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*Say Something Theological: The Student Journal of Loyola Marymount University Theological Studies*

## **Is it a Requisite for a “Believer” to be Part of the Formal/Institutional Church?**

By Dillon Cook

**Abstract:** For the purposes of this paper, I attempt to wrestle with the question of whether or not it is a requisite for a “believer” (which turns out to be a loaded and ambiguous term) to be a part of a formal/institutional Christian Church. This is a difficult task to accomplish, and this, I admit. There is no way to answer this, truly with certainty. But Metaphysics are rarely grounded in “certainty.” This is true for many Christian Theological tasks as well. Nevertheless, this argument will be attempted by working with and off of the Black liberation theologian and philosopher, James H. Cone's basic structured argument found in "Black Theology & Black Power." It's important to note that Cone is a systematic theologian writing in 1969, a time where White America (and its "Christians") helped contribute to the assassination of Malcolm X and Martin Luther King Jr. Not to mention, FBI Director J. Edgar Hoover was on a hunt for the next “Black Messiah,” had already infiltrated the Black Power movement, and that same year was making serious moves in undermining the Black Panther Party. Whereas White “Christian” America largely had his full support. After all the atrocities Black people in America have gone through, especially by its "Christians," many Black people had lost hope; they were broken, tired, many were angry—and righteously so. Cone’s 1969 argument reflects these Black sensibilities, a righteously angry theological and philosophical argument. I am attempting to wrestle with whether the basic structure of his argument is still applicable in contemporary America during the modern Black Lives Matter Movement. Thus, after rendering Cone’s argument from 1969, we imaginatively bend space and time to fast forward to the modern era 2020 and on, where we see if, by implication, Cone's argument is still relevant to the majority ("white") "Christian" Institutional/Formal Church. For the purposes of this paper, I will attempt to argue that Cone’s basic argument structure is still applicable, and that it is not a requisite for a Christian “believer” to be a part of a formal/institutional church. In this paper, I look at the ramifications of the Black Lives Matter movement in relation to the Christian formal institutional Church.

**Keywords:** Theology, Philosophy, Black Theology, Black Liberation Theology, Black Theology of Revolution, Secular Theology, James Cone

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*Say Something Theological: The Student Journal of Loyola Marymount University Theological Studies*

For the purposes of this paper, I make the bold assertion that it is not a requisite for a believer to be a part of a formal/institutional Christian Church. This is a difficult task to accomplish. Nevertheless, this argument will be made working off of the Black liberation theologian and philosopher James H. Cone, particularly utilizing his structured argument found in *Black Theology & Black Power*. It's important to note that Cone is a systematic theologian writing in 1969, a time where White America (and its "Christians") helped contribute to the assassination of Malcolm X and Martin Luther King, Jr. FBI Director J. Edgar Hoover was on a hunt for the next "Black Messiah" and had already infiltrated the Black Power movement and the Black Panther Party, whereas White Christian America largely had his full support.<sup>1</sup> After all the atrocities Black people in America have gone through, especially by its "Christians," many Black people during this time had lost hope; they were broken, tired, and many were angry—and righteously so. Cone's 1969 argument reflects these Black sensibilities, a righteously angry philosophical argument where he uses theology to do so. I am attempting to wrestle with whether the basic structure of his argument is still applicable in contemporary America during the modern Black Lives Matter Movement. So, for the purpose of this paper, I will absolutely argue that his 1969 Black Power basic argument structure is *still* applicable to the Black Lives Matter movement 2020—which is not far removed from today—and that it is *not* a requisite for a Christian "believer" to be a part of a formal/institutional church.

### **Socio-Political Introduction**

Even though I have slightly prefaced the historical setting in the introductory paragraph, I'd like to spend a bit more time, for the purpose of my philosophical/theological argument, underlying an applicable grounding for it: the social context of Black existence in America. The following is a quote from theologian and philosopher, Cornel West. Unsurprisingly, West sees Cone's argument as a loss of faith in White American Christians and White American Democracy as he speaks for Cone in 2018. West states:

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<sup>1</sup> Lerone Martin, "Bureau Clergyman: How the FBI Colluded with an African American Televangelist to Destroy Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.," *Religion and American Culture: A Journal of Interpretation* 28, no. 1 (2018): 29. By the end of 1964, there was a feud occurring with Dr. King and F.B.I. Director J. Edgar Hoover. There was a public rift, where Hoover cryptically (but publicly) attempted to create distrust by assassinating King's character without providing evidence for his rift with King, because then Hoover would have to expose to the public his illegal wiretapping on certain key figures like King. Nevertheless, "[...] following this public spat with Hoover at the end of the year, the foremost public opinion firm found that 'a cross section of the American public' largely sided with Hoover over King. Harris and Associates, Inc, led by Louis Harris, the first presidential pollster, found in a 1965 survey that 50% of the public 'sympathized' with Hoover, while only 16% identified with the Nobel Peace Prize winner [Dr. King]."

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Professor Cone raised a fundamental question that has pervaded the entire black freedom struggle: namely, whether there actually are enough intellectual, political, and cultural resources in American life to fully undermine the vicious legacy of white supremacy in America. [...] I think that this particular sensibility is one that millions of people of African descent experienced after the death of Martin Luther King. It is the question of the Honorable Elijah Muhammad, it is the question of Marcus Garvey, it is the question of Minister Louis Farrakhan. What makes us think that America has the capacity to produce a full-fledged multiracial democracy in which people of African descent are treated as kindly and equally as anybody else in every sphere of our lives? What evidence do we have?<sup>2</sup>

This is a crucial point concerning empirical history and practical grounding versus an unfounded idealism concerning the survival and flourishing of an oppressed people. Cornel West then gives us the following summary:

Historically speaking, we have two hundred forty-four years of enslavement, seventy-one years of Jim and Jane Crow, fifty-one years of every two and a half days with some black child or woman or man hanging on some tree like the strange fruit that Billie Holiday sang about. What makes us think that just within these last twenty-five or thirty years, the significant progress and breakthroughs made can cut deep enough so that these white supremacist sensibilities, be they subtly or not so subtly expressed, would not come back in the way they did after Reconstruction? What evidence do we have?<sup>3</sup>

Indeed, *what evidence do we have* that Black people, a focal point of the oppressed (globally) but in America, will be equally free in this country? It's a rhetorical question, because the progress that has happened is not sufficient for freedom. Thus, empirically speaking, there is *no* evidence that there will be freedom entirely. This is the Black existential experience and predicament in America in the wake of a historically (and contemporarily) oppressive collective. In the 1960s, the theologian, Dr. James Cone, had been wrestling with the very question that we are wrestling with today concerning Christian identity and the role of the Church. Because of Christianity's role in all of this, if Christianity is to render any meaning for Cone, he must make a theology relevant to the plight of Black existence in America. This

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<sup>2</sup> Cornel West, introduction to *Black Theology & Black Power*, by James H. Cone (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2018), xvii.

<sup>3</sup> Cornel West, introduction to *Black Theology & Black Power*, xvii.

*Say Something Theological: The Student Journal of Loyola Marymount University Theological Studies*

*Volume 6, Issue 1, May 2023*

*Loyola Marymount University, Los Angeles*



*Say Something Theological: The Student Journal of Loyola Marymount University Theological Studies*

new (1969) theology *must* start at Black existence for the sake of the existential predicament, “*being*,” entailing the absurdity of Black existence in America.

### **Black Existential Absurdity in America**

Starting at Black experience and existence, Cone states that when Black people “first awaken” in America, every day and on the daily to their situatedness in the social context, they feel “[...] sharply the absolute contradiction between *what is* and *what ought to be* or [recognize] the inconsistency between [...]” Black people’s views of themselves as humans, people, and citizens, “[...] and America’s theoretical/practical portrayal of” Black humans as *things* and their “[...] immediate reaction is a feeling of absurdity.” Cone says that philosophically, *the absurd* is

basically that which man recognizes as the disparity between what he hopes for and what seems in fact to be. He yearns for some measure of happiness in an orderly, a rational and a reasonably predictable world; when he finds misery in a disorderly, an irrational and unpredictable world, he is oppressed by the absurdity of the disparity between the universe as he wishes it to be and as he sees it.<sup>4</sup>

This exists in a twofold manner: via American “*multiracial Democracy*,” [read satirically] and via “Christianity” in practice, by the U.S. majority and larger aggregate of Christianity in America. Cone depicts the exemplification of this through the (DOI): Declaration of Independence. While it (the DOI) does say, “*We hold these truths to be self-evident; that all men are created equal; that they are endowed by their creator with certain unalienable rights; that among them is life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness [...]*,”<sup>5</sup> as man is a sexist metaphor for humankind bound by time and space, we also see that American Democracy was never intending to value Black bodies as *human* (and arguably women too, though Cone makes this argument in later works): “This is what the black [hu]man [being] *feels* in a white world. There *is no place* in America where the black [hu]man *can [...]* escape [to]. In every section of the country there is still the feeling expressed by Langston Hughes: ‘I swear to the Lord / I still can’t see / Why Democracy means / Everybody but me.’”<sup>6</sup> Cone furthermore argues that when the

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<sup>4</sup> James H. Cone, *Black Theology & Black Power*, 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary ed. (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, [1969] 2018), 9-10.

