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This material is excerpted from Dale Andrew's book Practical Theology for Black Churches (Westminster/John Knox Press, 2002).\* In chapter four (a section of the chapter) and in chapter five he reassesses the prophetic voice of the black church of during the last approximately fifty years and discusses how it can re-model its ecclesiology.

### **How to Reassess the Prophetic Voice of Black Theology**

Black theology has been quite progressive as a prophetic voice in white America and Western culture. It has challenged the social evils and ideology of racism rooted throughout American public and private spheres. Black theology has held white society accountable to its own democratic principles, and exposed injustice culturally, politically, and economically. Black theologians have even challenged the state of modern democracy with a Marxist critique of Western capitalism. In critical reflection, black theology has begun to redress its own classism and sexism. Black theology has also entered into critical appraisal of its relationships with Pan-African, Latin American, and Asian liberation theologies. In short, the maturation of black theology has produced a prophetic national and international voice.<sup>55</sup>

This study calls into question black theology's prophetic role in the black religious community. Black theologians have tried to root themselves within African American folk religion through an appeal to shared metanarratives, such as the Exodus event and social ministry of Jesus. Beyond this move, however, black theologians engendered an adversarial dialectic with black churches, between the predominance of a spiritually pietist, religious folk tradition and an insurgent sociopolitical ethos of liberation ethics.

Black theology anathematizes the predominating refuge image in black churches. The refuge paradigm is held as devoid of the tradition's liberation ethics. Therefore, pastoral ministry, as it is practiced in black churches, requires restructuring aimed at social action. The effort to restructure pastoral theology itself is not without merit. And the appeal to the origins of the religious community is within the biblical tradition of prophetic inspiration.<sup>56</sup> However, a neglected analysis from within the pastoral ministry functioning in contemporary black religious folk life compromises the prophetic office of black theology.

A historical metanarrative functions authoritatively in the biblical prophetic tradition. The term "metanarrative" refers to the spiritual interpretations of a historical narrative held by a faith community. The narrative is imbued with a transcendent authority as a pivotal revelation of God, God's will, and divine activity in humanity. Yet how religious praxis envisions and practices ministry implies historical interpretations of the faith traditions that have emerged from the

metanarrative. I have maintained that a faith identity paradigm of black ecclesiology emerged historically as the churches interpreted their own formation and life. The pastoral and prophetic ministries of black churches were envisioned within the refuge image and liberation ethics that comprise their faith identity. The predominance of the refuge image in contemporary black churches has been judged explicitly disruptive by prophetic black theology, but it has not been accurately construed. It is painfully clear that black churches claim more of liberation ethics within their spiritual life than black theology grants. Any objection to the functional accuracy of this claim remains premature until black theology pursues a methodology for practical theological analysis of black ecclesiology and, therefore, black churches' pastoral ministries.

In the previous section, I systematically analyzed the effects individualism and racism have when they converge upon African American life experiences. Augsburg's schema and Erikson's life stages reveal important dimensions of the African American community. Black churches face dislocation from their historically central role in communal and individual responses to social oppression. The emphasis on inward spirituality and religious piety is most evident in the churches' focus on personal salvation and moral life. Outside of the Civil Rights era, their strongest attention to social presence has been an overwhelming concentration on their institutional development. Some critics even point out the reluctant involvement of black churches in the Civil Rights Movement. Despite the very real gains of institutional power, the disposition of institutionalism has resulted in some objectionable expenditure of both human and economic resources.<sup>57</sup> Yet, in all these grievances, there is little analysis of the actual contemporary influence that American culture asserts in black ecclesiology.

Black theology has succeeded in exposing the isolating practices of contemporary black churches. It has called churches into accountability for the practical needs of their people. Black theologians identify the problem as a loss of the liberation ethics once located in the churches' biblical understanding of Christianity. They maintain that black churches compromise the controversial demands of liberation ethics in the gospel message for an accommodational religious life in white America. Consequently, these churches continue to forsake their liberation heritage.

With the charge of accommodationism, many black theologians reject the popular social program of integration. Their argument holds that integration has become a device of exploitation.<sup>58</sup> Extending from the Black Power Movement, black theology argues that integration, for white America and white churches, does not mean equal opportunity and social mobility. White America uses socioeconomic and systemic power to manipulate the access and flow of social integration. This manipulation has become a means to control the radical demands for change. Integration, therefore, has resulted in a perpetuation of white supremacy and black inferiority.<sup>59</sup> Gayraud Wilmore suggests that there has been a misapplication of Christian theology to the social ideal of integration.<sup>60</sup> Ideologically, the displacement of racial identity became the gauge of social integration. Unfortunately, this means that white perceptions of social and religious acceptability become the canon for any transformation of our society. In essence, integration for America means "desegregated, but White."<sup>61</sup>

Black theologians reassert the religious ideal of God's love revealed in freedom and black wholeness. Black theology insists upon the value of black humanity and black power. However,

its methodology can be problematic. Cornel West identifies the methodology that black theology employs as a “dialectic methodology.”<sup>62</sup> I prefer to describe black theology’s methodology as systematic theology with an adversarial dialectic. Black theologians frequently rely on the dynamics of oppositional rhetoric in their sweeping assessments of contemporary black religious folk practices. West explains that its dialectic method is focused on negation and opposition. Black theology, therefore, has not developed its own notion of liberation.<sup>63</sup> In response, I reassert that black theology needs a methodology that engages in an “internal” dialogue with black churches regarding religious praxis in preaching and pastoral care.

