesus gives his disciples one more parable (vv. 23-34). In this story, a king demands payment from his debtors, but one man, unable to pay the enormous sum he has accumulated, begs for leniency. “Have patience with me, and I will pay you everything,” he pleads. The king not only grants leniency, he forgives the slave’s debt in full. What is the forgiven man’s response? Immediately he finds someone who owes him and demands immediate satisfaction. When his debtor begs for leniency, the forgiven slave has the man thrown in prison until he can come up with the money. The king’s response is wrathful. Jesus’ story ends with the king handing his slave over to be tortured until he repays his debt in full.

This parable re-emphasizes and strengthens the points Jesus has made about the Kingdom of Heaven earlier in the chapter. While on the surface this is a story about the importance of forgiveness, there is also something else happening in the parable that, especially when taken in context with the material that precedes it in chapter 18, recapitulates Jesus’ announcement that the Kingdom of Heaven stands with and for the oppressed, that it is, in fact, *of* the oppressed.

The first observation to be made about this parable is that it is a vivid lesson reminding followers of Jesus that they should love and forgive as they have been loved and forgiven. Jesus states this explicitly. There is something more to be said, however, about the debtor who, immediately upon being relieved of his debt, runs out and tackles the one who owes him money. Having just been forgiven of a debt of unimaginable proportions—he owes the king 10,000 talents—he goes on a debt-collecting rampage. It is loathsome behavior. But there is something else happening here, an issue that lies beneath the behavior. The slave who has his debt forgiven owes the king 10,000 talents, and when the king tells him to pay up his response is, at best, disingenuous. A slave just does not come up with that kind of money, no matter how much he begs for patience.

The debtor has a real problem because he does not just owe the money; at the level of debt he has reached, he literally owes his life. The slave's response shows that he does not fully understand the gravity of the situation. He is not capable of recognizing his own need. So when the king writes off the debt and sends the slave on his way, he leaves without understanding the act of love that has just taken place. The king's forgiveness is not just largesse. He understands the slave's plight better than the slave himself. He acts out of empathy and love to save the man from himself. The slave fails to fully understand what has happened. He recognizes that he has been let off the hook, but he fails to apprehend the enormity of what has happened: he no longer owes a debt he could *never* pay. Because he fails to see the reality of what has happened and to apprehend the act of love the king has committed on his behalf, he is incapable of extending to others the grace he has experienced himself. That is why he can leave the scene and grab a fellow debtor by the throat, and demand immediate payment. The forgiven debtor does not see that the king is standing with and for the little ones, the oppressed. Having been himself set free from oppression he immediately steps into the role of the oppressor, and reaps the consequences of his actions. Likewise, when the Church ceases to recognize itself as oppressed, it will take on the role of the oppressor. This idea forms a biblical basis for Cone's searing critique of white churches:

For white people, God's reconciliation in Jesus Christ means that God has made black people a beautiful people; and if they are going to be in relationship with God, they must enter by means of their black brothers, who are a manifestation of God's presence on earth. The assumption that one can know God without knowing blackness is the basic heresy of the white churches. They want God without blackness, Christ without obedience, love without death. What they fail to realize is that in America, God's revelation on earth has always been black, red, or some other shocking shade, but never white. Whiteness, as revealed in the history of America, is the expression of what is wrong with man. It is a symbol of man's depravity. . . . The coming of Christ means a denial of what we thought we were. It means destroying the white devil in us. Reconciliation to God means

that white people are prepared to deny themselves (whiteness), take up the cross (blackness) and follow Christ (black ghetto).⁹⁸

In Cone's critique, the white church has failed to understand itself as an oppressed people set free by the power of God's forgiveness, and has therefore taken on the role of the oppressor. The only way for the white church to truly be the Incarnate Body of Christ is to embrace blackness and reclaim the truth of God's solidarity in Jesus Christ with the little ones. Such a task begins with understanding the truth of God's revelation of God's self in Jesus Christ as one who came not to be served but to serve, who gave up his life in order to set the captives free, and by acknowledging the immense act of love that takes place in God's free self-giving. This can only be accomplished by prayer and through the power of the Holy Spirit. A prayer Karl Barth offered before his Good Friday, 1957 sermon "The Criminals With Him" displays the desire for such a reformation as this:

O Lord, our God! We are met today to commemorate the fact that thy masterful and fatherly plan with the world and with ourselves has been carried out when thou didst permit our Lord Jesus Christ to be imprisoned that we may be free, to be declared guilty that our guilt may be taken away, to suffer that we may have joy, to be put to death that we may have life eternal.