<sup>5</sup> James H. Cone, *Black Theology & Black Power*, 10.

<sup>6</sup> While trans/intersex was socially unrecognized during Cone’s time, James Cone has infamously been critiqued for his patriarchy/sexism, especially in his earlier books. In most of his recent books, he has corrected the language or written more inclusively; however, Cone prefaces *this* book stating that he deliberately left his sexist language in this book to remain

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*Loyola Marymount University, Los Angeles*



*Say Something Theological: The Student Journal of Loyola Marymount University Theological Studies*

Dred Scott Supreme Court Case had its diabolical effect<sup>7</sup> on America, this *further solidified* Black peoples' "faith" in the limitations of American "Democracy." Cone states, in conclusion of the Black consciousness quoting L.H. Fishel Jr. and Benjamin Quarles, "Thus the black [hu]man '*had no rights which the white man was bound to respect.*'"<sup>8</sup>

Concerning Black existential absurdity then, in the plight of the white American predicament, the critical question for Cone then becomes, "*How should I respond to a world which defines me as a nonperson?*"<sup>9</sup> We're going to bypass the obvious "scientific" and "ontological" lie of Black nonpersonhood.<sup>10</sup> But Cone says the crucial question is *how* to respond. Cone states: "In this existential absurdity, what should [the Black person] do? Should [Black humans trying to exist in America] respond as [they] know [themselves] to be, or as the world defines [the]m?"<sup>11</sup> Cone says that the Black human being's response will be predicated on one's *ontological perspective*, in one's paradigm

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the same as when he wrote it, as a reminder for his failure and embarrassment in his early days as a theologian. He states in *Black Theology*, "Amnesia is an enemy of justice. We must never forget what we once were lest we repeat our evil deeds in new forms," xxix. The point being: anytime you see a quote, (to make up one for example, i.e., "God was referencing [God's self.]", the brackets are not meant to change the general theoretical message of Cone, but to correct the sexism *that Cone himself* corrected in the modern preface of this book, including other books (but as mentioned, decided leaving the former basic structure of this book untampered with as a reminder of his failure). I do this not to speak for Cone as white man, because I could never do so; however, 1) I think this adds strength to Cone's argument (including my argument), and 2), this is in addition to the fact that he has already corrected/amended this in other books. And in the modern context, [humankind] offers inclusivity to trans and intersex persons, women, children, etc. One may object by asking why I wouldn't use Cone's later works; this is a decent question, but my response: not every book of his contains the same style of arguments. This one works well for my question.

<sup>7</sup> More on the Dred Scott decision: Cone states, "But I also read in the Dred Scott decision, not with pride or identity, but with a feeling of inexplicable absurdity, that blacks are not human. 'But it is too clear to dispute, that the enslaved African race were not intended to be included, and formed no part of the people who framed and adopted this declaration; for if the language, as understood in that day, would embrace them, the conduct of the distinguished men who framed the Declaration of Independence would have been utterly and flagrantly inconsistent with the principles they asserted; and instead of the sympathy of mankind... they would have deserved and received universal rebuke and reprobation.'" See L. H. Fishel Jr., and Benjamin Quarles, *The Negro American* (Glenview, IL: Scott, Foresman, 1967), 204-205; emphasis added.

<sup>8</sup> James H. Cone, *Black Theology & Black Power*, 11, quoting L. H. Fishel Jr. and Benjamin Quarles, *The Negro American*, ft. 20.

<sup>9</sup> James H. Cone, *Black Theology & Black Power*, 13.

<sup>10</sup> Very obviously, this question is a given and not up for debating the intrinsic value of one socially constructed human race versus another. It's not an ontologically or scientifically relevant question for me if one is posited as superior or inferior in some shape or fashion. However, my intentions aren't for defending that in this paper, rather we accept that as given; my intentions lie elsewhere.

<sup>11</sup> Original quote: "In this existential absurdity, what should he do? Should he respond as he knows himself to be, or as the world defines him?" James H. Cone, *Black Theology & Black Power*, 13.

*Say Something Theological: The Student Journal of Loyola Marymount University Theological Studies*

*Volume 6, Issue 1, May 2023*

*Loyola Marymount University, Los Angeles*



concerning reality and one's place in it. He states, "If one believes that this world is the extent of reality, he will either despair or rebel."<sup>12</sup> He continues by introducing the philosopher and existentialist, Albert Camus for, as Cone states, "According to Camus's *The Myth of Sisyphus*, suicide is the ultimate act of despair."<sup>7</sup> In the Myth of Sisyphus, without getting into the extensive mythological background, at the most rudimentary understanding, there is a mythical character (Sisyphus: a human-like character, for our purposes) pushing a gigantic boulder up a hill. As soon as he begins to make progress pushing the boulder from point-A to point-B, the weight of the boulder slides back to A (or behind point-A), pushing Sisyphus back down the hill. This happens continuously, without a (seemingly) foreseeable successful future of progress. After pushing the rock up the hill enough times, and failing enough times, purpose becomes absurd and meaningless. This is an accurate depiction of Black existence in America for Cone. Cone states: "The structure of white [majority oppressive] society attempts to make 'black being' into 'nonbeing' or 'nothingness.' In existential philosophy nonbeing is usually identified as that which threatens being; it is the ever-present possibility of the inability to affirm one's existence."<sup>13</sup>

On the other hand, concerning one's ontological view of reality or paradigmatic outlook, we may ask, "Well, what about the religious believer?" Unfortunately, as it historically has stood, and as it contemporarily stands, Cone argues that for the religious believer, "If, perchance, a [hu]man believes in God, and views this world as merely a pilgrimage to another world, [they are] likely to regard suffering as a necessity for entrance to the next world. Unfortunately Christianity has more often than not responded *to evil* in this manner."<sup>14</sup> On the surface it may look as if Cone is saying that people are just susceptible toward this belief and propensity concerning viewing "suffering as a necessity for entrance to the next world" and can be corrected, but when he includes this praxis underneath, where he argues "Christianity has *more often than not* responded to evil in this manner," Cone is going beyond mere conceptualization, and saying Christianity in its predominant praxis, has responded to evil in this insufficient way. And this by implication, is a theological anthropological claim; a historical claim. Implicitly, Cone is talking about *the psychological state* that is sociologically present (in the salient adoption of Christianity) where suffering is regarded as an inevitable requisite for entrance to that final destination, and in this paradigm of traditional Christian eschatology, Cone is saying, empirically speaking, this has *not* worked for Black humanity and existence.

Furthermore, Cone seems to be arguing that this Christian eschatological paradigm hinders Black people from ascertaining freedom because in suffering, (*which, as the Sisyphus metaphor shows, there is a lot of suffering in existing on this planet*), there is some sort of psychological state occurring; an

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<sup>12</sup> Cone, 13.

<sup>13</sup> Cone, 8; emphasis added.