*The prophetic office of black theology requires a methodology grounded in practical theology, which seeks an internal transformation of black religious life—that is, internal to the religious folk tradition. Instead, the dialectic method in black theology has produced an unsuccessful attempt to create resocialization of black churches. This method struggles to redefine for black churches newly plausible, religious, sociopolitical structures for resocializing black life.* West characterizes this struggle as an effort to create a counterhegemonic culture. Explaining this very point, West first defines a hegemonic culture:

A hegemonic culture subtly and effectively encourages people to identify themselves with the habits, sensibilities, and world views supportive of the status quo and the class interests that dominate it. . . . A hegemonic culture survives and thrives as long as it convinces people to adopt its preferred formative modality, its favored socialization process.<sup>64</sup>

In contrast, a counterhegemonic culture resolves

to opt for a transformative modality, a socialization process that opposes the dominant one; . . . it fosters an alternative set of habits, sensibilities, and world views that cannot possibly be realized within the perimeters of the established order.<sup>65</sup>

The chasm between black theology and black churches reflects the failure to create a counterhegemonic culture within black churches. The primary factors in this failure are the limitation of the theological method employed and what I have termed as the misdiagnosis and missed-diagnosis of religious praxis in black churches, which concern the convergence of American individualism and racism.

Black theology grounds its liberation ethics in the historical black community. Theologically, it places this responsibility within black churches. Black theology insists that the goal of liberation is both the primary and ultimate meaning of the Christian gospel message. Liberation involves the freedom of persons, personhood, and individuality. However, if freedom is the ultimate expression of liberation, then what are the implications for the future of community? Concerned with the beguiling effects of individualism within individuality, Robert Bellah asks, “But what do you aim for once you have been liberated? . . . But where should the struggle lead? . . . But what are [individuals] going to do with power?”<sup>66</sup> Black theologians have responded that such questions can be considered only after liberation itself. This logic considers the lack of freedom a violation of divine interests in creation and that of a people, interests which are inescapably concerned with individual freedom.

These questions, however, should raise concern over the preeminence of individualism within the quest for liberation. Black theology fails to establish a counterhegemonic black religious folk culture for its prophetic liberation ethics. Individualism remains the dominating hegemonic culture in American religious life, both white and black, and in black theology itself. The lack of a counterhegemonic formulation for black religious praxis results in what West describes as a neohegemonic culture: “Neo-hegemonic culture constitutes a new phase of hegemonic culture; it postures as an oppositional force, but, in substance, is a new manifestation of people’s allegiance and loyalty to the status quo.”<sup>67</sup> American individualism in black religious life disrupts the development of the counterhegemonic religious culture desired by black theology. Instead, a neohegemonic culture has developed, which embraces the liberation of black personhood and self-fulfillment, but does not curb the negative impact of American individualism upon the black community and religious praxis.

The fragmentation of the black community and the displacement of black churches illustrate the neohegemonic cultural deviations germinating among black churches. The liberation ethics of black theology, alone, does not successfully define a counterhegemonic religious culture for black churches. In disparaging the churches’ spiritual interpretations of liberation, black theology perpetuates the isolation of ecclesial life. The paradigm of faith identity for black ecclesiology not only reestablishes the interrelatedness of refuge and liberation, but also sustains a prophetic paradigm for black practical theology. For black churches, liberation contends with spirituality and social freedom. Neither individuality nor liberated individuals can ultimately be self-sustaining. Freedom, in and of itself, is not capable of sustaining either public or private life.<sup>68</sup> Hence, a renewed affirmation of the interrelationship between spiritual and historical liberation in God’s abiding care for black humanity constitutes this challenge to black theology.

Black ecclesiology, or more specifically its faith identity paradigm, becomes a far more appropriate point of departure for black theology. The faith identity paradigm may reground black theology in black religious experience. It preserves the relationship between the refuge impulse and liberation ethics, which is integral to black ecclesiology. Traditional black churches do not perceive the refuge image as devoid of liberation ethics. If black theologians desire to bridge this gulf with black churches, a reassessment of contemporary black spirituality is necessary. This methodology follows Cecil Cone’s corrective for the black theology project.<sup>69</sup> Faith identity reestablishes a common authority and cultural hermeneutic for black theology and black folk religion. In so doing, the interrelationship between the refuge impulse and liberation ethics of black ecclesiology becomes the lens through which a critique of black churches and black theology can be constructed. Black practical theology envisions a renewed, though redefined, relationship between the tradition’s pastoral spirituality and the prophetic campaign for black freedom and wholeness. This reorientation in ecclesiology could be advanced quite dramatically once black theology concedes that it too has supplanted the faith identity paradigm with its own uprooted agenda.

## **Chapter 5**

### **Re-Modeling Black Ecclesiology**

The communal milieu of worship is a pivotal feature of pastoral care in the faith identity paradigm of black churches. In similar fashion, pastoral practices also sustain the prophetic ministry of churches by empowering individuals and communities with theological and psychosocial tools for living. Notwithstanding, black theology places prophetic ministry within a radical notion of liberation ethics considered essential to living as a people of God. Even within the pastoral life of church communities, the prophetic traditions wrestle to clarify God's desires for black humanity as revealed through historical revelation and religious experience. Hence, black theology strives prophetically to hold black churches accountable to a dialectic praxis within their communal heritage.

