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“I Once Was Blind, but Now I See”

The Doctrine of Revelation in the African American Experience

But can mortal man behold him? The eagle veils his eyes before he can gaze upon the unclouded sun. Who then can gaze upon the visage of that God whose shadow illumines the sun, and who covers himself with light, as with a garment? Nevertheless the pure in heart shall see God. They shall see him in all his works of nature, providence, and grace. They see him alike in the minute insect, and huge elephant; in the sagacious mocking bird and the stupid ostrich. They see him sprinkling the earth with flowers, and gilding the firmament with stars! They see him walking with Shadrack, Meshack, and Abednego, in the fiery furnace, and sitting with Daniel in the lion’s den. They see him while a babe in the manger, and a man quelling the raging sea amid the howling storm! They see him amid the lightnings and thunders of Sinai, and amid the tears, the groans, and the blood of Calvary!

BISHOP DANIEL ALEXANDER PAYNE
GENERAL INTRODUCTION AND CONTEXT

How does one know God? How can his divine will be apprehended and followed? Is it possible to truly know something of the character of the divine Creator? Can we know God in any way other than through sacred writings and traditions?

These questions are not new, neither were they new at the dawning of African American religious history. Every people and culture in human history struggled to find satisfactory answers to this epistemological problem—how does one know? And more specifically, how does one know God?

**General revelation: God revealed in nature and conscience.** Historically, Protestant Christianity resolved the problem of knowing, particularly knowing God, by considering two sources: general and special revelation. The doctrine of general revelation held that God left his imprimatur on the design of the universe and in the conscience and moral laws of humanity. So, the psalmist proclaimed that “the heavens declare the glory of God” (Ps 19:1), and the apostle Paul asserted, “since the creation of the world God's invisible qualities—his eternal power and divine nature—have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made” (Rom 1:20). According to the doctrine of general revelation, the Creator communicated something of his person and divine will through the created order, including the conscience and moral laws ingrained in the individual and human society. With application of reason, then, the natural order reveals God in a real and true sense.

However, Christian theologians through the ages taught that while general revelation was enough to apprehend God in some sense, to know that he exists, humanity needed another form of revelation to better comprehend God's specific attributes and will. For example, Jonathan Edwards (1703-1758), opposing the Enlightenment’s emphasis on human reason, illustrated the limits of human reason by pointing to the inability of one person to know the unexpressed thoughts of another. “We find that the things of men cannot be known by other men any further than they reveal or declare them.” The same must be true, Edwards reasoned, of God. “So says the apostle it is with the things of God that we are told in the gospel. They are things that concern God himself, his secret counsels and sovereign will, and things in himself which he alone can be supposed to see and be conscious to immediately. And therefore, our reason will not help us to see them any further than God’s Spirit is pleased to
reveal." Edwards argued that to make reason the final arbiter of divine truth was to subordinate God’s rule and make the fallacious claim that fallen human reason was a better guide in spiritual things. Reason had an important role in determining whether Scripture was divine in origin and infallible in content; however, once that was established Edwards argued that “modesty and humility and reverence to God require that we allow that God is better able to declare to us what is agreeable to that perfection than we are to declare to him or ourselves. Reason tells us that God is just, but God is better able to tell what acts are agreeable to that justice than we are.”

The typical view expressed by Edwards and others in the early Colonial era held sway through much of the country’s history. For example, Princeton theologian Archibald Alexander (1772-1851), refuting rationalist tendencies coming from Unitarians of his day, concluded, “we must unequivocally deny to reason the high office of deciding at her bar what doctrines of Scripture are to be received and what not” and “insist that all opinions, pretensions, experiences, and practices must be judged by the standard of the Word of God.” The Princeton theologians, from Alexander to B. B. Warfield (1851-1921), exalted the supremacy of divine revelation over human reason and natural revelation well into the 1900s.

**Special revelation: God revealed most clearly in Scripture and in Jesus Christ.** The doctrine of special revelation answered the church’s need for more particular or specific information regarding the character and plans of God, his commands for his people, and the way of salvation. The Bible, in both the Old and the New Testaments, contained this special revelation of God. It, the church held, recorded God’s work in history to redeem and save a covenant people for himself. The pages of Scripture unveiled the attributes of God—his wisdom, omnipotence, holiness, mercy, love, supremacy, sovereignty, justice, etc.—in sufficient clarity for human beings to know and relate to him with ac-

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2Ibid., p. 127.

accuracy and for their eternal redemption. In the Bible, one observed God revealing himself in and through the history of his people. In the Bible, prophets and apostles spoke and wrote the very oracles of God as they heard “the word of the Lord” coming to them, interacted with angelic messengers, or received visions directly from God.