<sup>14</sup> Cone, 13; emphasis added.



unconscious process, a spiritual process (if you will), that on a deeply ingrained level, truncates to some degree full expenditure towards liberation. This is because they are comforted that there might be *more*, that there might be *bliss on the other side* of this existential hell that is reassuring them that, [we might say]: “[...] *if I fail pursuing freedom, the land of milk and honey will be waiting for me.*” If I do not push this crushing boulder off of my existence, that’s okay because, “[...] *this world is not my home, I’m just a passing through.*” Now, to bring it back conceptually, in Albert Camus’s *Myth of Sisyphus* (according to Cone): Again, (1.) Suicide is one option amidst existential absurdity, and (2.) The second option is to rebel. As Cone is a Christian theologian, suicide is not perhaps a Christian, moral, or liberative option for the whole (I presume). This is not something he discusses much, but the two obvious implications are that (A.), Suicide isn’t valuing Blackness with intrinsic value and beauty (“Black is beautiful, baby!”). And (B.) Suicide would mean that the powers of evil win, and this seems worse than suicide—leaving Black struggling others to fight the evil powers and demonic forces alone. Cone argues, the reality is that there may or may not be some afterlife anyway. “The idea of heaven is irrelevant for Black Theology. The Christian cannot waste time contemplating the next world (if there is a next). Radical obedience to Christ means that reward cannot be the motive for action. It is a denial of faith to insist on the relevance of reward.”<sup>15</sup>

Thus, this leaves only one option for Cone, and this is *to rebel*. Cone states, [in the spirit of Paul Tillich] “The courage to be, then, is the courage to affirm one’s being by [confronting] the dehumanizing forces which threaten being. And, as Tillich goes on to say, ‘He who is not capable’ of a powerful self-affirmation in spite of the anxiety of non-being is forced into a weak, reduced self-affirmation.”<sup>16</sup> So for Cone, then, to rebel against the absurdity of oppression is the only option. Cone states:

Black Power is like Camus’s view of the rebel. One who embraces Black Power does not despair and take suicide as an out, nor does he appeal to another world in order to relieve the pains of this one. Rather, *he fights back with the whole of his being*. Black Power believes that blacks are not really human beings in white eyes, that they never have been and never will be, until blacks recognize the unsavory behavior of whites *for what it is*. Once this recognition takes place, they can make whites see them as humans. The [person] of Black Power will not rest until the oppressor recognizes him for what he is—[hu]man. He further knows that in this campaign for human dignity, freedom is not a gift *but a right worth dying for.*<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> James H. Cone, *Black Theology & Black Power*, 141.

<sup>16</sup> Cone, 8; emphasis added.

<sup>17</sup> Cone, 13-14; emphasis added.





*Say Something Theological: The Student Journal of Loyola Marymount University Theological Studies*

Okay, so Black Power then *is* Christianity according to Cone. But what is Black Power? And then, what about “Christianity” in general? Let’s start with the latter first.

### **If “Black Power is Christianity,” then What about Christianity in General?**

Cone seems to suggest that there is a deep unmendable chasm between Black Power and Christianity. As Cone writes in 1969, he states that “most churches see an irreconcilable conflict between Christianity and Black Power [...]”<sup>18</sup> Cone argues that largely, Western (majority white oppressor) “Christian” theology is not applicable or even *relevant* to Black people—particularly American Black people since this is the context. This means that Theology is required to become existentially “meaningful” to Black people, whereas, Christianity as currently practiced by the status quo has been, and *is* largely meaningless. As Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. said a few years before this book, *Black Theology and Black Power* was published, (and before white American “Christians” contributed to Dr. King’s assassination):

Here we are moving toward the exit of the twentieth century with a religious community *largely adjusted to the status quo*, standing as a tail-light behind other community agencies *rather than a headlight leading men to higher levels of justice*. [And in a discussion on viewing Churches in the South, King states,] Over and over again I have found myself asking “What kind of people worship here? Who is their God? [...] Far from being disturbed by the presence of the church, *the power structure of the average community is consoled by the church’s silent and often vocal sanction of things as they are*. But the judgement of God is upon the church as never before. If the church does not recapture the sacrificial spirit of the early church, it will lose its authentic ring, forfeit the loyalty of millions, *and be dismissed as an irrelevant social club with no meaning for the twentieth century*. I am meeting young people every day *whose disappointment with the church has risen to outright disgust*. Maybe again, I have been too optimistic. Is organized religion *too inextricably bound to the status quo to save our nation and world?* <sup>19</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> James H. Cone, *Black Theology & Black Power*, 2.

<sup>19</sup> Martin Luther King Jr., “Letter From Birmingham Jail,” in *A Testament of Hope*, ed. James Washington (New York, HarperCollins Publishing, [1963] 1986), 299-300. I have heard it argued that King is only critical of the White Church here, but I think more evidence shows that he is also critical of the Black formal/institutional Church. James Cone states: “There are *some* churches I have seen which are prophetic, *some* preachers that are prophetic, not the church, but some ministers *in spite of the institution*. But that was true during King’s time. *He didn’t have the institution*, because James

*Say Something Theological: The Student Journal of Loyola Marymount University Theological Studies*

*Volume 6, Issue 1, May 2023*

*Loyola Marymount University, Los Angeles*



*Say Something Theological: The Student Journal of Loyola Marymount University Theological Studies*

Again, Cone argues that there is a desperate need for Theology to becoming meaningful, whereas it is repugnant in praxis as it stands, as Cone argues that it does not speak to, or for, the Black impoverished. “Unless theology can become ‘ghetto theology,’ a theology that speaks to black people, the gospel message has no promise of life for the black [hu]man—it is a lifeless message.”<sup>20</sup> Cone has not given up on Christianity, because according to Cone, the Gospel *unleashes* a certain kind of *power* to Black people in their struggle to be.<sup>21</sup> Thus, Cone says that in “sophisticated terms” this may be called a “theology of revolution”—(this is before the liberation theology development out of Europe, however, if we were to categorize this in a modern context, it would fit under liberation theology; this is what Cone would go on to later call it).<sup>21</sup>

### **What is this Theology of Revolution for Blacks in America?**

Now that we have an idea of generally what a “Theology of Revolution” is, what makes this Black Theology, “a theology of revolution?” The main thing that makes it a theology of revolution is its *freeing* focus. Cone states the oppressive majority “treatment of Christianity has been shaped by the dominant ethos of the culture. There have been very few, if any, radical, revolutionary approaches to the Christian gospel for oppressed blacks. There is then, a need for a theology whose sole purpose is to emancipate the gospel from its “whiteness” [oppressiveness] so that blacks may be capable of making an honest self-affirmation through Jesus Christ.”<sup>22</sup> Here, we find its revolutionary nature involves, *the*

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Jackson didn’t like him at all, and fought against him every way. And *most preachers didn’t like him*. So, he had a small group; so I still think there are small groups that rise up and bear witness in Ferguson, in Baltimore, and a few other places that we don’t even know about [...].” See James H. Cone, “The Cry of Black Blood: The Rise of Black Liberation Theology,” Union Theological Seminary, February 25, 2016, video of lecture, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=P\\_Q768HvabU](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=P_Q768HvabU).

<sup>20</sup> James H. Cone, *Black Theology & Black Power*, 37.

<sup>21</sup> Cone, 36. On ‘theology of revolution,’ Cone states: “There is, then, a desperate need for a black theology, a theology whose sole purpose is to apply the freeing power of the gospel to black people under white oppression. In more sophisticated terms this may be called a theology of revolution. Lately there has been much talk about revolutionary theology, stemming primarily from non-Western religious thinkers whose identification lies with the indigenous oppressed people of the land. These new theologians of the ‘Third World’ argue that Christians should not shun violence but should initiate it, if violence is the only means of achieving the much needed, rapid radical changes in life under dehumanizing systems. They are not confident, as most theologians from industrialized nations seem to be, that changes in the economic structure (from agrarian to industrial) of a country will lead to changes in its oppressive power structure. (America seems to be the best indication that they are probably correct.) Therefore their first priority is to change the structures of power.”

<sup>22</sup> James H. Cone, *Black Theology & Black Power*, 37.

*Say Something Theological: The Student Journal of Loyola Marymount University Theological Studies*

*Volume 6, Issue 1, May 2023*

*Loyola Marymount University, Los Angeles*



*emancipating* of the gospel from oppressiveness—in this case, in 1969 for the Black human being, this is a loaded term meaning “whiteness.” Its “[...] sole purpose is to apply the freeing power of the gospel to black people under white oppression.”<sup>23</sup>

A second component to this Black Theology (a “theology of revolution”) is that, upon the embodiment of Blackness (literal and metaphorical), it then becomes as close to a universal theology as a universal theology can become. Cone states: “This work further seeks to be revolutionary in that “The fact that I am Black is my ultimate reality.” My identity with blackness, and what it means for millions living in a white world, controls the investigation. It *is impossible* for me to surrender this basic reality for a “higher, more universal” reality. Therefore, if a higher Ultimate Reality is to have meaning, it must relate to the very essence of blackness.”<sup>24</sup>

Cone holds this one for obvious reasons: 1.) Blackness has been excluded by theoretical rationalization (and practical application) by those who have (majority) power in ‘religion,’ but this is also due to Cone’s definition of theology, (2.) Cone does not believe, due to human finitude, our human situatedness in time and space, that we can ever arrive at a “Universal Theology.” In 1969, in a literal and metaphorical sense, Blackness then, becomes the closest Christian theology can come to “a Universal Theology” that there is. As Cone states, “Since theology is human speech and *not* God speaking, I recognize today, as I did then, that *all* attempts to speak about ultimate reality are limited by the social history of the speaker.”<sup>25</sup> And naturally, there is something revolutionary about this, solely for the fact that Black theology subverts the prominent theology of epistemic “authority.”