Between pastoral and prophetic interests, faith identity contains two distinct, but mutually dependent, functions: refuge and liberation. A proper discussion of black ecclesiology will weigh their relationship. These functions shape the churches' life and mission. Inasmuch as refuge and liberation reflect the pastoral and prophetic dialectic of the historical Black Church, the critique of black churches by black theology heightens the need for a model to explore and reorient the paradigm of faith identity for black ecclesiology. Black theology maintains that the refuge function has become the predominant, if not sole, essence of the churches' contemporary bearing in the black community. Black theologians impeach these churches in their dereliction of prophetic liberation ethics. They charge that black church ministries increasingly neglect the practical needs of African Americans and their communities. Black churches have resisted any censure of their refuge function and disputed claims that they defy their liberation legacy. Despite charges of a lost dialectic, faith identity remains the dominant paradigm for these churches. Re-modeling black ecclesiology within this faith paradigm may prove helpful in reestablishing a dialectic between the refuge and liberation functions.

A covenant model of ecclesiology may offer the greatest opportunity within the biblical traditions of black churches and black theology to reorient this relationship between the pastoral and the prophetic. A covenant model would place heavy emphasis on the biblical semblance of black churches as "a people of God." For African American folk religion, faith identity as a people of God grew out of a religious culture of salvation and liberation through the personal encounter with God and the faith community. Faith identity operated between black personhood and black peoplehood. For the emerging black churches, faith identity shaped personhood and peoplehood into a covenantal understanding of their relationship to God that reclaimed and redefined their humanity. African American Christians came to know God as their creator, redeemer, and liberator. A covenant model of black ecclesiology, therefore, can work within a faith identity paradigm to bridge the chasm between religious folk life and social justice.

Just as God is revealed in the liberation of the Israelites, so too does the covenantal relationship with the Israelites reveal God's desires for the faith community and humanity. Liberation was a pivotal historical event for the Israelites. The radical activity of God in the Exodus event and the Sinai covenant established an intentional community, which was again reconciled in the postexilic exodus and the subsequent reorientation of the Davidic covenant. A closer look at these biblical covenant traditions is the focus of the next chapter. This present chapter is concerned with the immediate exigencies in re-modeling faith identity for black churches and black theology.

For the biblical traditions, judgment and salvation renewed the authoritative claims of God's sovereignty. Both the Sinai and Davidic covenant traditions defined liberation for the Israelite communities in terms of social justice. The covenants made radical demands upon the Israelites for social reform. Prophetic inspiration appealed to the authority of the covenant traditions to buttress the insurgent appeals to reform. However, the radical quality of these intentional communities was not expressed ultimately by the threat of revolution. Prophetic reform becomes radical in God's judgment upon social injustice and the call for repentance. One can easily understand the temptation to identify prophetic judgment with revolutionary ethics. However, the development of prophetic inspiration between the dominant Sinai and Davidic covenants highlights a reformist platform based on Israel's salvation by grace, repentance, and reconciliation.

Unlike these reformist traditions, the black theology project understood its historical context as revolutionary. The liberation ethics of black theology made radical demands upon American society under the threat of revolutionary consequences. Violence became an immediate ethical alternative to both white qualifications upon social reform and its torpid progress. Black theology characterized its revolutionary liberation ethics in the biblical prophetic tradition, but subjugated the roles of reform and reconciliation to this platform.

Covenantal theology, however, places the biblical prophetic traditions within the genre of social reform, which does not necessarily lack the radical demands of social justice. Liberation still remains a pivotal historical revelation of God's will for humanity. Yet it is the covenantal relationship with God that defines the content and goals of liberation. Through a reevaluation of its prophetic heritage, black theology could make significant strides in spanning the gulf with black churches in a covenantal theology of radical reform and reconciliation that wrestles explicitly with faith identity.

*Prophetic practical theology does not envision reform in religious isolation. Practical theology seeks reform within the life of the religious community and ministerial praxis beyond the faith community. Prophetic inspiration interprets primarily the covenantal revelation of God's will and goals for radical reform. This radical reform insists uncompromisingly upon social justice, whether it be cultural, political, or economic. Radical reform in black ecclesiology will also insist on a model of faith identity. A covenant model of ecclesiology can reorient prophetic black theology within black churches at the same time that it suggests possibilities for a radical reform of African American folk religion. The effort to re-model black ecclesiology will struggle to root prophetic appeal in faith identity and the religious folk life of black churches. This struggle to re-model ecclesiology between faith identity in African American folk religion and black theology is the focus of this chapter.*

## **THE TASK FACING AFRICAN AMERICAN FOLK RELIGION**

Black churches have failed to develop praxis in a radical reform acceptable to various contingents within the black community. While black theology captured the rippling tide of revolutionary fervor of the sixties and seventies, it quickly became another victim in the fragmentation of the black community. Within this context, I have argued that American individualism disrupts the corporate identity of African Americans in religious folk life as well

as in the larger black community. The loss of a common identity once consigned by shared suffering transmutes pluralism in the black community into debilitating fragmentation.<sup>1</sup>

Pastoral theologian Charles Gerkin establishes the problems of individualism as a competing narrative of American life. He explains:

Recognition of this tension—between the primacy and autonomy of the self ('individuation,' in the words of many developmental psychologists) and of corporate group and commonly shared values and interpretive meanings—has become commonplace in American popular culture in recent years. Whether that tension be labeled the contest between autonomy and heteronomy (by philosophers), between self-fulfillment and conformity (by psychologists), or between narcissism and group solidarity (by social psychologists), ordinary folk in American life today experience the bind of needing to be strong and self-sufficient and needing to belong.<sup>2</sup>

In essence, individualism has created a self-fulfillment ethic as the organizing narrative for American life. The self-fulfillment narrative competes with other narrative structures for central meaning.<sup>3</sup> Gerkin is therefore concerned with the confusions people face in times when traditional theological images have become meaningless. The utilitarian individualism of our self-fulfillment ethics results in an American pluralism fragmenting Christian communities.