Left to ourselves we are lost. None of us deserved to be rescued, not one. Yet in thy great majesty and mercy thou hast made common cause with our misery and our sin in order to lift us up. how else can we show our gratitude than by comprehending and acknowledging this mighty deed?

This can only happen when the same living Savior who suffered for us, was crucified, died, and was buried, now enters our midst. Only when he speaks to our hearts and consciences, opening them to thy love and teaching us wholly to trust in thee and to live on thy love one.

Humbly yet confidently we would ask that this may come to pass in the power of thy Holy Spirit.⁹⁹

Such a reformed church as Barth prays for here, a church that is called together in order to be confronted by the Word of God, that confesses its sin when it acts as oppressor, that stands as

⁹⁸ Cone, *Black Theology and Black Power*, 151-152.

⁹⁹ Karl Barth, *Deliverance to the Captives* (New York: Harper, 1961), 75.

one with the oppressed, that recognizes its own character as oppressed, will discover that God's love is in limitless supply. There is no need to be frugal or fair. There is love enough even for the oppressor.

As we have seen in this brief excursus, Matthew 18 provides a powerful framework for understanding the authority Christ has given his Church. In Matthew 25, there is an eschatological coda to the ideas I have outlined from chapter 18:

When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, then he will sit on the throne of his glory. All the nations will be gathered before him, and he will separate people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats. Then the king will say to those at his right hand, 'Come, you that are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world; for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me. ... Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me.' (Mat 25:31-35; 40)

This parable speaks to the right use of the power of binding and loosing. The power of binding and loosing should be used to serve the poor, to welcome the stranger, to clothe the naked, care for the sick and visit the imprisoned. The authority Christ gives the Church is the power to pursue justice. The Word of God is empowering and liberating. So how does the Church, which has encountered this empowering and liberating Word, and which experiences the presence of Christ in its midst, live out its mission in the world? To put the question another way, how does the Church faithfully encounter and then proclaim the liberating Word of God?

The Mission of the Church and God's Mission

The Church ultimately exists to carry out God's mission in the world. God overcomes the principalities and powers, the spiritual forces of wickedness, the kingdoms of this world, and sets captives free. God is a liberating God. The Church only succeeds in its mission when it declares

emphatically that God stands with and for the oppressed, and that God's desire and goal for all of humanity is liberation. The Church is the organ of God's mission in the world. It is therefore always both oppressed and triumphant; it suffers and it overcomes. The Church should expect no better treatment than was received by its Lord. The cross is the locus of the Gospel, and therefore of the Church's mission in the world, and the cross requires of those who claim it as insignia that they remain in solidarity with the little ones. The cross is the symbol of the One who suffers and who overcomes, and who requires that those who follow him take up their own crosses. Cone puts it well. "Though the pain of Jesus' cross was real, there was also joy and beauty in his cross. This is the great theological paradox that makes the cross impossible to embrace unless one is standing in solidarity with those who are powerless."¹⁰⁰

Barth and Cone agree that the God-ordained mission of the Church is intimately connected with the incarnational mission of Jesus Christ. The Church exists only to proclaim the reality of the Incarnation, the Lordship of Jesus and the sovereignty of God. This proclamation happens in history, but its basis is eschatological; however, the proclamation and the eschatological reality are inextricably intertwined. As Cone points out: "The future of God in biblical history cannot be separated from the *oppressed condition* of God's people (emphasis Cone's)."¹⁰¹

There is room for nothing more or less than the proclamation of the Word of God in the Church's work in the world. When the Church fails to see itself as anything other than that which must be subsumed into the Word of God that calls it into being, it ceases to be the Church. Barth poses an important challenge that must be central to the Church's ongoing self-examination.