And ultimately, Jesus Christ embodied all the truth of divine revelation, and was himself the message of God to fallen humanity. Where general revelation provided an awareness of the existence of God as demonstrated by his creation, special revelation particularized who this God was in his triune character, what his intentions were vis-à-vis humanity and history, and how God and humanity could be joined in meaningful relationship. The pages of Scripture contained this message and provided the one sure means of knowing the person and mind of God. In these pages, God disclosed himself and crossed the epistemological chasm between his infinite existence and humanity’s finite reason.

The principal representatives of the main Protestant churches in the American colonies brought with them these formulations of general and special revelation, doctrines that served generations of Christians before them. This way of knowing—via Scripture and general revelation—provided the foundation for the ordering of society in matters religious, political, scientific, economic and social. Owing to a theological consensus forged over a nearly two-hundred-year period by Reformation thinkers and European churchmen, the American colonies began their experiment “under the Puritan canopy,” which subscribed to this two-source view of revelation.

The African American church and its doctrine of revelation first emerged and developed in the shelter of this canopy, but it also fed on input from other sources. Eugene Genovese observed, “Afro-American religion arose from a conjuncture of many streams—African, European, classic Judeo-Christian, and Amerindian—but pre-eminently it emerged as a Christian faith both black and American.” How these “streams” shaped the African American doctrine of revelation is the subject of this chapter.

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EARLY SLAVERY ERA THROUGH ABOLITION ERA (1600-1865)

African American Christians in the northern colonies stood as heirs of the Puritan and evangelical tradition of divine revelation. The orthodox consensus regarding special and general revelation reigned from the founding of African American literature in the works of Jupiter Hammon to the end of slavery in the essays of Bishop Daniel A. Payne.

Jupiter Hammon: A characteristic orthodox view of the Bible and its authority. Jupiter Hammon (1711-1806?), for example, expressed a cogent and characteristic-orthodox view of the Bible and its authority. Hammon, at the age of forty-nine, became the first African American to publish a work of literature. A slave his entire life, Jupiter Hammon worked as a clerk and bookkeeper for the wealthy slave trading Lloyd family of Long Island, New York. Young Hammon probably benefited from Anglican missionary educational efforts established in the Oyster Bay area of Long Island. In addition, through the Lloyd family’s economic and cultural ties to Boston, Hartford, New York and London, Hammon had access to literature and works of theology.6

“A devout evangelical Christian, Hammon had been converted during the earliest stirrings of the Great Awakening.”7 His Christian convictions likely received reinforcements under the Quaker ministrations of William Burling (1678-1743) of Long Island and abolitionist John Woolman (1720-1772) who visited Oyster Bay on at least three occasions. The Quakers of Oyster Bay and Philadelphia published Hammon’s Address to the Negroes in the State of New York with a posthumous acknowledgment of close association with Hammon. Sondra O’Neale observes that “as a writer [Hammon] used Christianity and its foundation of biblical language, allusion, and imagery to mount a public assault against slavery. He left four poems, two essays, and a sermon, however that offering includes the first, and most comprehensive statement of black theology as well as the earliest antislavery protests by a black writer in all of American literature.” And yet, as O’Neale concludes, “Hammon’s dual commitment to Christianity and freedom has been either undervalued or ignored.”8 To recover a historical understanding of African American theology,

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7Ibid., p. 1.
8Ibid.
then, the pattern of ignoring or undervaluing Jupiter Hammon must be reversed.

In *An Address to the Negroes in the State of New York*, Hammon wrote:

The Bible is the word of God and tells you what you must do to please God; it tells you how you may escape misery and be happy forever. If you see most people neglect the Bible, and many that can read never look into it, let it not harden you and make you think lightly of it and that it is a book of no worth. All those who are really good love the Bible and meditate on it day and night. In the Bible, God has told us everything it is necessary we should know in order to be happy here and hereafter. The Bible is the mind and will of God to men.  

Hammon’s contention that “the Bible is the word of God and everything in it is true” indicated his subscription to the orthodox view of inspiration and infallibility. The words of Scripture were, according to the orthodox view, literally God-breathed or inspired (2 Tim 3:16). And given that they originated with an omniscient God, they were also without error in all that they recorded. Accordingly, Hammon urged his hearers to devote themselves to learning to read so that they may “study it day and night.” Hammon’s views were characteristic of most African American Christians of the period. This view of the Bible as special revelation held sway among African American Christians during the antebellum period and would remain largely unchallenged until African Americans gained access to the liberal schools of theology that emerged in the late 1800s and prospered through the mid-1900s.

