

In Nomine Iesu

Grace to you and peace my Sisters and Brothers in Christ. I have been asked to do a presentation on Womanist perspectives on justification and gender issues. It is a daunting task for many volumes have been written on the subject. Womanist's voices are heard and felt from the margins, even in an August gathering as the Conference of International Black Lutherans.

I was fortunate to attend the last gathering in Bulawayo. I remember with a certain amount of irony a worship service. One of the hymns was "Rise Up O Saints of God." Well, the language in the hymnal had not been modified and it read, "Rise Up O Men of God." A fair amount of ambivalence was experienced by the African-American delegation. While some of our brothers may have been tempted to sing "rise up o men of God," they heard the voice of the womanist critique from the boundary reminding them to use inclusive language. More concretely, 'Brothers, unless you want to ride on the wing of the plane on the return trip to the US you would want to sing "saints" instead of "men."' It is my belief that any conversation on justification and gender issues is a conversation that must begin in our respective communities for there is much to discuss.

Womanist Theology Defined

The term *womanist* was introduced 1983 by writer Alice Walker in In Search of Our Mother's Gardens: Womanist Prose. It was derived from a folk expression in the Black community, *womanish*. This admonition was generally applied to little Black girls that asserted themselves. To describe a young Black girl as *womanish* or to tell her that she was *acting womanish* was to warn her early on to stay in her place. And what was that place but on

the margins, twice removed from whom American society deemed normative -- a White male.

Alice Walker (1983) rescued that term and reframed it positively. She defines womanist as:

Womanist from womanish (Opp. of "girlish," i.e., frivolous, irresponsible, not serious.) A Black feminist or feminist of color. From the Black folk expression of mothers to female children, "You acting womanish," i.e., like a woman. Usually referring to outrageous, audacious, courageous or willful behavior. Wanting to know more and in greater depth than is considered "good" for one. Interested in grown-up doings. Acting grown up. Being grown up. Interchangeable with another black folk expression: "You trying to be grown." Responsible. In charge. Serious.(xi)

She celebrated the sass, confidence, inquisitiveness, strength and spirit of being *womanish*. In her formal definition, she takes seriously Black woman's experience of responsibility, tenacity and love of self .

African-American women in theology appropriated the term, *womanist*, for the perspective which they bring to theological enterprise. Womanist theology uses black woman's experiences as its point of departure for doing theology. In other words, Black women's experience is moved from the margin to the center for theological reflection.

Womanist theology also recognizes and speaks to the multidimensionality of Black women's oppression hinging on racism, sexism and classism. It also offers a social critique of the hegemonic structures that

maintain Black women's oppression. This angle of vision illumines the shortcomings of feminist theology and Black theology. Feminist theology reveals a racist bias in that it is normed by white women's experience to the exclusion of Black and other women of color. Womanist theology exposes sexism inherent in Black theology. However, at heart of womanist theology is a communal understanding that suggests in order for our communities to experience shalom -- authentic wholeness, African-American women and men, in partnership, must speak the truth in love with clarity and hold each other accountable.

Subjectification as a Basis for Doing Theology

In the Gospel of Matthew, chapter 16, Jesus asks his disciples, "Who do people say that I am?" The disciples answer, "some say John the Baptist, but others say Elijah and still others Jeremiah or one of the prophets." Jesus then asks them, "who do you say that I am?" In so doing Jesus shifts the focus from others to the disciples themselves. He makes them subjects of the question. The import of this question cannot be gainsaid, for the answer to it has implications for our doctrine of God, the Holy Spirit, ecclesiology and justification.

The legacy of chattel slavery has left its imprint on American psyche. African-American people were considered objects, non-entities and sub-human. In Dark Symbols, Obscure Signs: God, Self and the Community in the Slave Mind, Riggins Earls does a careful examination of the slave masters' anthropological perspective regarding slaves. He found that Christian slave masters grounded their understanding of slave anthropology in scripture and maniacally creative theologies. While they were willing to assert that slave had souls created in the *Imago Dei*, their bodies were not so. Slaveholders and slaves were equal before God in the spiritual realm, but this

was not the case in the temporal realm. In other words, slaves were disembodied equals before God. It was a strange, kind of docetic understanding of the Jesus Christ's incarnation as it applied to slaves. The slaves humanity had to be disassembled. A disembodied slave male or female was far removed from the human standard -- the White male.