African American religious folk life has not escaped this struggle unsullied. Individualism in black religious life has reoriented central biblical narratives in self-fulfillment ethics. Even the advances made by the human sciences in nurturing self-esteem and human value reflect the appropriation of American individualism. Individualism permeates individuality in religious and secular life with an egoism or narcissism. For black religious folk life, individualism has become a deceptive bed-partner to the alluring egalitarian virtues of American evangelical Christianity. Personal salvation and religious piety displace the kind of individuality-in-community that David Augsburger identifies in group-centric cultures.<sup>4</sup> The narrative interpretations of shared suffering during much of American black life were somewhat able to resist the fragmenting effects of American individualism until the ebb of the Civil Rights Movement in the mid-twentieth century. The rise of a small privileged black class and the rampant growth of the black underclass characterized the fragmentation of the black community under the impact of pluralism. Traditional Christian narratives of identity and meaning ultimately could not withstand the debilitating effects of the individualism that permeates American pluralism. Dogged racism and socioeconomic oppression continue to augment this fragmentation. Consequently, the individualism within African American evangelical Christianity hastened the displacement of black churches from their historical centrality in the black community.

Concerned with the fragmentation of modern society at the hands of pluralism, Gerkin turns practical theology to the narrative structures of human life. Narrative structures identify the individual and corporate worlds of meaning that one uses to interpret experiences, values, and decision making. Practical theology, which is praxis-oriented, seeks to reformulate one's narrative within Christian faith structures.<sup>5</sup> The primary task becomes a narrative, hermeneutical process of interpretation. The structure of this process focuses the Christian narrative on those competing narratives that comprise modern life. Gerkin's schema for narrative, practical

theological thinking involves several movements. First, a person moves from reflection on a present activity and human experiences to reflection on the past development of one's story. The process attempts to interpret and determine meaning that results from that activity. The next movement must then return to the present in order to move toward some future understanding of the same activity and its history.<sup>6</sup> The goal is a fusion of horizons of meaning between the Christian narrative and one's competing narrative.<sup>7</sup>

The displacement of black churches within the larger fragmentation of the black community makes a straightforward application of this method rather difficult. The narrative structures of American individualism not only fragment the black community at large but also disrupt the historical communal narrative of shared suffering and religious folk life. Consequently, a reflexive examination between individual and corporate narratives of modern black life is necessary. The task here is to reformulate horizons of meaning between individual and corporate identity within a Christian narrative of African American folk religion.

In this enterprise, I am concerned that a fusion of horizons between individualism and communalism does not sacrifice individuality or pluralism. The examination of biblical and historical narratives explores possibilities of normative Christian values for the interpretation of individuality and community. Immediately, problems concerning human history and divine revelation require attention. The function of past religious narratives hinges upon the identification and interpretation of revelation in history.<sup>8</sup> Earlier I argued that American slaves and early free Blacks identified and interpreted revelation within their own historical context from their biblical understanding of God's revelation in Israel's past. Yet the expedience of an ecclesial model depends directly on the horizons of meaning it holds in the present. Though one can identify models that point to divine revelation, the immediate interpretation or application of revelation is encumbered with historical difficulties.

In his book *The Meaning of Revelation*, H. Richard Niebuhr explores the complications that historical relativism creates for understanding revelation. In the simplest of terms, historical relativism involves the perceptions of spatial and temporal relativity. Historical relativity makes any kind of knowledge conditional to a spatial and temporal point of view. Claims to universal knowledge, therefore, are themselves conditional.<sup>9</sup> However, historical relativity can be pressed too far. When pressed, it risks a subjectivism that isolates historical groups.<sup>10</sup>

Already the difficulties of identifying and interpreting divine revelation for practical theology become apparent. Is there a space somewhere between uncritical universalism and some kind of sequestered subjectivism for transcendent historical revelation to exist? I use the term "transcendent" to mean revelation that conveys knowledge of God, including God's will for humanity, that may transcend the limitations of historical eras and continue to unfold within human history. Niebuhr suggests that theology can arrive at an understanding of revelation that establishes particular meanings derived from identifiable patterns in historical revelation.<sup>11</sup> The historical relativity of revelation does not reject the potential of history to communicate religious meaning to present reality. Yet the limitations of the historical present force one to begin with revelation from a confessional stance, "by stating in simple, confessional form what has happened to us in our community, how we came to believe, how we reason about things and what we see from our point of view."<sup>12</sup> In essence, one's initial response to revelation is



confessional and communal. Otherwise, it becomes self-justification or self-defense, and therefore displaces the object of revelation, God.<sup>13</sup>

The confessional voice of revelation and theology offers a critical approach to narrative hermeneutics. Beginning with the present historical conditions in the fragmentation of the black community and the displacement of black churches, I have explored the debilitating effects of American individualism in secular and religious folk life. We have seen that a classic conflict between individuality and community emerged in the present historical narrative of black religious life in response to racial and socioeconomic oppression. Persons enter the hermeneutical process with questions of meaning, value, decisions, and actions. Though they explore historical revelation in their narrative tradition for answers, they do so with suspicions of their own interpretations as well as the tradition's. The central goal is not a retrieval of "the good old days and ways," but rather the discernment of God's redemptive activity in our history and day-to-day lives.<sup>14</sup>