**Daniel Alexander Payne.** Daniel Alexander Payne (1811-1893) was born February 24, 1811, to London and Martha Payne, free blacks in Charleston, South Carolina, during the height of slavery. Immediately following his birth, the elder Paynes dedicated their son to the work of the Lord; however, neither Payne would live to see their hopes fulfilled. London Payne died when Daniel was just over four years old, and Martha followed her husband in death just five years later. Raised by his grandmother, Daniel became a voracious student, devouring every subject of learning he could find. Between the ages of eight and fifteen, young Daniel received educational instruction from the Minor’s

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10 Ibid., p. 239.
Moralist Society and a popular Charleston schoolmaster named Thomas S. Bonneau. While employed as an apprentice to local shoe and carpentry merchants, Daniel taught himself Greek, Latin and Hebrew. By age nineteen, Daniel Alexander Payne opened and operated a school for both slave and free Africans in South Carolina until the South Carolina General Assembly forced the closure of the school in 1835.11

Sleepless, loaded with disappointment, failing in prayer and doubting the existence and justice of God, Payne closed the school on March 31, 1835, and shortly thereafter moved north from South Carolina to New York. While in New York, Payne received encouragement to further education and training at the Lutheran Theological Seminary in Gettysburg, Pennsylvania, where he received a Protestant theological education. In June of 1837, after initially resisting any call into full-time Christian ministry, Daniel Alexander Payne was licensed by the Lutheran Church and fully ordained about two years later by the Synod at Fordsboro, New York. He was a little over twenty-six years old.12

In the winter of 1841, he joined the African Methodist Episcopal (AME) Church and by 1843 the AME church received him into full connection. Payne made his most significant contributions to the Christian church during his time as a pastor and later a bishop of the AME church. In particular, Payne’s tireless efforts to reform the character and educational quality of the African American pastorate earned him the moniker “Apostle of Education to the Negro as well as the Apostle to Educators in the A.M.E. Church.”13

Payne’s view of the Bible. Bishop Payne’s view of the Bible corresponded with that of Jupiter Hammon and evangelical America. In his most famous address, Welcome to the Ransomed, given on the occasion of the District of Columbia’s emancipation of slaves, Payne exhorted his hearers to “rest not until you have learned to read the Bible.”14 His estimation of the Scriptures resonated with that of most African Americans during the time. Quoting Psalm 19:7-10, he concluded that the judgments, statutes and laws of the Bible,

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12Ibid.
“Yield uniform, implicit obedience to their teachings. They will purify your hearts and make them the abodes of the Ever-Blessed Trinity.” According to Payne, apart from obeying divine law, the recently freed slaves could not hope to obey human law. In his autobiography, Payne explained the relationship between Scripture, on the one hand, and moral, religious, civil and political ideas on the other. He displayed something of his high view of Scripture’s authority and inerrancy as he argued, “an individual man or woman must never follow conviction in regard to moral, religious, civil and political questions until they are first tested by the unerring word of God.” The Bible was to be the exclusive source and the norm for personal conviction and conscience. Payne continued:

If a conviction infringes upon the written word of God, or in any manner conflicts with that word, the conviction is not to be followed. It is our duty to abandon it. Moreover, I will add that light on a doubtful conviction is not to be sought for in the conscience, but in the Bible. The conscience, like the conviction, may be blind, erroneous, misled, or perverted; therefore it is not always a safe guide. The only safe guide for a man or woman, young or old, rich or poor, learned or unlearned, priest or people is the Bible, the whole Bible, nothing but the Bible.¹⁶

As a Bishop in the AME Church, Payne required responsive reading of the Bible in every local church’s public meeting, believing that “the colored race, who had been oppressed for centuries through ignorance and superstition, might become intelligent, Christian, and powerful through the enlightening and sanctifying influences of the word of God.”¹⁷ Following the Bishop’s leadership, efforts were made to encourage education in the Scriptures for both men and women and to use such knowledge as the basis for reform and self-improvement among the masses of African Americans.