Another component that makes Cone’s Black Theology a revolutionary theology is that it must be a Christian Theology centered on the Divine Christ-Person. The Christ is present in the beginning and in the end, according to Christian tradition that many Blacks of America appropriated. The Christ is “the Revelation, the special disclosure of God to [humankind], revealing who God is and what his purpose for [humanity] is.”<sup>26</sup> Cone argues that “Christianity revolves around a Person, without whom its existence ceases to be.”<sup>27</sup> This is part of what makes Black Theology a revolutionary Theology for Cone, but also because the Christ’s existence is in an inescapable way, inextricably tethered to the oppressed. Cone states: “According to the New Testament, Jesus is the man for others who views his existence as inextricably tied to other [humans] to the degree that his own Person is inexplicable apart from others. The others, of course, refer to all [humankind], especially the oppressed, the unwanted of society, the

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<sup>23</sup> Cone, 36.

<sup>24</sup> Cone, 37.

<sup>25</sup> Cone, xxvi.

<sup>26</sup> James H. Cone, *Black Theology & Black Power*, 39.

<sup>27</sup> Cone, 39.



*Say Something Theological: The Student Journal of Loyola Marymount University Theological Studies*

‘sinners.’”<sup>28</sup> The Christ is for the oppressed, the unwanted, the downtrodden, and the outcasts. Cone gives scriptural evidence of this, suggesting Luke 4: 18-19 (RSV) are exemplifications of such Christ-like teaching, stating: “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me / because he has anointed me to preach the good news / to the poor. / He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovering of sight to the blind, / To set at liberty those who are oppressed, / To proclaim the acceptable year of the Lord.”<sup>29</sup> Cone also gives scriptural justification for its revolutionary nature, as Mark 1:14-15 (and other Gospel accounts give) that “the Kingdom of God is at hand” the time is now for repenting, and believing the Gospel’s revolutionary message. Cone states: “Indeed, the message of the Kingdom strikes at the very center of man’s desire to define his own existence *in the light of his own interest at the price of his brother’s enslavement*. It means the irruption of a new age, an age that has to do with God’s action in history on behalf of man’s salvation. It is an age of liberation, in which ‘the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised up, the poor have the good new preached to them’ (Luke 7:22).”<sup>30</sup> In a similar way that Malcolm X would “wake the dead,” Black humanity, through Christ, now can finally *be*, and come *into being*. They have the ability *to become*. “Is this not why God became man in Jesus Christ so that [humankind] might *become* what he[*she*] is? Is not this *at least* part of what St. Paul had in mind when he said, “For freedom, Christ has set us free” (Gal. 5:1)? As long as [a person] is a slave to another power, [a person] is not free to serve God with mature responsibility. [A person] is not free *to become* what he[*she*] is—*human*.”<sup>31</sup> Thus, Black Theology *is revolutionary*, and Christianity *is Black Power*. But, now, *what is Black Power?*

### **The Basic Tenets of Black Power**

When it comes to observing historical events of truth outside of the traditional “Church” things can appear... messy (but also look inside the church—that’s a mess itself). Nevertheless, after King was assassinated, protests and riots broke out all over the nation—similar to what we saw in modern day, after George Floyd was murdered by Officer Derek Chauvin in another case of deliberate police brutality on Black humans *trying to be*. In the world, things get messy, no doubt about it. Cone acknowledges that there is a small percentage of Black Power advocates who hate white people. “While most Black Power advocates do not prescribe hatred (only a small minority) few, it must be admitted,

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<sup>28</sup> Cone, 40.

<sup>29</sup> Cone, 40.

<sup>30</sup> Cone, 40; emphasis added.

<sup>31</sup> Cone, 45.

*Say Something Theological: The Student Journal of Loyola Marymount University Theological Studies*

*Volume 6, Issue 1, May 2023*

*Loyola Marymount University, Los Angeles*



would suggest love as the black [hu]man's response to white oppression."<sup>32</sup> While Cone is explicitly acknowledging that the Christian and Dr. King "love-thy-neighbor" teaching and movement were being taken advantage of by the oppressor, here he also implicitly acknowledges the small minority of Black folk that hate white people apart of the movement. Cone comprehends the complexity. But this is why Cone has qualified it: "It is not my thesis that all Black Power advocates are Christians or even wish to be so."<sup>33</sup> And thus, Cone gives a proper definition: "My concern is, rather, to show that the goal and message of Black Power, as defined [below] is consistent with the gospel of Jesus Christ [...]."<sup>34</sup> Cone writes that Black Power

*means complete emancipation of black people from white oppression by whatever means black people deem necessary.* The methods may include selective buying, boycotting, marching, or even rebellion. Black Power means freedom, black self-determination, wherein black people no longer view themselves as without human dignity but as [people], human beings with the ability to carve out their own destiny." [...] Black Power, then is a humanizing force because it is the black [hu]man's attempt to affirm [their] being, [their] attempt to be recognized as a "Thou," in spite of the "other," the white power which dehumanizes him[/her].<sup>35</sup>

Then Cone gives a final summation of Black Power in short:

Black Power, in short, is an attitude, an inward affirmation of the essential worth of blackness. It means that the black [hu]man will not be poisoned by the stereotypes that others have of him[/her], but will affirm from the depths of his[/her] soul: "Get used to me, I am not getting used to anyone." [...] This is Black Power, the Power of the black [person] to say Yes, to [their] own 'black being,' and to make the other accept [them] or be prepared for a struggle.<sup>36</sup>

And these are the basic tenants of Black Power. I believe, as articulated, this is compatible with the Christ's message because Christ embodied restores value in God's creatures and creation. Cone writes, "What is this freedom for which Blacks have marched, boycotted, picketed, and rebelled in order to achieve? Simply stated, freedom is not doing what I will *but becoming what I should*. A [person] is free

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<sup>32</sup> James H. Cone, *Black Theology & Black Power*, 54; emphasis added.

<sup>33</sup> Cone, 55; emphasis added.

<sup>34</sup> Cone, 55.

<sup>35</sup> Cone, 6, 7, 8.

<sup>36</sup> Cone, 9.



*Say Something Theological: The Student Journal of Loyola Marymount University Theological Studies*

when he sees clearly the fulfilment of his being and is thus capable of making the envisioned self a reality. This is ‘Black Power!’<sup>37</sup> And as is true of Christianity, that God became human, so that all might *become*.<sup>38</sup> Nevertheless, to the extent I’ve argued, I think this is indubitably compatible with the Christ’s teachings. Thus, if Black Power is Christianity, and if Black Theology is Christianity, —> Black Power (synonymous to Black Theology) is Christianity. Therefore, Black Theology/Black Power/Christianity is

a message about the ghetto, and all the other injustices done *in the name of [...] religion* to further the social, political, and economic interests of the oppressor. In Christ, God enters human affairs *and takes sides with the oppressed*. Their suffering becomes his; their despair, *divine despair*. Through Christ the poor [hu]man is offered freedom now *to rebel against that which makes him[/her] other than human*.<sup>39</sup>

### **What about the Formal/Institutional Church?**

A naturally flowing question it seems is, “What about the formal or institutional church, now that we have established something outside of our traditional thinking of it, (i.e., Black Power is Christianity)?” I think the first place to start would be addressing Cone’s skepticism towards institutions.<sup>40</sup> A second point lies in Cone’s interpretation of Biblical values. Cone argues that a 1<sup>st</sup> Century exemplification of the Christ portrays a particular message of the gospel:

The message of the gospel is clear: Christ came into the world in order to destroy the works of Satan (1 John 3:8). His whole life was a deliberate offensive against those powers that held [humanity] captive. [...] In fact every exorcism was a binding and despoiling of the evil one (Mark 3:27). [...] If we make this message contemporaneous with our own life situation, what does Christ’s defeat of Satan mean for us? There is no need here to get bogged down with quaint personifications of Satan. [Humans] are controlled by evil powers that would make them slaves.