If, however, the process begins with the present historical narrative, which is characterized by individualism, then the logical starting point may well be the individual. A common confessional stance of individual faith identity perceives personal experience within a pilgrimage.<sup>15</sup> To understand another person's immediate experiences, interpretation springs from understanding his or her "story," or faith identity. This profile conceptualizes an ongoing process that interprets the encounter between a Christian worldview and one's daily struggles. How a person reports one's experiences and these encounters is as important to the story as the events themselves.<sup>16</sup> New experiences enter a dialectic between being the object of interpretation and possibly reinterpreting the unfolding story. The in-breaking of new meanings may be more of an out-breaking or turning point in these already unfolding interpretations of experiences. The story, or faith identity, is the hermeneutical starting point.<sup>17</sup>

A narrative, hermeneutical process therefore involves two major foci within faith identity, which I call self-identity and ultimate identity. First, self-identity struggles with one's immediate historical experiences, responses, and interpretations. The struggle may intensify or abate under the impact of religious meanings. Therefore, change in the self is related to a process within faith identity between one's existential self-understanding and one's relationship to an eschatological future.<sup>18</sup> The second major focus concerns the role of ultimate identity. Ultimate identity picks up on the meanings conveyed by an eschatological future between one's historical social context and one's ultimate or anticipated future, known primarily through the faith tradition.<sup>19</sup> In a religious culture of individualism, the dialectic of faith identity, between self-identity and ultimate identity, actually places the individual in competing narratives from within the faith community and tradition.

Gerkin is attentive to how a person interprets the events of one's life. One's perspective is a primary interpretation. And pastoral attention should focus upon exploration of these interpretations.<sup>20</sup> Herein, Gerkin cautions those who would argue for factual exploration. Factual exploration risks the impression of an "archaeological expedition." He also warns against an unconditional style that questions neither truth nor fact. Instead, narrative hermeneutics emphasizes that meaning is held in tension between the extreme poles of experience and interpretation.<sup>21</sup>

Gerkin's narrative, hermeneutical method is particularly helpful because it requires dialogue between personal experience, the social context, and the interpretations of the faith tradition. These poles relate to a broader triangulation between the person's life, human history, and eschatological time.<sup>22</sup> As a result, the praxis of both pastoral and prophetic ministry is held in a dialectic that involves faith identity within a community of faith. Eschatological time centers humanity in the activity and purposes of God. Gerkin's narrative hermeneutic places eschatological time in the discernment of eschatological identity. Therefore, faith identity emerges from the vista of one's own history as a participant in God's eschatological future. In turn, pastoral and prophetic ministries take place within the historical and theological dilemma of a person who "becomes separated from the meaning of [his or her] human eschatological identity."<sup>23</sup>

Understanding the role that faith identity plays in the narrative interpretation of African American folk religion deals directly with the critical impact of American individualism. The displacement of black churches in the fragmentation of the black community suggests a disruption in the dialectic of faith identity—between personhood and peoplehood. An unbridled investment in American religious piety by black churches elevated an individualistic narrative in black religious folk life. The cost has been an increasing separation from the historical narrative. In the face of racial violence and a systematization of social oppression, a sense of community in shared suffering once preserved the biblical narrative of a peoplehood through the post-Reconstruction era. However, even this sense of community could not restrain the fragmenting effect of American individualism in religious life. The religious and social egalitarian appeal of American revivalism and evangelicalism became an immense inspiration, despite the abstraction of personal salvation and religious piety from their historical narrative. In the language of a covenant model of black ecclesiology, black churches and religious life eventually became separated from their eschatological identity as a covenant community in the activity and purposes of God.

Unfortunately, the legal gains of the Civil Rights era did not curb the fragmenting effects of American individualism in black life. In chapter 4, I analyzed the convergence of American racism and individualism upon black churches and the black community. The fragmentation of the black community at large exposed the rise of a small black middle class in contrast to a disproportionately large, growing black underclass shackled by socioeconomic oppression. It seems that legislation was successful only in deinstitutionalizing segregation. While the Civil Rights era may mark a change in the public moral conscience of America, the legacy of racism was immediately apparent in white resistance to accepting the moral and economic responsibility of social reform. Acculturation characterized the access to privileged status among the black middle class. And the black underclass continued to grow due to the lack of social and economic reform.<sup>24</sup> The historical communal narrative of shared suffering lost its bearing in characterizing black responses to the times. Moreover, with the rise of religious individualism, black churches became an imperceptive accomplice in the separation of a biblical covenant narrative from black communal life.

This displacement of black churches within the larger fragmentation of the black community makes Gerkin's narrative movement from the present to the past a difficult prospect. Whereas

the black theology project sought to reconnect black churches and the black community to a revolutionary narrative from the pre–Civil War period, I have argued that its failure lay in both a misdiagnosis and a missed-diagnosis. Black theology argued for a radical agenda expressed by a revolutionary model of liberation ethics. In contrast, black churches adopted the language of black power in the interests of self-esteem and black wholeness. Black churches could not reconcile the revolutionary narrative with either the present age or their faith identity.