Payne’s view of natural revelation. However, Payne’s doctrine of revelation did not

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¹⁵Ibid., p. 8.
¹⁶Payne, Recollections of Seventy Years, pp. 233-34.
¹⁷Ibid., p. 253.
end with a high view of Scripture. Near the twilight of American slavery, evidence of an understanding of natural or general revelation emerged in the writings of African Americans. Among them was Bishop Payne who, in a brief article in the *Repository of American Religion and Literature*, credited creation with revealing the incommunicable attributes of God. He wrote:

> God has condescended to so adapt the intellect of man to the universe, and the universe to his intellect, that by the proper use of the former, and the contemplation of the latter, he may know as much of the Almighty as it is possible to know. The architect is known by his designs, and the skill with which he executes them; the spirit of inspiration saith, even a child is known by his doings, and hence it is also written, that the heavens declare the glory of God and the firmament showeth his handiwork. And again the invisible things of him from the creation of the world, are clearly seen, being understood by the things that are made, even his eternal power and God-head.\(^\text{18}\)

In the creation, according to Payne, God condescended or lowered himself to the level of man’s ability in order to communicate “as much of the Almighty as it is possible to know.” Appealing to biblical texts like Romans 1:20, Payne concluded that if people would simply apply their minds to the study of the universe, which is suitably fashioned to fit their intellectual abilities, they may come to understand the character, eternality and power of God. For Payne, the idea that God speaks and can be heard in and through the created universe was unassailable. “We maintain the position that in a universe whose proportions are as just as they are stupendous; whose forms are as beautiful as they are varied; whose parts and whose movements harmonize with mathematical precision—there is the utterance of an infallible voice, declaring that God is infinite in wisdom, omnipotent in power, and unbounded in goodness.”\(^\text{19}\)

In Payne’s thought, not only the incommunicable attributes of God were revealed in the physical universe, but the moral laws of God, which “demonstrate the moral perfections of his being,” also were codified into the structure of the universe.\(^\text{20}\) Payne opined, “The heart of the legislator is always seen in the laws he enacts; if he be just, his laws will be just and equitable; if he be a tyrant, his laws will be unjust and tyrannical. So, also, the just and holy laws

\(^\text{19}\)Ibid., p. 3
\(^\text{20}\)Ibid.
The moral law, good in essence because God himself is omnibenevolent, applied itself universally and indiscriminately, favoring no persons. According to Payne, “Gabriel, at the right hand of the Eternal, and the meanest slave of Virginia, are placed alike under its glorious and fearful sanctions.” One’s station in life provided no escape from the just consequences and rewards of the moral lawgiver. In the natural moral law, then, writers like Payne found both a revelation of God’s character and a theological weapon for attacking moral injustices perpetrated against Africans, especially slavery. Payne argued that the purpose of God’s moral law was “the government of moral agents,” and the existence of this moral law was plainly seen in the nature of relationships and creation.

History as revelation. In his semi-centennial address delivered at Allen Temple AME Church in Cincinnati, Ohio, Payne put forth a three-fold view of revelation. He discussed the revelatory role of both nature and Scripture, but added that God was also manifested in history. Payne argued that God showed himself to his creation through the history of races, nations, governments and “that kind of personal history which we call Biography.” The greatness of God, according to Payne, exhibited itself in the origin, growth, decline and demise of nation states, and the exaltation and humbling of despots like Nebuchadnezzar, righteous and humble men like Daniel, and the punishment of crime in the lives of men like King David. Payne saw in history “evidences of (God’s) inflexible justice and beneficent providence, as well as his unquestionable sovereignty.” While Payne did not further develop this aspect of his doctrine of revelation, he nonetheless foreshadowed later theologians like James Cone (1938–) who consider the history of African Americans a significant source for formulating theological positions. Unfortunately, Cone and others would invert the priority that Payne assigned to the three sources of revelation by minimizing the authority and denying the inerrancy of Scripture.
and by exalting the importance of history and culture.

**Revelation in slave theology.** As historian Mark Noll makes clear, Puritan influences were greatest in New England. And while the Puritans exerted some influence over the entirety of civil, social and political life in the colonies, antebellum southern theology resisted the impress of New England, providing its own theological distinctives.25 The distinctiveness of southern theology was particularly evident among enslaved African Americans. Perhaps nowhere was the distinctiveness of African American theology more on display than in their doctrine or understanding of divine revelation. While the New England doctrines of general and special revelation, which were largely propositional and cognitive in character, provided a compatible framework for southern theological reflection, the advent of slave conversions gave the African American doctrine of revelation a more immediate, experiential and even emotional flavor. This distinction between white cognitive emphases in the doctrine of revelation and black emphases on subjective and immediate experience may help explain why the two traditions have traveled along mostly separate trajectories in the development of their theology.