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<sup>37</sup> James H. Cone, *Black Theology & Black Power*, 45.

<sup>38</sup> One may object here that I’m not dealing appropriately with the implications of what it means to “become”: it is true that I’m deliberately side-stepping the issue of violence vs. nonviolence in *becoming*. Cone gives arguments for this: rebellion means both violence and nonviolence when necessary. However, I’m not trying to make a thorough argument for this in this paper. This is a book-worthy topic in itself, and is not the focal point of my paper.

<sup>39</sup> James H. Cone, *Black Theology & Black Power*, 41; emphasis added.

<sup>40</sup> Cone discusses this in great detail at the end of the video cited on ft. 19.

*Say Something Theological: The Student Journal of Loyola Marymount University Theological Studies*

*Volume 6, Issue 1, May 2023*

*Loyola Marymount University, Los Angeles*





*Say Something Theological: The Student Journal of Loyola Marymount University Theological Studies*

The demonic forces of racism are real for the black [person]. Theologically, Malcolm X was not far wrong when he called the white man “the devil.” The *white structure* of this American society [institutionally], personified in every racist, must be at least part of what the New Testament meant by demonic forces.<sup>41</sup>

If this is the case, then it must follow that the majority (white) society is entrenched in Demonic forces, and this includes the “Christian” institutions. Cone says “[...] the man Jesus ‘reveals God’s love by what he says, does and is.’”<sup>42</sup> The Christ exposes God’s love by bearing the fruit of the Spirit. And it appears the fruit of Christian institutions is withered and completely, or if present, not significant enough to maintain the Christian name. Because in demonic fashion, “It seems that the mistake of most whites, religionists included, is their insistence on telling blacks how to respond ‘as Christians’ to racism, insisting that nonviolence is the only appropriate response. But there is an ugly contrast between *the sweet nonviolent language of white Christians* and *their participation in a violently unjust system*.”<sup>43</sup> The audacity of the oppressor to tell the oppressed, how to resist the oppressor’s oppression! “If the real Church is the people of God, whose primary task is that of being Christ to the world by proclaiming the message of the gospel (kerygma), by rendering services of liberation (diakonia), and by being itself a manifestation of the nature of the new society (koinonia), then the empirical institutionalized white church *has failed on all counts*.”<sup>44</sup> And for further details, Cone states:

The white church has not merely failed to render services to the poor, but has failed miserably in being a visible manifestation to the world of God’s intention for humanity and in proclaiming the gospel to the world. It seems that the white church is not God’s redemptive agent *but, rather, an agent of the old society. It fails to create an atmosphere of radical obedience to Christ*. Most church fellowships are more concerned about drinking or *new buildings* or *Sunday closing* than about children who die of rat bites or [black persons] who are killed because they want to be treated like *[human beings]*. The society is falling apart for want of moral leadership and moral example, *but the white church passes innocuously pious resolutions and waits to be congratulated*.<sup>45</sup>

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<sup>41</sup> Cone, 46; emphasis added.

<sup>42</sup> James H. Cone, *Black Theology & Black Power*, 63.

<sup>43</sup> Cone, 63; emphasis added.

<sup>44</sup> Cone, 80; emphasis added.

<sup>45</sup> Cone, 80-81; emphasis added.

*Say Something Theological: The Student Journal of Loyola Marymount University Theological Studies*

*Volume 6, Issue 1, May 2023*

*Loyola Marymount University, Los Angeles*



*Say Something Theological: The Student Journal of Loyola Marymount University Theological Studies*

One might acknowledge the truth about the institution here in America in the 1960s, but what about the individuals who are not actively engaging in behavioral racism, and who believe they are not participating in the systematic components of racism. Well, Cone has thought about this. He suggests that even the individuals who may not be actively participating in institutional or structural racism are guilty by their silence and complicit nature in the “church” and institutions. “Racism has been a part of the life of the Church so long that it is virtually impossible for even the “good” members to recognize the bigotry perpetuated by the Church.”<sup>46</sup> If the institutions are corrupt, then, those “good” one’s are largely guilty by identification in them. Because inaction, *is* action. If this is true, then what about the *true* Church? Let’s start by first trying to figure out what the true Church is and is not.

### **What the Church is, and What the Church is Not**

I will first start by utilizing Cone’s argument for what the church *is not*. According to Cone, the Church is not bound by any human demarcation, any form of tribalism. “The Church of Christ is not bounded by standards of race, class or occupation. It is not a building or an institution. It is not determined by bishops, priests or ministers as these terms are used in their contemporary sense.”<sup>47</sup> It is also the case that the Church is not bound by the sacraments according to Cone, and it is not defined by those who join in on the formal or institutional church assembly. Cone articulates this well in the following point:

The Church is not defined by those who faithfully attend and participate in the 11:00 A.M. Sunday worship. As Harvey Cox says: “The insistence by the Reformers that the church was ‘where the word is rightly preached and the sacraments rightly administered’ will simply not do today.” It may have been fine for distinguishing orthodoxy from heresy, but it *is worthless as a vehicle against modern racism*. We must therefore be reminded that Christ was not crucified on an altar between two candles, but on a cross between two thieves. He is not in our peaceful, quiet, comfortable suburban ‘churches,’ but in the ghetto fighting the racism of churchly white people.<sup>48</sup>

Thus, the Church according to Cone is not bound by “*irrelevancies and trivialities*” as Dr. King once said. “In spite of the noble affirmations of Christianity, the church has often lagged in its concern for

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<sup>46</sup> Cone, 81.

<sup>47</sup> James H. Cone, *Black Theology & Black Power*, 74.

<sup>48</sup> Cone, 74-75.

*Say Something Theological: The Student Journal of Loyola Marymount University Theological Studies*

*Volume 6, Issue 1, May 2023*

*Loyola Marymount University, Los Angeles*



social justice and too often has been content to mouth *pious irrelevancies and sanctimonious trivialities*. [...] Christianity repudiates racism.”<sup>49</sup> Or as Cone mentions regarding the human moral compass when it comes to existing among a body of people, “But to assume that one has knowledge of good and evil is to ignore the fall of [humanity]. It assumes that doing the will of God means obeying a system of rules, a pattern of life.”<sup>50</sup> Cone also says elsewhere, “The mistake of the modern church is to identify the work of God’s Spirit in the believer either with private moments of ecstasy or with *individual purification from sin, particularly from a short list of ritual[s]* (removing the pollutant of alcohol, removing tobacco, etc.) [...] This is a hopelessly *impoverished* view.”<sup>51</sup> So how do we identify what the Church *is* then? Well, from our last block quote we get the notion that the formal institution is not vain *in totality*... necessarily. Cone admits through secular theologian Harvey Cox, that “*It may have been fine for distinguishing orthodox for heresy,*” but now the implication is that the formal institution has become null, it has fallen into complacency; it is no longer serving its function. So how do we move forward?

Cone argues that “Traditional Christian theology describes the activity of God today in terms of the work of the Holy Spirit.”<sup>52</sup> He asserts that it is difficult to think of the Christian God without thinking of the Holy Spirit. And even in the Old Testament, God’s Spirit was present in prophets and other interesting cases. Yet, with the life of the Christ and especially, with the “[...] death and resurrection of the Christ, the gift of the Spirit to persons—rare in the Old Testament—becomes a possibility for all who respond to God’s act in Christ in faithful obedience.”<sup>53</sup> A second component of this is the common teaching that “*we still must fight the war, but the decisive battle has been won;*” a byproduct of the Christ making the Spirit more readily available. Cone calls this the *ekklesia*: With Christ, “also comes a new people which the New Testament calls the *ekklesia* (church). Like the people of Old Israel they are called *into being* by God himself—to be his agent in this world until Christ’s second coming.”<sup>54</sup> For Cone this means that being overtaken by God’s Spirit requires *recognizing* the existential threat of non-being (i.e. our Sisyphus metaphor). And Christ calls the oppressor and oppressed *into being*, and to be free from the “*principalities and powers.*” While this is common for the

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<sup>49</sup> Martin Luther King Jr., “How Should a Christian View Communism?” in *Strength to Love* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, [1963] 2010) 104.