In similar fashion, the pre–Civil War black churches were radical, but their radicalism was not commonly defined by revolution. Instead, black churches sought radical social reform. The term “radical” here means an insistence upon the complete transformation of race relations and citizenship. Where black churches were unable to reform public life, their endeavor for liberation survived in the reform of spiritual life. What black theology identifies as the “otherworldliness” of black churches is more evident of the conflict between revolutionary and reformist models of action than it is descriptive of the churches’ understanding of liberation and social justice. The turn, then, to a revolutionary historical narrative by black theology fails in black churches, first, because of the misdiagnosis of “refuge” in the churches’ faith identity, and, second, because of the missed-diagnosis of the competing narratives of American individualism and racism in African American folk religion. *The task of re-modeling black ecclesiology seeks to reestablish the dialectic between refuge and liberation narratives in faith identity—a task that a covenant model could advance.*

## **HISTORICAL INTERPRETATION AND BLACK THEOLOGY**

In light of the failure of black theology to establish a common narrative with black churches, one may question whether a reconstruction of an ecclesial model can fulfill the historical, hermeneutical task of Gerkin’s narrative method. The task involves a narrative hermeneutic of the Christian faith that will help reconnect the present age with its Christian eschatological identity. Black churches, however, face a more complicated task. Any construction of a normative narrative in Western Christianity risks the exclusion of the particular life and faith struggles of African Americans. Even the appeal to the biblical narratives cannot escape such historical relativity. Gerkin seems to acknowledge this liability by establishing a “hermeneutic of suspicion” gauge. The search for historical horizons of meaning undergoes a suspicion of interpretations. Any application of this narrative method must contend with the probability of historical prejudice in interpretations, as well as blindness to external historical factors.<sup>25</sup>

The natural alternative for black theology and black churches has been a turn to their own historical and cultural experiences with Christianity. For Archie Smith, the aim is “anamnestic solidarity.” The point of anamnesis is the memory or recovery of past experiences and “the rediscovery of the meaning of the church’s task in the present time.”<sup>26</sup> Anamnesis attempts to “re-present” meaning that remains open to new meanings. The failure of black theology to appropriate anamnestic solidarity with black churches lies in the rejection of the reformist tradition in the churches. What recognition is given to the reformist traits comes in the form of an oppositional dialectic, or plain anathema.

The revolutionary character of black theology was indeed present in the early black churches but was limited to the occasional heroic figures of insurrection and repatriation. Otherwise,

mainstream black churches considered insurrection impossible due to the lack of available resources. The revolutionary liberation ethics of black theology may actually be more the product of its immediate age than the churches' historical traditions. Furthermore, the predominant reformist tradition of black churches sought the redemption of society by the intervention of God's activity. This position is not a judgment upon the revolutionary figures of black history. In fact, I make little distinction between the revolutionary figures in black history and the role of black churches in American history. Both sought radical social change. The ethics of method—for example, of violent revolution—is more properly weighed within the immediate historical social conditions.

It seems clear that the black churches of the post-Civil Rights Movement, much like those of the post-Reconstruction era, did not view revolutionary violence as a practical nor redemptive means of social reform for their historical period. Such a conclusion does not imply that their preferred method of reform, being a religious piety aimed at the demonstration of human equality, was in line with the churches' historical Christian narrative. In fact, I contend that the acculturation of American individualism betrayed the churches' own agenda by jeopardizing the reformist traditions of ecclesial presence. What exactly, then, do these observations mean for the recovery of a narrative past or anamnestic solidarity?

Black theologians and cultural critics in the past two decades<sup>27</sup> have exposed the painful betrayal wreaked by the blind acculturation of Western ideology in materialism and capitalism. In this very perspective, Archie Smith observes the loss of

collective solidarity and common struggle for emancipation in an exploitive society that seeks to incorporate [black people and other oppressed minorities] within its existing ideology, structure, and system of values. . . . Uncritical acceptance of the dominant values of this materialistic society predisposes them to reach for the same commodity pacifiers that the system holds out to so many others.<sup>28</sup>

The loss of collective solidarity is a convincing indicator of a social amnesia with which black churches cannot afford complicity. An uncritical acceptance of Western ideology and social values creates a false consciousness that legitimizes contradictions in the social system.<sup>29</sup> The complicity of black churches can be seen in the privatization of religious life. Individualism became the ideological foundation for this privatization. In black churches the result has been a detachment from its traditional social and historical foundation. In turn, personal faith or religious life increasingly reflects social structures and public life, though the former seeks transformation apart from deep connections to the latter.<sup>30</sup>

The effect of individualism in black religious folk life lies in an externalization of historical narratives, or the loss of anamnestic solidarity. Past narratives of revelation no longer interpret present identity or the present course of history. The privatization of religious life leads to an individualistic internalization of present history. Perceptions of needs are based upon personal salvation and responsibility. Consequently, the loss of anamnestic solidarity is accompanied by a loss of corporate solidarity. The current movement in our society against reparation legislation, such as Affirmative Action, is an excellent example of the individualism pervading both white and black American culture. For the churches, the chief experience of social solidarity merely

reflects the individualism of personal salvation. The church becomes a separate social body of “saved” individuals. Social responsibility focuses on proselytizing individual souls.<sup>31</sup> I refer to the privatization of religion as the internalization of salvation or redemptive history.