**Visions, voices and signs.** Slaves in the American south most frequently wrote of God revealing himself through visions and voices. While they held the Bible in high regard, they by no means limited the revelation of God to either the Scriptures or to natural law as their New England counterparts had. In the folk theology of slaves, the doctrine of revelation was expanded to include direct, unmediated communion of man and God through visions and voices.

The belief that God was able to and frequently did reveal himself through voices and visions, if not normative by slave standards, was at least normal. The collection of conversion testimonies and short biographies assembled by Clifton Johnson in *God Struck Me Dead* are an invaluable recording of slave theological thought, at least among slaves alive during the twilight of the institution. Many of these slave conversion testimonies featured vision- and voice-based revelations, with the recipient recording very little surprise or disbelief at the prospect of hearing or seeing God through dreams or visions. The pervasiveness of God’s spoken revelation was demonstrated in his willingness

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to even speak to children as young as eight years old.  

One interviewee summed up the “normalcy” of hearing from God by saying, “I know that God talks to His people because He talks to me and has been talking to me ever since I was a boy.”

In this person’s view, the exceptional aspect of God revealing himself through speech is not that he speaks with his people—of that the person was sure. Rather, the exceptional feature was that the voice and vision were “spiritual,” perhaps occurring in a manner and a dimension other than typical human communication but no less real. “He doesn’t talk as we talk but He talks to us and we hear with the spiritual ear and see through the spiritual eye.” The slave believed that visions and dreams were “inner” experiences. While the voice of God was unquestionably “audible,” it was not identical to the physical vibrations that produce regular sound. For example, one person describing his call to preach recalled, “He told me one morning in a voice as clear as mine but which seemed to be the inside of me.”

Another commentator, waxing more theological, explained both the normalcy of God speaking to his people and the process through which God’s spoken revelation could be received by human beings:

The soul is the medium between God and man. God speaks to us through our conscience and the reasoning is so loud that we seem to hear a voice. But if God gave us the power of speech, can He not talk? If a soul calls on God, having [no] other earthly hope, will God not reveal himself to such a one?

Where Bishop Payne understood the intellectual faculties of man as particularly suitable for apprehending God in the created physical universe, this former slave regarded the human conscience and soul as specifically designed for communication with God. The force of his rhetorical questions indicate that neither the ability of God to speak nor the fact that he does speak surprised the African slave, even if there was at times uncertainty about whether

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26See, for example, “I Came to Myself Shouting,” p. 30; “Fly Open for My Bride,” p. 32 (8 year old child); “I Am as Old as God,” p. 37 (13 year old child); and “To Hell with a Prayer in My Mouth,” p. 41 (12 year old child) in Clifton H. Johnson, ed., God Struck Me Dead: Religious Conversion Experiences and Autobiographies of Ex-Slaves (Cleveland: United Church Press, 1969).

27Johnson, God Struck Me Dead, p. 16.

28Ibid., emphasis added.


30Ibid., p. 2.
the voice in question was the reasoning conscience of man or the actual vox Dei from heaven.

In addition to the spoken word of God, some slaves also held that God revealed himself through signs. William Adams, a former slave, understood the revelation of God as an ability some Africans had to discern these signs. Adams relayed the following account of his ability:

How I learnt sich? Well, I’s done larn it. It come to me. When the Lawd gives sich power to a person, it jus’ comes to ’em. It am forty years ago now when I’s fuss fully realize’ dat I has de power. However, I’s allus int’rested in de workin’s of de signs. When I’s a little pickaninny, my mammy and uther folks used to talk about de signs. I hears dem talk about what happens to folks ’cause a spell was put on ’em. De old folks in dem days knows more about de signs dat de Lawd uses to reveal His laws dan de folks today. It am also true of the cullud folks in Africa, dey native land. Some of de folks laugh at dey beliefs and says it am superstition, but it am knowin’ how de Lawd reveals His laws.31

For Adams, comprehending the revelation of God was connected to knowledge of precisely how God reveals himself through natural and supernatural signs. Ostensibly, those who knew God’s ways in revelation were capable of receiving information from and about God that others, whether more modern Africans or those who derided “superstition,” were not. And against the charge of superstition, William Adams responded:

There am lots of folks, and educated ones, too, what says we-uns believes in superstition. Well, it’s ’cause dey don’t understand. ’Member de Lawd, in some of His ways, can be mysterious. De Bible says so. There am some things de Lawd wants all folks to know, some things jus’ de chosen few to know, and some things no one should know. Now, jus’ ’cause you don’t know ’bout some of de Lawd’s laws, ’taint superstition if some other person understands and believes in sich.32

In Adams’s view, and perhaps the view of many Christian slaves, the revelation of God through signs, visions and voices was not only directly given, but at times sovereignly given to a “chosen few to know.” How and who was chosen was left to the mysterious ways of God.