¹⁰⁰ Cone, *The Cross and the Lynching Tree*, 162.

¹⁰¹ Cone, *A Black Theology of Liberation*, 147.

“The question to be unceasingly posed for the community and for all of its members is whether the community is a true witness. This question concerns, therefore, not only the community’s speech but also its very existence.”¹⁰² The Church encounters and is confronted by the Word of God in order that it might announced the good news of God’s “Yes” to humanity. This mission is the Church’s single task. And, Barth contends, the task is complete in the Church’s death.¹⁰³ When the Church fails to recognize this, when it begins to see itself as an end to itself, the Church loses the hope of the Gospel, the Word of God by which it is called into being, unto which it must subject itself, and into which it must be subsumed. The Church’s hope is, therefore, also its tribulation.¹⁰⁴ “That the Church, in common with everything human, is compelled towards fulfillment in this world; that it should long to live triumphantly; whereas, in fact, it lives only of promise and must decrease in order that He may increase—this, we repeat, is the tribulation of the Church which cannot be taken too seriously.”¹⁰⁵

The Church’s mission is defined by the nature of Jesus and of his mission. Barth, by emphasizing Christ’s divinity, universalizes this mission. “Jesus was not simply a nice fellow who happened to like the poor. Rather, his actions have their origin in God’s eternal being.”¹⁰⁶ The Church’s essential nature, then, in Barth’s view, is derived from its participation in the life of God, of God’s eternal being. Cone is more concrete in his description of Christ’s mission, and the implications it has for the Church’s work in the world. “The real scandal of the gospel is this: humanity’s salvation is revealed in the cross of the condemned criminal Jesus, and humanity’s

¹⁰² Barth, *Evangelical Theology*, 40.

¹⁰³ Barth, *Epistle to the Romans*, 345.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid.

¹⁰⁵ Barth, *Epistle to the Romans*, 345.

¹⁰⁶ Cone, *God of the Oppressed*, 74.

salvation is available only through our solidarity with the crucified people in our midst.”¹⁰⁷ It is the cross, more than any other act of Jesus’ earthly ministry that speaks most robustly to the experience of the oppressed.¹⁰⁸

For both Cone and Barth, Jesus Christ, his life, ministry, death, resurrection and ascension, defines the character of the Church. The Church, as the Church, simply doesn’t exist apart from Christ. Being gathered in Christ’s name constitutes the Church. The presence of Jesus is the defining characteristic of the Church, and his mission is the only task of the Church. Jesus’ mission was and is to announce the advent of the Kingdom of God, and to demonstrate the nature of that Kingdom by standing in solidarity with those who suffer and who are oppressed, and by taking suffering and oppression upon himself.

The way in which Jesus carried out his mission is the model for the Church’s work today. Jesus’ primary move was to stand with the oppressed and to proclaim God’s solidarity with them and to announce God’s liberation for them. “This is the dialectic of human thought: God enters into the social context of human existence and appropriates the ideas and actions of the oppressed as God’s own. When this event of liberation occurs in thought and praxis, the words and actions of the oppressed become the Word and Action of God.”¹⁰⁹ This is the work of the Church.

Solidarity alone is not enough. The Church must be a community of the oppressed, a community of those who suffer, in order to adequately carry out its mission as the incarnation of Jesus Christ, the ongoing presence of Jesus, and the agent of the Word of God in the world.

¹⁰⁷ Cone, *The Cross and the Lynching Tree*, 160.

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, 26

¹⁰⁹ Cone, *God of the Oppressed*, 90.

