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The racism of Black Liberation Theology

September 01, 2008 | Ergun Mehmet Caner

In recent days, Black Liberation Theology has risen to the forefront of our national debate. With the publicity surrounding Barack Obama's former pastor, the Rev. Jeremiah Wright, and the inflammatory rhetoric with which he speaks, many have come to question the basis for the beliefs of this system.

Black Liberation Theology arose on university campuses in the 1960s, as the next generation of theology following the civil rights movement. It was no longer enough, it was argued, for Christians to unite under the banner of Jesus Christ. An entirely new grid was needed that would speak to Christians of color.

In 1969, Dr. James Cone, professor at Union Theological Seminary in New York City, published "Black Theology and Black Power." This seminal work argued that white European-Americans could not see or understand the humanity in persons of color. They were descendants of the oppressors, and as members of the elite class structure of society, actively oppress people of color to this day. A new theological movement must be developed from within the oppressed, if it is going to speak to the oppressed.

This new theology viewed all humanity as part of two distinct classes: the victims (the oppressed) and the victimizers (the powerful). In this context, Jesus' teachings were meant to free the oppressed from injustice, inequality and tyranny. Rather than viewing salvation as repentance and faith in the finished work of the Cross, salvation is found in the liberation of the victim from the bonds of cultural slavery.

If the rhetoric sounds vaguely familiar, that is because it is. It is Marxism, imported into the American landscape. Liberation theology found root in Latin America in the same era because it spoke to the grinding poverty experienced by so many and gave them a common enemy. The devil, in this case, is the rich elite class. Marx and Engels would be proud.

What makes this philosophy dangerous is that it is inherently racist. The alleged powerful, usually the white man, can never understand or relate. He is incapable of speaking to the races who are perceived as the oppressed. His theology is inferior because his class structure is higher. If color is the grid through which the Bible can only be understood, are we all ignorant of the Bible since it had its formation among the Persian world of the olive-skinned?

The theological errors are too numerous to mention. The cross is reduced to an act of activism. The empty tomb is merely a footnote. Salvation is power. Grace is ignored. It is a racist movement.

Though Dr. Cone is now the elder statesman of the movement, there are others who now rise to the stage of this cultural racism. Dr. Cornell West wrote an essay titled "Black Theology and Marxist Thought" in 1979, further solidifying the ties between the movements. He has been a

major influence as a professor at both Harvard and Princeton. The Rev. Wright is a continuing inheritor of the mantle of this theology for victims. As his parishioner for more than 20 years, it is difficult to understand how Senator Obama did not hear any of this philosophy. As in most movements, the central premise permeates every strata of the movement.

Since the Rev. Wright stands so forcefully and proudly behind the movement and the premises, Senator Obama can only offer one of two conclusions: either the Senator was not there, or he wasn't listening.

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