Slaves’ view of Scripture. While the African enslaved in the south held to a

32Ibid., p. 73.
view of divine revelation more expansive than that promulgated by their orthodox peers in the North, they did not disparage the sacred Scriptures. The Bible was almost universally held in high regard. Southern African Christians accepted that the Bible was indeed the word of God, even if they were suspicious about its misuse in the hands of some slaveholders and whites that wielded it in support of the chattel institution. John Jea's (1773–?) testimony is instructive in this regard:

After our master had been treating us in this cruel manner [severe floggings, sometimes unto death], we were obliged to thank him for the punishment he had been inflicting on us, quoting that Scripture which saith, “Bless the rod, and him that hath appointed it.” But, though he was a professor of religion, he forgot that passage which saith “God is love, and whoso dwelleth in love dwelleth in God, and God in him.” And, again, we are commanded to love our enemies; but it appeared evident that his wretched heart was hardened.\(^3\)

Despite his owner’s hypocrisy and savagery, Jea’s references to the Bible indicated both his savvy in responding against his owners by using their own instrument of oppression and his recognition that the Scriptures held the true words of God. He described his longing to hear God’s word despite his owner’s opposition:

Such was my desire of being instructed in the way of salvation, that I wept at all times I possibly could, to hear the word of God, and seek instruction for my soul; while my master still continued to flog me, hoping to deter me from going; but all to no purpose, for I was determined, by the grace of God, to seek the Lord with all my heart, and with all my mind, and with all my strength, in spirit and in truth, as you read in the Holy Bible.\footnote{\textit{Ibid.}, p. 379, emphasis added.}

Rather than denounce the Bible as fraudulent along with its white adherents, the slaves recognized that learning to read the Bible and to possess its contents for themselves was real spiritual power, whose potency was made all the more alluring by efforts to prohibit its access. So, slaves vowed to learn to read before they died so that they could read the Bible. They took advantage of every clandestine opportunity to secure lessons from favorable masters or their children, often risking legally sanctioned retribution, severe beatings and death.

By the end of slavery’s reign in America, African American doctrines of revelation were beginning to widen and make room for sources of revelation other than the Scriptures, including God continuing to reveal himself through supernatural means and interventions. This expansion of the doctrine of revelation would weaken the centrality of the Scriptures in the practice and thought of African American Christianity.

\textbf{RECONSTRUCTION, “JIM CROW” SEGREGATION, THE GREAT MIGRATION AND THE “NEW NEGRO” MOVEMENT (1865-1929)}

With both sides claiming biblical support for their cause, the Civil War actually weakened public attention to and confidence in the Scriptures. The war sufficiently undermined interpretive processes that otherwise would have checked biblical interpretations hostile to a general Christian framework, unleashing several developments and attacks that threatened historically ortho-
dox views of revelation and biblical hermeneutics. Intellectual attacks against Christianity arose within the new universities of the era. German “higher criticism” made its way to the country; and meanwhile, modernism reasserted the role of reason in epistemological matters, initiating a “figurative” hermeneutics for understanding biblical texts. In addition, the Social Gospel Movement popularized by Walter Rauschenbusch (1861-1918) and Washington Gladden (1836-1918) influenced some African Americans interested in social concerns. These movements, associated as they were with liberal theology, introduced significant doctrinal debates and changes in the American Christian communities, including that of African American Christianity.

After the Civil War, there arose initially among Methodist congregations a renewed emphasis on personal sanctification and religious zeal known as the Holiness movement. One writer described early adherents of the Holiness movement as persons who “were fundamentalists, acknowledged the role of the Holy Spirit in the believer’s life, were revivalistic, and were puritanical in their rejection of tobacco, alcohol, the theater, and cosmetics.”

Spreading from Methodists between North Carolina, New York and Missouri to Baptist and independent congregations in Michigan, South Carolina and the Mid-South, the early Holiness movement provided fertile soil for the Pentecostal movement inaugurated by the Azusa Street revival of 1906-1908. Under the preaching and leadership of William J. Seymour (1870-1922) at Azusa Street mission, “the actual Pentecostal movement originated in a revival among black Americans” and “has been called a contribution from the black community to the white one.”