Unfortunately, the dialectic between external and internal history introduces difficult associations in the displacement of black churches and the fragmentation of the black community. In human associations, Niebuhr states that external history depersonalizes individuals into organizations of external bonds of interests or existential conditions. Internal history, therefore, becomes a community of selves with a past and a future.<sup>32</sup> Under the impact of American individualism, the externalization of history experienced among black churches seems consistent with this observation. The separation from historical narratives within the black community, caused by a fragmenting individualism in both religious and secular life, signifies an external view of history. It seems reasonable that the dialectic pole of internal history would apply as well. To the contrary, however, the character of American individualism in black religious folk life does not align neatly with the concept of internal history.<sup>33</sup>

For Niebuhr, association through internal history “means community, the participation of each living self in a common memory and common hope no less than in a common world of nature.”<sup>34</sup> At first glance, it appears that black churches do perpetuate an internally shared faith identity and therefore internal history. I have just argued that the privatization of religious folk life internalizes narrative history. However, the church community itself is endangered by the externalization of its historical narrative of revelation and memory. More specifically, the loss of shared narratives with much of the black community characterizes the displacement of black churches as just another factor in the fragmentation of the black community. What is left of any community ideal in internal history is a collective of individuals marked by a common interest in the personalization of religious life.

The functional amnesia of past narratives within the immediate internal history of black churches complicates the external history of the Church within the black community. Since internal history is reliant on faith interpretations of revelation in the churches’ religious life, it does not always translate well into external history.<sup>35</sup> Therefore, the duality between internal and external history is a critical hurdle in regaining the lost horizons of meaning from past narratives. Because churches typically profess faith insights, which are not readily perceived from external viewpoints of experiences, Niebuhr suggests that the scrutiny extended by external examination can become part of the internal history of the churches. I include in this examination the external experiences of the Church’s institutional life in society. The external views of both the churches’ social history and their internal history may then challenge the churches’ detachment and any self-exaltation of internal meanings or inner life.<sup>36</sup> In short, external history must become part of the internal history of black churches for an effective hearing to take place.

It is precisely within this confrontation that black theology insightfully chided black churches. The movement developed a theological voice for the challenges raised by the external historical viewpoint of a fragmenting black community. Unfortunately, black theology’s renunciation of the personal spirituality, or “otherworldliness,” within the churches’ inner life dismissed the bearing of a narrative memory of liberation for the soul and its egalitarian meaning for black life and black wholeness. This is the danger of *one-world thinking*,<sup>37</sup> whether this-worldly or

otherworldly. I believe the reproach to black churches with a pre–Civil War characterization of liberation ethics failed due to an unresolved duality between the internal and external viewpoints of historical revelation. In turn, black churches externalized that part of black theology that did not align with their prevailing internal history.

This unresolved duality becomes an important focus in the fusion of horizons required in the narrative, hermeneutical method.<sup>38</sup> I have established that the dominant narrative in the internal history of contemporary black churches is a pilgrimage in personal salvation and religious piety. In a controversial turn, black theologians provided a theological voice to the external historical perspective of black power and a fragmenting black community. However, their liberation ethics remained an external history of the churches. This lack of mutuality prevails between the embrace of liberation ethics and the churches' self-image. I contend that the prophetic identity of black theology is compromised by its oppositional dialectic over the "authentic" internal history of black churches. Existential liberation and spiritual liberation become stratified. Therefore, a fusion of horizons in meaning becomes impossible due to a duality between this-worldliness and otherworldliness, between external and internal interpretations of historical narratives.

A historical covenant model of black ecclesiology may reestablish a strong mutuality between existential liberation and spiritual liberation. Such a model would cultivate the biblical tenets of faith identity in African American folk religion, which maintain God's will in social justice and freedom of the soul from sin and oppression. Covenantal theology grounds prophetic identity in an interdependent relationship between the religious community and social justice. The viewpoint of external history that the prophetic tradition offers is divine revelation. As Niebuhr contends, "The church's external history of itself may be described as an effort to see itself with the eyes of God."<sup>39</sup> Therefore, *the biblical covenant narratives underpin a historical black covenant narrative as a hermeneutical device for black theology to become a prophetic, practical theology for black churches*. A covenant model of black ecclesiology offers a prophetic voice insisting upon radical social justice for the oppressed of the community as an integral part of our spiritual inner life, care, and worship. When an external observation of the Church finds a voice in practical theology, it becomes part of the inner life of the church. *Practical theology then turns to the past narratives to rediscover lost or even new meanings that reconnect the past with the present as internal history*.

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## **Chapter 4**

### **Notes:**

55. Cornel West has classified four stages in the evolution of black theology. His last two stages are Black Theology of Liberation as Critique of White North American Theology (1969–77) and Black Theology of Liberation as Critique of U.S. Capitalism (1977–to at least the time of the publication of his book, 1982). He then calls for a fifth stage, Black Theology of Liberation as Critique of Capitalist Civilization. See Cornel West, *Prophesy Deliverance: An Afro-American Revolutionary Christianity* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1982), 103–6.

56. I develop the biblical tradition of prophetic inspiration in greater detail in the ensuing chapters. Here the point is that the prophetic tradition of the Hebrew Scriptures intimately associated religious life with the historical covenant community
57. Lincoln and Mamiya, *The Black Church*, 228–29.
58. Cone, *Black Theology and Black Power*, 17–19.
59. Ibid.
60. Gayraud S. Wilmore, “A Black Churchman’s Response to The Black Manifesto,” in *Black Theology*, ed. Wilmore and Cone (1979), 94–95.
61. Ibid., 95.
62. West, *Prophesy Deliverance*, 108.
63. West’s criticism of the dialectic method in black theology is reflected in Victor Anderson’s image of black theology as an ideological mirror of white Eurocentric theology; cf. n.9 above. 86  
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64. West, *Prophesy Deliverance*, 119.
65. Ibid., 119–20.
66. Bellah et al., *Habits of the Heart*, 21.
67. West, *Prophesy Deliverance*, 120.
68. See Bellah et al., *Habits of the Heart*, 23–25, 143.
69. The reader may wish to cross-reference my discussion of Cecil Cone, *The Identity Crisis in Black Theology*; see previous chapter.