<sup>50</sup> James H. Cone, *Black Theology & Black Power*, 159.

<sup>51</sup> Cone, 65; emphasis added. This may seem like just a critique of the majority oppressive church (largely white)—I think this is partially correct, but this is also a critique of the Black church and other Black religious communities. During the late 60s and early 70’s, the purification of the body was very popular among even Black Nationalists like Malcolm X in the Nation of Islam and Black Muslims for example.

<sup>52</sup> James H. Cone, *Black Theology & Black Power*, 64.

<sup>53</sup> Cone, 65.

<sup>54</sup> Cone, 73.



“believer” and those who accept Christ, Cone throws in another untraditional aspect of the word believer.

Interestingly, God’s Spirit is not just limited to what we may call “believers.” Cone writes, “In fact, God may even use the nonbeliever, as in the case of Persian emperor Cyrus (Isa. 45).”<sup>55</sup> In this biblical account, Emperor Cyrus was utilized by God’s righteousness where God’s spirit entered the empirical ruler for Divine will. Cone also gives another example of this seen all throughout the New Testament where God’s Spirit in Christ is extended to the naked, hungry, and thirsty stranger, including the imprisoned and sick which can be found in (Matt. 25:37-39). Cone also states, “Or he may use persons who are not conscious of being for or against God but merely against the suffering of [humankind].”<sup>56</sup>

Cone does not call it this, but essentially what Cone is doing (at least what I’d argue) is rebuilding an ecclesiology of Spirit. So, what about the Spirit of God? What does living according to an authentic Spirit look like? According to Cone, “Authentic living according to the Spirit means that one’s will becomes God’s will, one’s actions become God’s actions. ...[T]his may mean that God is not necessarily at work in those places where the Word is truly preached and the sacraments are duly administered (as Reformation theologians defined the Church), but where the naked are clothed, the sick are visited, and the hungry are fed. And this is not just something subjective, this is something of certainty.”<sup>57</sup> In relation to Black power this means that there may be those who are consciously seeking the Christ, and there may be those who are *not* consciously seeking Christ. However, where humankind is “in trouble,” and to “[...] the extent that it is genuinely concerned and seeks to meet the needs of the oppressed, it is the work of God’s Spirit.”<sup>58</sup> But, how can this be measured? How can we observe this? One way is the fruits of humanity, as mentioned earlier, but in a lot of cases, it doesn’t seem to be observationally evaluative. “There are no abstract tests or objective guarantees that one is doing the work of God. There is only a subjective certainty in which one knows that his in touch with the Real, what Paul calls “the Spirit in our hearts, crying ‘Abba! Father!’ (Gal. 4:6).”<sup>59</sup> Cone appeals to a segment of Kierkegaard referencing his faith amidst the absurd, stating, “Faith...is the objective uncertainty due to the repulsion of the absurd held fast by the passion of inwardness, which in this instance is intensified to the utmost degree.”<sup>60</sup> Cone continues:

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<sup>55</sup> Cone, 67.

<sup>56</sup> Cone, 67.

<sup>57</sup> Cone, 67.

<sup>58</sup> James H. Cone, *Black Theology & Black Power*, 67-68.

<sup>59</sup> Cone, 67-68.

<sup>60</sup> Cone, 67-68.



*Say Something Theological: The Student Journal of Loyola Marymount University Theological Studies*

It is absurd because there are no objective scientific criteria to judge whether one is right. In fact “He who from the vantage point of a higher knowledge would know his faith as a factor resolved in a higher idea has *eo ipso* ceased to believe.” It is an existential certainty that grips the whole of one’s being in such a way that now all actions are done in the light of the Ultimate Reality. Karl Barth calls this “the Subjective Reality of Revelation.” It is “our freedom to be the children of God and to know and love and praise him in his revelation.” There is no rational tests to measure this quality of being grasped in the depths of one’s being. The experience is its own evidence, the ultimate datum.<sup>(see 59)</sup>

One may object to this “ecclesiology of Spirit” as I have called it, suggesting that this is some type of capitalist individualism. But (1.) it is the case that Cone adamantly critiques Capitalism, and (2.) It is the case that Cone adamantly critiques, what in Catholic theological circles is called “expressive individualism.” There *is* in fact, a spiritual community involved, and it *is not* some type of *Moralistic Therapeutic Deism*.<sup>61</sup> “Authentic freedom has nothing to do with the rugged individualism of *laissez faire*, the right of the businessman to pursue without restrain the profit motive or the pleasure principle which is extolled by Western capitalistic democracies. On the contrary, *authentic freedom* is grounded in the awareness of the universal finality of [humankind] and the agonizing responsibility of choosing between perplexing alternatives regarding his existence. Therefore, freedom cannot be taken for granted.”<sup>62</sup> As a matter of fact, this is very much at odds with any form of expressive individualism, or any moralistic therapeutic deism or similar categorization in any form.

### **The Components of the Church from the New Testament Perspective:**

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<sup>61</sup> What is Moral Therapeutic Deism? “Christian Smith and Melinda Lundquist Denton profile a popular variant of deism, a subjective image of God that emerges from their research on the spiritual and religious lives of US teenagers. They also suggest that this variant may be the ‘new mainstream American religious faith for our culturally post-Christian individualistic, mass-consumer society.’ Calling it Moralistic Therapeutic Deism, its God creates and orders the world, wants people to be nice and fair to each other as taught in the Bible, and most world religions, and does not need to be particularly involved in one’s life except when needed. [...] This is a God who ‘is always there for me,’ but makes no demands and remains at a safe distance [...]” See Thomas Rausch, “The Divine Mystery,” in *Systematic Theology: A Roman Catholic Approach*, (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2016), 67-68.

<sup>62</sup> James H. Cone, *Black Theology & Black Power*, 48.

*Say Something Theological: The Student Journal of Loyola Marymount University Theological Studies*

*Volume 6, Issue 1, May 2023*

*Loyola Marymount University, Los Angeles*



*Say Something Theological: The Student Journal of Loyola Marymount University Theological Studies*

Cone seems to suggest that from the New Testament perspective, the Church can be categorized into 3 functions: 1. Preaching (Kerygma), 2. Service (Diakonia), and 3. Fellowship (Koinonia). Cone writes:

Preaching means proclaiming to the world what God has done for [humankind] in Jesus Christ. The Church tells the world about Christ's victory over alien forces. If we compare Christ's work on the cross with warfare, as Oscar Cullmann and others do, then it is the task of the Church to tell the world that the decisive battle in the war has been fought and won by Christ. Freedom has come. [...] The Church, then is men and women running through the streets announcing that freedom is a reality. This is easily translated into the context of modern racism. God in Christ has set [humanity] free from white power, and this means an end to ghettos and all they imply. The Church tells black people to shape up and act like free men because the old powers of white racism are writhing in final agony. The Good News of freedom is proclaimed also to the oppressor, but since he mistakes enslaving power for life and health he does not easily recognize his own moral illness or hear the healing word. But the revolution is on, and there is no turning back.<sup>63</sup>

However, despite the oppressor's stubborn complacency, Cone says that majority members (white people) may have a role to play in this spiritual war. Cone argues that "[...] there are places in the Black Power picture for 'radicals,' that is for [persons] white or black, who are prepared to risk life for freedom. There are places for the John Browns, [persons] who hate evil and refuse to tolerate it anywhere."<sup>64</sup>

So, the *kerygma* is a message of liberation for God's people, and it presents a crisis type situation, as Dr. King often called it, a "social tension" per se. What about the *diakonia*? The service, for Cone is found in the joining of "[...] Christ in his work of liberation. This is diakonia, 'service.'"<sup>65</sup> It is as simple as that, it is communal "service," not purely individualist, and it seeks joining the will of God in liberation from oppressive forces with others.

What about the *koinonia*? Cone says that "[...] the Church is also fellowship (koinonia). This means that the Church must be its own community what it preaches and what it seeks to accomplish in the world."<sup>66</sup> Cone also says there is more: there is the community holding itself accountable, where it

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<sup>63</sup> James H. Cone, *Black Theology & Black Power*, 75.

<sup>64</sup> Cone, 33.

<sup>65</sup> Cone, 77.

<sup>66</sup> Cone, 78-79.