**William Seymour and revelatory tongues of Pentecost.** With regard to the Bible, Holiness-Pentecostal leaders like William Seymour and Bishop Charles H. Mason (1866-1961), founder of the largest African American Pentecostal denomination, the Church of God in Christ, held a firmly evan-
gelical view. Nearly all Pentecostal denominations were founded with a belief in the inspiration and infallibility of the Scripture and the authority of Scripture over faith, conduct and reason.  

Seymour wrote emphatically, “We stand on Bible truth without compromise,” and he understood that unity in Christianity could only be achieved through faithful adherence to the Scriptures. “We recognize every man that honors the blood of Jesus Christ to be our brother, regardless of denomination, creed, or doctrine. But we are not willing to accept any errors, it matters not how charming and sweet they may seem to be. If they do not tally with the Word of God, we reject them.”

In addition, the Bible was the standard against which to judge the appropriateness of Christian conduct. “We are measuring everything by the Word, every experience must measure up with the Bible. Some say that is going too far, but if we have lived too close to the Word, we will settle that with the Lord when we meet Him in the air.”

Elements of a regulative principle regarding spiritual gifts were also found in Seymour’s writings. For example, he proclaimed, “We do not read anything in the Word about writing in unknown languages, so we do not encourage that in our meetings. Let us measure everything by the Word, that all fanaticism may be kept out of the work.”

The Bible in Pentecostalism was always to be its own interpreter by “comparing Scripture with Scripture so that there be no confusion and no deceptive spirit or wrong teaching.” With respect to the Scriptures, Seymour and other pioneers of American Pentecostalism stood, in part, as heirs to evangelical and orthodox views of the generations that preceded them.

However, the doctrine of revelation in Pentecostal circles did not end with their view of the Bible. Like generations of African Americans on southern plantations before him, Seymour believed that God’s revelatory activity continued in history, especially in visions, prophecy and the miraculous gift of speaking in tongues.

Claims to such visions were common during the Pentecostal revival of Azusa Street. One writer published in the Apostolic Faith, the main communic-
cations organ of the Azusa Street movement, wrote of a vision given to her by the Lord to explain the Spirit’s work in sanctification:

Several years ago, when I was very hungry, seeking God in all His fullness, I shut myself away in my closet one day, and the Lord gave me a wonderful revelation. As I was kneeling before my Maker, beseeching Him to show me all He expected me to be, right before my eyes I saw this wonderful vision. There appeared a man with a large, long, knotty, but straight log. The man had an axe. Did you ever see anybody score timber? He was scoring the log, and it seemed to me the axe went clear to the bit. And every time he scored, it hurt me. He scored it on four sides and then took the broad axe and whacked off the knots. Then he took a line and he made it pretty smooth. Then he raised it in the air, and taking a great plane, turned to me and said: “This is the plane of the Holy Ghost,” and he ran the plane up and down, till I could see the image of the man perfectly reflected in the face of the log, as in a mirror. He did this to all four sides. Then turning to me, he said: “Thou art all fair, my love; there is no spot in thee.”

Mrs. Hall explained that the vision indicated God’s desire to “take all the bumps, all the barnacles off” believers until they “reflect the image of the Master.”

In another edition of the Apostolic Faith, the publishers reported the account of “a sister” who received a vision regarding a call to preach:

Two days ago the power of God came over me and He said, “Whatsoever ye ask in my name believing, ye shall receive.” I said, “Give wisdom to speak to the people.” Immediately I was in a great hall with tables spread all about, and the Lord was the waiter, and I saw His beautiful, smiling face. He spoke to me and said, “I have called my friends and they did not come, therefore go out and ask everyone you find to come to the wedding.” As I looked around to see something beautiful, the scene changed and I was in a hospital and saw poor creatures dying, looking like skeletons. I thought my call was to the hospital and telephoned to know when it was open for visitors, but the Lord revealed to me that it meant all those who are sick in their souls.

Other accounts frequently appeared in the pages of the Apostolic Faith, where Seymour published them as evidence of the fulfillment of biblical

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prophecies and a continuation of the events recorded in the New Testament book of Acts. Citing trances and visions in Acts, writers in the *Apostolic Faith* wondered how anyone could doubt that Pentecost had come.\(^{46}\)

*Revelation and speaking in tongues.* Tongues, too, were seen as revelatory activity of the Holy Spirit. According to a testimony written by a Bro. H. M. Allen of Los Angeles, “I find everything the Holy Ghost speaks to me in the unknown tongues is of profound report. He has not given me liberty to tell all He has shown me in the unknown tongues, but they are the most important things that can possibly take our attention, things that are speedily coming on the whole earth.”\(^{47}\) Apparently, tongues were a medium for prophetic messages—even though they were not always immediately understood by the speaker or appropriately shared with wider audiences.