## Chapter 5

### Notes:

1. See chapter 3 above. See also hooks, *Yearning*, 36–37; idem, *Killing Rage*, 165–66; and Cleage, *Black Christian Nationalism*, 32.
2. Charles V. Gerkin, *Widening the Horizons: Pastoral Responses to a Fragmented Society* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1986), 36.
3. Ibid., 37.
4. For Augsburg’s contrast between egocentric and group-centric cultures, see chapter 4 above.
5. Gerkin, *Widening the Horizons*, 54–57.
6. Ibid., 65–67.
7. Ibid., 61. Gerkin relies heavily upon Gadamer’s hermeneutic theory of fusions of horizons. See Charles V. Gerkin, *The Living Human Document* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1984); and Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method* (New York: Seabury Press, 1975).
- 8 Gerkin, *Widening the Horizons*, 56-57.
9. H. Richard Niebuhr, *The Meaning of Revelation* (New York: Macmillan Co., 1941), 5.
10. Ibid., 12.
11. Ibid., 13.
12. Ibid., 29.
13. Ibid., 28–29.
14. Gerkin, *Widening the Horizons*, 72.
15. Charles V. Gerkin, *The Living Human Document: Revisioning Pastoral Counseling in a Hermeneutical Mode* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1984), 61. Similarly, Lewis Sherrill identified pilgrimage as an operative interpretation of Christian life as opposed to life as a treadmill or as a saga. In short, pilgrimage “is open to more than the merely natural and human, so that human existence is consciously related . . . to God who transcends nature and humanity, . . . [and] is

open to eternity” (Lewis J. Sherrill, *The Struggle of the Soul* [New York: Macmillan Co., 1951], 19).

16. Gerkin, *The Living Human Document*, 37. Gerkin would most likely refer to the person’s story as a “living human document,” taken from Anton Boisen’s methodology exploring human and religious experience. Boisen emphasized the importance of a person’s experience and how that person chooses to report it. In short, he asks, “How [do] religious experiences function to give shape to the encounters of individuals with problems of living?” Boisen sought to interpret one’s language and world of experience. According to Gerkin (see p. 200), Boisen first developed his methodology in a lecture, beginning with the depth experiences of persons, later published in *Journal of Pastoral Care* 9, no. 1 (1950).

17. Gerkin, *The Living Human Document*, 39–40.

18. *Ibid.*, 73.

19. *Ibid.*, 100.

20. *Ibid.*, 130.

21. See Paul Ricoeur, *Freud and Philosophy: An Essay on Interpretation* (Evanston, Ill.: Northwestern University Press, 1996).

22. Gerkin, *The Living Human Document*, 102–17.

23. *Ibid.*, 69.

24. Bellah et al., *The Good Society*, 24–25.

25. Gerkin, *Widening the Horizons*, 64.

26. Archie Smith, *The Relational Self*, 21.

27. See chapter 4 above for my discussion of the convergence of racism and individualism upon the black middle class in particular.

28. Archie Smith, *The Relational Self*, 17.

29. *Ibid.*, 161–63.

30. *Ibid.*, 168.

31. *Ibid.*, 49–50.

32. Niebuhr, *The Meaning of Revelation*, 51–52.

33. James Fowler underscores the difficulties operating between Niebuhr’s internal history and personal history. I find Fowler’s warning particularly helpful in understanding the disruption American individualism causes between the internal history of the faith community and the person. For Niebuhr, personal history involves the self’s encounter with faith through a community of faith. A person knows Christ only through the accounts and experiences of those other persons encountered in or from the community of faith. Niebuhr extends personal history to include all categories of faith. Fowler argues that Niebuhr’s categories of internal and external history then become ambiguous in the bifurcation of the person and history. The risk is a closed circle in what Fowler describes as “from faith to faith.” See James W. Fowler, *To See the Kingdom: The Theological Vision of H. Richard Niebuhr* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1974), 226–27, 244, 258–59.

34. Niebuhr, *The Meaning of Revelation*, 52.

35. *Ibid.*, 61.

36. *Ibid.*, 63.

37. *Ibid.*, 60; Niebuhr holds that “one-world thinking, whether as this-worldliness or as other-worldliness, has always betrayed Christianity into denial of some of its fundamental convictions.”



38. Diane Yeager emphasizes that Niebuhr actually sought to refute an epistemological dualism or, in his terms, “the problem of historical dualism.” Internal history cannot be subsumed in external history. Niebuhr makes no claim to a metaphysical solution, but suggests that if the dualism becomes problematic in the conceptual search for a universal statement, then such a search should be abandoned. A descriptive function should replace it, which would include confessional descriptions of personal experiences. Yeager warns, however, that this approach may run a risk of “inner empiricism.” Yet, as pointed out in the text above, even in Niebuhr’s reliance on conversion, or transformation, he resolves the conflict by explaining that external viewpoints of ourselves can then become part of our internal history. See Diane Marcia Yeager, “Reasoning Faith: H. Richard Niebuhr’s Renewal of the Theology of St. Augustine,” Ph.D. diss. (Duke University, 1981), 206–8.

39. Niebuhr, *The Meaning of Revelation*, 65.