Christ, as the expression of God's humanity, carries out God's desire to be in partnership with humanity in the most concrete terms. Christ is the expression of God's togetherness with man, the incarnation of God as partner with man.¹¹⁰ Barth is careful to describe this partnership as unequal—God is the superior partner.¹¹¹ In this sense, Barth does not completely abandon his conception of God as wholly other; however, God exercises divine freedom not as simply “unlimited possibility” but through God’s own sovereign grace elects God’s self as humankind’s God and thus commits God’s self to humanity.¹¹²

It is the language of election that allows Barth to discuss the “humanity” of God without risking heterodoxy. God’s sovereignty and freedom are never at risk in Barth’s view. Barth is also careful to define his terms specifically and, in some sense, directionally. In establishing the humanity of God, Barth never makes a move to establish the divinity of humankind. God’s humanity is displayed in God’s sovereign election of God’s self as the “Creator, Reconciler and Redeemer”¹¹³ of humankind; God acts out of God’s freedom to become incarnate in the person of Jesus Christ and, through the incarnation, to express God’s desire for humankind. The incarnation is an invitation for humankind to enter into partnership with God. It is accomplished as an expression of God’s divine freedom; the invitation is for humankind to exercise its own freedom in order to joyfully appropriate God’s self-election as humankind’s God.¹¹⁴

It’s important here to address the idea of “dialogue.” For Barth, this term means more

¹¹⁰ Barth, *The Humanity of God*, 45.

¹¹¹ Ibid., see also note 90 on page 32 of this essay.

¹¹² Barth, *The Humanity of God*, 69-71.

¹¹³ Barth, *The Humanity of God*, 84.

¹¹⁴ Barth, *The Humanity of God*, 69, 84.

than simply conversation. In Barth's usage, dialogue has a highly relational nature. Barth establishes that God and humankind are both free partners in relationship with one another. In the context of this relationship, God, as the superior partner, reveals God's self to humankind.¹¹⁵ The implications of this partnership are far-reaching and profound. This dialogic relationship between God and humankind creates a template for human relationships and ethics. God's exercise of divine freedom in order to choose to partner with humankind is a model for human exercise of freedom in the way humans deal with one another. The God who dialogues with humankind calls humankind into dialogue with itself. In this way, the *kerygmatic* ministry of the Church and the characteristic mission of the Church come together; and both are defined by the fundamental nature of the Church as formed by an encounter with the Word of God. The Word of God confronts the Church and therefore the Church must confront the world. The nature of the Church's confrontation with the world is consistent with the way Jesus has confronted the world: by standing with the oppressed and by adopting the life of the oppressed as his own life.

Cone takes this idea further when he describes the ways in which black preachers have shared the message of God's commitment to humanity:

They proclaimed what they felt in song and sermon and let the truth of their proclamation bear witness to God's redemptive presence in their resistance to oppression. Their sense of redemption through Jesus' cross was not a propositional belief or a doctrine derived from the study of theology. Redemption was an amazing experience of salvation, an eschatological promise of freedom that gave transcendent meaning to black lives that no lynching tree could take from them.¹¹⁶

"God's redemptive presence" is witnessed in the context of oppression. The very act of proclaiming the Good News becomes, in the context of black religion, an act of defiance against the

¹¹⁵ See note 90 on page 32 of this essay.

¹¹⁶ Cone, *The Cross and the Lynching Tree*, 74.

kingdoms of this world (including the power structures of the white church) that seek to overpower and oppress. Redemption in this context is not merely a fact of theological history, nor is it solely an eschatological hope. Rather it is a reality that operates in the life of the community of faith because Jesus himself was oppressed in the same way as the community. The community's oppression, then, is a means of experiencing communion with God.

The central issue of ecclesiology for both Barth and Cone is the mission of the Church as the ongoing Incarnation of Jesus Christ. There is no reason for the Church to exist if it does not make Christ present in the world and speak the truth of God's Word to the world. Barth, coming as he does from the perspective of one who is reclaiming God as God's self, wholly other from the creation, emphasizes the universal nature of Christ's work reconciling the world to God. Cone, from the perspective of the oppressed community, emphasizes the particularity of Christ's ministry to and with the oppressed, consummated in his death as a criminal on the cross of Calvary. Both of these perspectives are essential if the Church is to fully embody the Kingdom of Heaven. The Church militant is the community of the oppressed, but it is also a victorious community. The Church stands in solidarity with those who suffer as it boldly proclaims the Good News that Jesus Christ, the oppressed one, has overcome the powers and principalities and has, by his cross and resurrection, set at liberty all who are oppressed.

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