*Say Something Theological: The Student Journal of Loyola Marymount University Theological Studies*

*Volume 6, Issue 1, May 2023*

*Loyola Marymount University, Los Angeles*





identifies the identity/entity attached to the oppression of others, and holds those accountable who are not living according to the Spirit. However, this can be difficult. “It is true that this concern may cause the community to ask the wrong questions. It may focus on irrelevancies (smoking, dancing, drinking, etc.) rather than on the essential (racism) [oppression, exploitation], but it is only through asking of the question, ‘What makes [persons] Christians?’ that the true Church is able to be Christ in the world.”<sup>67</sup> Essentially, there must be a clear defining of its members, right? Or should there? What does this look like by implication? When members are oppressing others then, they are confronted, and an endeavor is sought to free them from the “principalities and powers.” This is one way of identifying members. Members ought to have safeguards in place that are preventative of turning the church back into “sanctimonious trivialities.” However, Cone doesn’t go into too much detail about what this would be. Cone is actually not too thorough here in regards to rebuilding the (as I call it) “ecclesiology of Spirit” and taking the Black Nationalist approach in the plight of oppression communicates that there will have to be much self-affirmation, and healing Black people in the trenches of their self-hatred and oppressed psyches before they can ever think about an institution again. For white people who want to help the cause, he recommends Malcolm Boyd’s underground church,<sup>68</sup> or perhaps Harvey Cox’s secular world. But Cone isn’t too concerned about working this out in full for white people in 1969, because his concern is about the anguish in his people.

### **Jumping into a Time Machine**

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<sup>67</sup> James H. Cone, *Black Theology & Black Power*, 79.

<sup>68</sup> Cone, 145. “According to Boyd, the underground church is a fellowship of “unemployables” in the institutional church who are seeking to be Christian in an age of societal dehumanization. They bypass the structures of church power because they believe that suffering is more vital than saving face. In some cases, they “are participating, with thanksgiving, in the dying and in the willing of death” of the Church. Quoting from Henri Perrin’s *Priest-Workman in Germany*, Malcolm Boyd describes the spirit of the underground church: ‘All this calls for men who can get out of themselves, who will cease walking by lonely paths, and will come to the high roads where men of \*all nations\* pass by. Such Christians as these, leaping over the rottenness of the world at a bound, will stand up before men, bearing the light of Christ past the winding ways and false mysticisms which mislead them. This also calls for men to leave the Ghetto in which they so often shut themselves up—in *our* churches, *our* papers, *our* movements, *our* good works—this calls for them to be amongst pagans, and really become theirs as Christ became ours, giving up their life, their time, their resources, their activity, for those who haven’t heard the ‘good tidings.’ A Christian hasn’t finished his job when he has gone to Mass on Sunday. The Church’s prayer, the body of Christ, are only given to him as a help towards bringing *him* to the world. And if men do not recognize in us the love and goodness of our Father, then we have done *nothing*—we haven’t even begun to serve Him.’ Words like these could inspire white [people] to live a lifestyle properly called Christianity. The underground church seems to be a body of men who are seeking to be Christian’s independent of the organized church. According to Boyd, it is not a denial of Christianity but its affirmation. It seeks ‘to insist, by whatever means, that the church be itself.’”



*Say Something Theological: The Student Journal of Loyola Marymount University Theological Studies*

It appears Cone has a legitimate argument here. One fear, however, I think is that there is legitimate concern for the church turning back into what it was, (*perhaps* institutionally already *is* in 1969), but then again, the Church has never had its focus on the liberation of the oppressed in a prioritized sense until modern day. Yet, even still, it's clearly not happening quickly enough—even liberation theologians like Gustavo Gutiérrez who are recognized *within* the Catholic institution (for instance) are still subject to being shut down or silenced by the institution. So sure, this seems relevant for 1969, but is it relevant for 2020 and onward? Let's imagine that we bend space and time, and we jump forward in time to 2020/modern day. Is the basic structure of Cone's ecclesiology of Spirit argument still applicable?

Ironically, we find White Christians respond to #BlackLivesMatter and the movement in the modern era in a *strikingly similar* fashion they sociologically responded to the Black Power Movement in the 1960s and 1970s. This is perhaps due to many reasons, including the U.S. capitalist system we inhabit, which has the tendency to exploit those on the bottom (often hitting racial minorities worst) while promoting flourishing power for those on top, among other reasons including: "sin," behavioral racism, fear, and complacency, including unrepentant racists still alive from the 60s and 70s.

Just to put things into perspective, our most recently elected *former* U.S. president, Donald Trump, was a president elected by the American "Christian" community that called Black Lives Matter advocates and activists "thugs" and "communists," while rhetorically claiming that they "hate America" and "want to watch it burn." Unfortunately, rhetoric like this was used *on so many occasions* that it is common knowledge, and difficult to pinpoint merely one occasion. This is a historical mantra and repeat for Black people seeking liberation in America. And it is the case that this man (President Trump) largely, by his single-handed efforts (of course, converting others) caused and propagated, a reawakening of America's brutal racial history, and exacerbated divides appealing to white nationalists and far-right political extremists. This isn't to say this stuff wasn't under the surface before, but he certainly energized it. To put things more into perspective on the recent nature of racial historical events, former President Donald Trump is 75 years old, and would have been 21, almost 22 years old the day that Dr. King was assassinated, and would have been even older during the Black Power movement. (Which, it's well known that he wasn't for minorities then).<sup>69</sup> Nevertheless, as we found White "Christians" in opposition in 1969, we *still* find them in opposition to the Black liberation movement today (not to say that Donald Trump is a Christian, but somehow, he managed social pull with Catholics

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<sup>69</sup> David A. Graham, et al., "An Oral History of Trump's bigotry," June 2019, <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2019/06/trump-racism-comments/588067/>.

*Say Something Theological: The Student Journal of Loyola Marymount University Theological Studies*

*Volume 6, Issue 1, May 2023*

*Loyola Marymount University, Los Angeles*



and Protestants alike, to further the chasm and polarize the political climate feeding White nationalist and “Christian” sensibilities to the populace, at the detriment of the Black, Indigenous, and oppressed, here in the U.S. and outside of it.)

According to a Pew Research Report poll in 2020, the results showed that “two-thirds of White Evangelical Protestants (WEP) say it is very important to have a president who stands up for *their* religious beliefs, [...]”<sup>70</sup> The report also showed that, “Fully 8 in 10 (WEP) say that the phrase ‘fights for what I believe in’ describes Trump ‘very well’ or ‘fairly well,’ including roughly half who say this describes him ‘very well.’”<sup>71</sup> We certainly know that it wasn’t *Black people’s religious beliefs*, or the majority of the oppressed people that were being reflected according to statistics. (WEP) also noted in an overwhelming sense that “[...] the Trump administration has helped (59%) rather than hurt (7%) the interests of evangelical Christians. And three-quarters of white evangelicals say they agree with the president on ‘many,’ ‘nearly all’ or ‘all’ important issues facing the country.”<sup>72</sup>

This is a complete embarrassment. It’s depressing even (for the legitimate Christian), that according to the study 8/10 (WEP) say that Donald Trump, (a vehement racist who openly denied systematic racism exists), “*fights for what I believe in.*” One might say, well that’s the Evangelicals, we would expect that from them.<sup>73</sup> And as a testament, unfortunately, we see equally disappointing results amongst the Catholic majority (White) peoples too (WC). According to the same poll, “Around two-thirds of (WC) say the phrase ‘fights for what I believe in’ describes Donald Trump very well or fairly well, and 68% of white Catholics say “intelligent” is a fairly or very good descriptor of Trump.”<sup>74</sup> Also important for assessing this will be the current populations statistics for today when it comes to observing statistical majority versus minority population numbers. Just as the population statistics back then in James Cone’s 1969 Black Power era heavily weighed the white majority as the majority of the United States population, and therefore a white majority that predominates the Christian institution and nation, we see similar proportions as far as U.S. population statistics go in modern day. According to the U.S. Census Bureau, the estimated population percentage-wise according to race as of July 1<sup>st</sup> 2021, we

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<sup>70</sup> Claire Gecewicz and Gregory A. Smith, et al., “White Evangelicals See Trump as Fighting for Their Beliefs, Though Many Have Mixed Feelings About His Personal Conduct,” Pew Research Report, March 12, 2020, <https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2020/03/12/white-evangelicals-see-trump-as-fighting-for-their-beliefs-though-many-have-mixed-feelings-about-his-personal-conduct/>.

<sup>71</sup> Claire Gecewicz and Gregory A. Smith, et al., “White Evangelicals See Trump as Fighting for Their Beliefs.”