This false dichotomy justified the Christian slaveholder's use of baptism as a method to redeem the souls without invoking the liberative dimension of the Gospel (to set at liberty the captives). Why, then, baptize slaves at all? Baptism was touted as a means of encouraging docility among slaves thereby increasing their value in the market place.

Kelly Brown-Douglass (1994) notes similar theological contortions, designed to fuel the institution of slavery going in *The Black Christ*. She does an analysis of slaveholding Christianity and slave Christianity. For the slaveholder, the White Christ is an object of worship bordering on idolatry, while the Black Christ for the slave is the subject of belief. She describes slaveholding Christianity :

The White Christ is grounded in an understanding of Christianity suggesting that Jesus of Nazareth was Christ, the Messiah, because God was made flesh in him. The incarnation itself is considered the decisive feature of Christianity. That God became human is the essential fact in what it means for Jesus to be Christ. His ministry to the poor and the oppressed is virtually inconsequential to this interpretation of Christianity If persons believe that Jesus had become "human" in Jesus and thus Jesus is Christ, then they do not have to be

anxious about their salvation. To believe that God's act in Jesus is to become convinced that through that act salvation has been secured. With salvation guaranteed through belief, White people could be both slaveholder *and* Christian without guilt or fear for their souls (13).

Slaveholding Christianity as described by Brown-Douglass is a clear misappropriation of the doctrine of justification. Once justified, one is liberated to serve God and neighbor. However, neighborliness, is predicated on humanity and according to slaveholding Christianity, slaves did not meet the criteria as humans.

It is important to note that while some slaves embraced the White Christ (and contributed to their own oppression), many slaves noted the incongruity of this christology and rejected it. They attended services held for them by the slaveholder only to later slip away and have "church" or their own worship services in the "hush harbors." Under the watchful eye of the slaveholder, worship services were used to control and ensure docility. They were objects of slaveholding Christianity. But when they would "steal away to Jesus" and attend their very own worship services, the slaves moved from liminality to centrality. In this act they became subject and began to answer Jesus' question, "who do you say that I am?"

Jesus' significance in slave Christianity had to do with his activity in their lived realities. "Jesus was a living being with whom the slaves had a intimate relationship" (Brown-Douglass 1994, 20). Slave Christianity was based on a foundation that highlighted Jesus' public ministry. Slave Christian noted the miracles as well as the sufferings of Christ. It was believed that if

Jesus acted decisively in human history then he would act on the behalf of the slaves -- in their daily lives as well as the eschatological hope of liberation from chattel slavery.

Vestiges of slave Christianity can be seen in the works of Cone, Cleage and King. While Black theology has its roots in slave Christianity it falls prey to patriarchy. Slave Christianity has been wrested from the hands of slaveholding Christianity and has been refined by some of the greatest male thinkers in the African-American community. However, the voices of the female thinkers have not a part of the conversation. This is a womanist critique of Black theology.

As I have pointed out, the subject's answer to the Jesus question has profound implications for the basic doctrines of our church, particularly the *imago dei*. As a female pastor, serving in the southwestern part of the US (Houston, TX), I am keenly aware of the incarnational nature of patriarchy. Ironically, my ability to pastor and preach comes into question with a great deal of frequency because in the minds of many of my African-American counterparts I am not male. Black ecclesiology and theology have a hegemony of their own.

Jaquelyn Grant (1993) argues that "the central christological problem rests in the fact that Jesus Christ has been and remains imprisoned by the socio-political interest of those who historically have been keepers of the principalities and powers" (57). She asserts that a "captive Jesus has been used to advance oppression." Grant contends that Jesus has been held captive by the structures of racism, sexism and classism. She states that African-American women tend to transcend those things that attempt to incapacitate the power of Jesus. She outlines four categories or symbols by which "Jesus is liberated by African-American women as he liberated them."