<sup>72</sup> Gecewicz and Gregory A. Smith, et al., “White Evangelicals See Trump as Fighting for Their Beliefs.”

<sup>73</sup> I’m not just being facetious. Evangelicals have been behind Catholics when it comes to science, and intellectualism in a lot of ways, considering Catholics have long been influenced by Enlightenment, operating *beyond* the notion of inerrancy, *beyond* a literal interpretation of Creation, long accepting of evolutionary science, etc.

<sup>74</sup> Claire Gecewicz and Gregory A. Smith, et al., “White Evangelicals See Trump as Fighting for Their Beliefs.”



find still an overwhelming majority of the national population identifies as the majority coming in at “76% White,” with just “13.4% Black” and then there is a category marked “White alone” at “60%” and this includes people who do not identify as also Hispanic.<sup>75</sup> However, it is important to note, where white Christians may have been the majority of the past, (1969), the Afro-American population has surpassed whites in America who identify as Christian in modern day, whereas, as of 2014, people who identified as “White and Christian” were then holding *only* “70% of the population,” whereas “Black identification with Christianity” surpasses both “White, Latino, and Asian, and Other, with 79%” according to a Pew Research Center analysis.<sup>76</sup>

Upon first recognition of this, this may seem as if this data may change James Cone’s conclusion and outcome of his argument, considering White religionists are less than the Black religionists. But we must remember that just because one doesn’t identify as “Christian,” it does not mean that they didn’t support Trump, nor does it mean that they weren’t anti-Black Lives Matter, nor is it the case that there are no White Christian sensibilities to be found amongst them.

As a testament to this, according to a study accomplished on September 21<sup>st</sup> of 2021, we find that at the time of the study, “[...] 83% of Black Americans currently express at least some support [...]” in the Black Lives Matter movement, while only “[...] 47% of White adults” supported it.<sup>77</sup> In another religious study, we find in an article titled, “Most White Americans who regularly attend worship services voted for Trump in 2020,” we find that “Overall, 59% of voters who frequently attend religious services cast their ballot for Trump.”<sup>78</sup> And concerning Black voters, they “overwhelming supported Biden in 2020 regardless of how often they attended religious services.”<sup>79</sup>

After evaluating all of this data, what conclusions can we draw? Well, after all these years, there is something *still seriously wrong* in the institutional church, and that is: it is still oppressive, and it is still “white,” and it’s still “demonic” as Cone would say. When Black people overwhelmingly recognize

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<sup>75</sup> “Quick Facts: United States,” United States Census Bureau, accessed April 1, 2022, <https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/fact/table/US>.

<sup>76</sup> “Religious Landscape Study: Christians identified by race/ethnicity,” Pew Research Center, 2014, <https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/religious-landscape-study/compare/christians/by/racial-and-ethnic-composition/>.

<sup>77</sup> Juliana Horowitz, “Support for Black Lives Matter declined after George Floyd protests but remained unchanged since,” Pew Research Center, September 27, 2021, <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2021/09/27/support-for-black-lives-matter-declined-after-george-floyd-protests-but-has-remained-unchanged>.

<sup>78</sup> Justin Nortey, “Most White Americans who regularly attend Worship services voted for Trump in 2020,” Pew Research Center, August 30, 2021, <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2021/09/27/support-for-black-lives-matter-declined-after-george-floyd-protests-but-has-remained-unchanged-since/>.

<sup>79</sup> Justin Nortey, “Most White Americans.”



*Say Something Theological: The Student Journal of Loyola Marymount University Theological Studies*

the dangers of majority (white) “Christians” and it’s *far beyond* 1969, this says that there is a serious problem with Christianity. And according to one poll, the religious and secular combined, based on the recent data, appear to be doing more for liberation than the White “Christians” (as the overwhelming majority of Black Christians teemed with no religious affiliation overwhelmingly voted against racist and neo-fascist President Donald Trump, whereas the overwhelming majority of White Christians voted for him) based on the data. This gets a bit more complex when we add other minorities, but even according to the statistics, other minorities’ endorsement of white Supremacists are (1.) less than the other majority accounts according to the data, and (2.) require a more complex analysis, based on the current reality existing where the majority holds power and the minority doesn’t, and in a predatory system, *assimilation happens for survival*, or “self-hatred” as Cone (and Malcolm X) calls it. And lastly (3.) some “minorities” enjoy the privilege of whiteness. (I.e. Hispanics/Latinos are sometimes “white passing,” and a prime example of complexity in minority affairs, 60% of Hispanics said they supported Black Lives Matter according to the above polls. That’s over half, but what happened to the other percentage? It should have been all, or realistically, a great majority of them, and these are the complexities I was getting at; including the fact that there was an upscale in discrimination against Hispanics and immigrants during Donald Trump’s presidency, and there are similar issues alike not discussed.

For the purposes of this paper, I sought out to wrestle with the question of whether or not it is a requisite for a believer to be a part of a formal or institutional Christian Church. I analyzed and evaluated James Cone’s argument. His argument, if I could put into a summary goes something like the following: Black existence in America is existentially absurd. They are faced with a predicament in the absurdity of America: the two options are to rebel or commit suicide. Rebellion is the only option Blacks have, according to Black liberation theologian Cone. Black Power is a way out. Cone says Christian Theology is meaningless to Black existence, and *must* become meaningful to and for Black existence. Cone creates a Black Theology, “a ghetto theology” that seeks to liberate Blacks, the downtrodden, the oppressed from majority (White) oppression, its structures and institutions—though in concept this could be applicable to any form of oppression or exploitation. In Christ, the degraded Black human is called to recognize the existential threat of nonbeing, and is called *into being*; now the Black human is called to *be*, the Black human being then is called *to become*, to liberate themselves, and their oppressor (if the oppressor will not liberate themselves—but once the revolution is on, it’s on). Because the Christian formal and institutional Church is at an irreconcilable conflict with Black Power, Cone argues, the Church *is not* the formal institution. The true Church is where Christ is, and Christ is liberating the oppressed, Christ is liberating Black existence in the ghetto. Thus, Cone argues for what I call an ecclesiology of Spirit. This is a brief summation of what was argued.

*Say Something Theological: The Student Journal of Loyola Marymount University Theological Studies*

*Volume 6, Issue 1, May 2023*

*Loyola Marymount University, Los Angeles*





*Say Something Theological: The Student Journal of Loyola Marymount University Theological Studies*

Now, we must ask ourselves, does this argument still hold today? If it held in 1969, or in other words, if this argument was valid then (and obviously I think it was, or I would not be using it), then I think it is *highly likely* that it is still relevant today. However, the pitfalls are, when looking at sociological data like this, the numbers render *a general picture*, they give you an idea of affairs; they do not give you truth of reality. Things are not certain, but things are also not so unreliable that it tells you *nothing* about reality. Therefore, it's hard to give a definitive response when it comes to answering our question. However, the data I have recently rendered certainly gives leanings to Cone's basic structure of his argument, *still being applicable* in 2020 (if not a few years around this time in modern-day) when it comes to answering the question, "*Is it a requisite for a "believer" to be a part of the Christian Church?*" because we don't get certainty here, but when you look at the *general* gist here, the picture of the Christian "Church" is not looking pretty. For the sake of this paper, and for the sake of Cone's argument, I would like to make the bold claim that Cone's argument in 1969 is still relevant in 2020 (and perhaps) modern day, and it is not a requisite for a believer to be a part of the formal Christian institutional "Church." This is a complex topic, and I understand that I will have objections, but this lays the groundwork for thorough research to be built upon my position and of course, on top of the intellectual genius James Cone's position—however, if he were alive today, I can only imagine what he would have to say regarding the most recent #BlackLivesMatter movement.

*Say Something Theological: The Student Journal of Loyola Marymount University Theological Studies*

*Volume 6, Issue 1, May 2023*

*Loyola Marymount University, Los Angeles*





*Say Something Theological: The Student Journal of Loyola Marymount University Theological Studies*

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*Say Something Theological: The Student Journal of Loyola Marymount University Theological Studies*

Volume 6, Issue 1, May 2023

Loyola Marymount University, Los Angeles



*Say Something Theological: The Student Journal of Loyola Marymount University Theological Studies*

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*Say Something Theological: The Student Journal of Loyola Marymount University Theological Studies*

*Volume 6, Issue 1, May 2023*

*Loyola Marymount University, Los Angeles*