They are: *Jesus as co-sufferer, Jesus as equalizer, Jesus means freedom, and Jesus as liberator.*

Jesus is seen as a *co-sufferer* because he endured suffering with which African-American women could identify. “But because Jesus Christ was not a mere man, but God incarnate, African-American women, in these sufferings, connected with the divine (Grant 1993). Additionally, Jesus is seen as an *equalizer*. He levels the playing field and inequity in the White as well as the African-American spheres. As evidence, Grant points to Jarena Lee, an African-American female preacher of the late nineteenth century who insisted on her right to preach deriving her authority to do so from Jesus. She argued that Christ died for women as well as men. Under the symbol *Jesus means freedom*, Grant lifts up Fannie Lou Hamer, a freedom fighter of the sixties and early seventies. Hamer was emboldened by her reading of Luke 4:18 and committed herself to follow the example set by Jesus and liberate the captives. The symbol of Jesus as Liberator empowers African-American women to engage in the process of liberation .” Grant cites Sojourner Truth to embody this symbol. Truth was asked about her ability to read and her biblical literacy in an effort to embarrass her. Undaunted, she retorted, she could not read a letter of the alphabet but when she preached; she preached Jesus. It was the work of Jesus in his earthly ministry and his example that legitimated the “protest activities of many African-American women” (Grant 1993).

When Jesus asked his disciples, “who do you say that I am?” He subjectifies them. Their subjectification makes them central. Grant (1990) contends that womanist theologians must move from object to subject in doing christological reflection. I would add that in other areas of church life, African-American women should do them same. The shift from margin to

center comes when we are "responsible, serious, and in charge" of own reflection on the Jesus question, whether it be in a weekly local Bible study, our preaching, or teaching.

Implications for Justification

In this brief presentation, we have moved together through quite a few years of theological development beginning with slavery. The implications for justification as it relates to slaveholding Christianity are minimal at best based on the perception that slaves were not did not meet a standard for humanity. Therefore justification for the slave was a non issue.

However, slaves understood the absurdity of slaveholding Christianity in which theology and ethics were radically estranged. When the slaves began, worshipping apart from the watchful eyes of the slaveholders, they began to answer the Jesus question, whether explicitly or implicitly, they began to see themselves as subjects of Jesus' grace, mercy, salvation and justification. They understood that their personhood and full humanity was given to them by God. This declaration of personhood or full humanity is akin to "alien righteousness" which God imparts as a result of justification.

God makes the declaration of presented, full humanity and righteousness (and no one can take that away). In many instances, this new self-understanding liberated once totally disenfranchised beings to claim justification as their own and to act on it (as my confirmation students will tell you, act as agents of grace and mercy on behalf of the neighbor). Earl (1994) notes that slaves were embolden so far as to tell the slaveholders that they were wrong for holding slaves. Undoubtedly, this self-understanding fueled many slave revolts.

Justification and the self-understanding it engenders, certainly has had far-reaching implications in many areas of African-American life. According

to Theology and the Black Experience, it certainly informed the Civil Rights Movement. However, the Civil Rights Movement was riddled with the sin of sexism. Patricia Hill Collins (1991), notes this in Black Feminist Thought. She highlights Ella Baker, civil rights activist as a “major figure in the Southern Christian Leadership Conference” (^{BCLC}~~SKULK~~) and yet during the larger plenary meetings her voice was barely heard.

Womanist perspective takes great risks in that it confronts names the various forms of oppression and the structures which oppose Black life and humanity. Womanist perspective offers wide angle lens insight as it takes up the multidimensionality of African-American women’s oppression. It does a careful analysis of the interlocking structures of racism, sexism and classism. Kelly Brown-Douglass (1999) in Sexuality and the Black Church, writes in depth about the Black church regarding sexual norms, mores, sexism and heterosexism thus furthering the examination of multidimensional oppression.

Implications for the African-American Lutheran Church

I believe that local African-American congregations, should set themselves about the task of answering Jesus’ question to his disciples, “Who do you say that I am?” An examination of that question would be helpful in defining the church’s mission articulated by African-American Lutherans with a clear understanding of justification by grace.

We are not unique in misappropriating the doctrine of justification, which happens to be one of the true gifts of the Lutheran Church. With regard to it, I see that the doctrine has been skewed. I point to internalized racist oppression to support my observation. I also noticed that women have not appropriated the language of womanish although they engage in behaviors and life-giving activities that would suggest they are in fact womanist. Some women of my congregation associate the term negatively with the women’s

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“Reflections on womanist perspective and justification.”

movement or feminism. While I believe that it is important to gather around these issues, I am curious to know how we can help our churches enter into discussion about justification and its impact on African American church life.

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