At other times, messages given through speaking in tongues confirmed the authenticity of disputed portions of Scripture. If Scripture were the final judge of all things, including things revealed by supernatural gifts as Seymour demanded, supernatural gifts were at times pressed into service to vouchsafe the veracity of the Scriptures. In answer to a dispute among some Holiness adherents regarding the acceptance of Mark 16:15-18, one writer concluded:

> We feel sure that these are the words of Jesus. The writer herself, being a great admirer of Bro. Godbey, was for some time influenced by his views in regard to the last words of our Lord as given (in Mark 16:15ff). But since being in these Holy Ghost meetings, and hearing these same words given again and again by the Spirit in unknown tongues and interpreted, all doubt has been swept away in regard to them.\(^{48}\)

The Azusa Street emphasis on spiritual gifts caused some to err in either practice or content. Early errors cropped up, warranting the attention of Seymour and the *Apostolic Faith*. For example, this correction was printed in the November 1906 edition just below the vision quoted above:

> In our last issue, there was a prophecy by Sister Mary Golmond of an earthquake coming to Los Angeles. She stated that the Lord had not showed the time, but that it would NOT come on Sunday. The word “not” was accidentally omitted.\(^{49}\)

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\(^{46}\)“In a Divine Trance,” *Apostolic Faith* 8 (April 1907): 3.

\(^{47}\)“When the Holy Ghost Speaks,” *Apostolic Faith* 2 (October 1906): 2.

\(^{48}\)“Shall We Reject Jesus’ Last Words?” *Apostolic Faith* 2 (October 1906): 3. Emphasis added.

In the October 1906 edition, a Lucy Farrow reported that, “There is a band of saints that do not read the Bible like saints. They say the Bible is for unbelievers so they do not read it at all.”\(^{50}\) Some in the Pentecostal movement apparently adopted the habit of writing in unknown tongues—a “gift” nowhere documented in the New Testament Scriptures. The first mention of this “gift” appeared without comment in the first edition of the *Apostolic Faith* in a one-sentence update of Pentecostal outpourings—“The Lord has given the gift of writing in unknown languages.”\(^{51}\) Throughout the revival, Seymour and others fought the charge of fanaticism and emotionalism from without and religious excesses from within. So, by the September 1907 edition of the paper, Seymour felt compelled to write, “We do not read anything in the Word about writing in unknown languages, so we do not encourage that in our meetings. Let us measure everything by the Word, that all fanaticism may be kept out of the work.”\(^{52}\) Despite his protests against excesses, the movement’s emphasis on supernatural gifts continued to be seen by critics as an inevitable contradiction of Scripture’s final authority and sufficiency.

When viewed from the vantage point of African folk and traditional religion, with its acceptance of visions and voices as forms of direct communication with God, Pentecostalism might not be seen as a radical departure from black religious and spiritual practice. One might conclude that the innovation of Pentecostalism was its attempt to define and defend from Scripture a practice that already existed. Such an interpretation has merit. However, assuming the high view of Scripture as the unique source of special revelation that characterized African Americans up to the late 1800s, the Pentecostal movement represented a serious departure from the reigning Reformed consensus of previous generations.

**Depression and World War II (1930–1949)**

For most of the years following Emancipation through the Second World War, the African American view of revelation remained essentially unchanged. Over this period, reliance on visions and dreams receded as more people learned to read and gained access to the Scriptures. And while some lamented a decline

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\(^{50}\) *The Work in Virginia,* *Apostolic Faith* 3 (November 1906): 3.

\(^{51}\) *Apostolic Faith* 1 (September 1906): 1.

in the recognition of the Bible's authority in the lives of African Americans, the Bible continued to hold a high place in black spiritual life. In many regards, the rise of the Ku Klux Klan, "Jim Crow" segregation, and violent assaults on the lives of African Americans forced greater reliance on sacred Scripture and the God revealed therein. Armed resistance was not a viable option available to African Americans, consequently "fight or flight" took on the form of spiritual resistance or migration to northern cities. In many cases, African Americans both resisted spiritually and fled the south as the rapid rise of black Baptist and Pentecostal churches in northern cities suggests.

Not until the rise of German higher criticism and liberal theological convictions in the latter half of the 1800s did the orthodox consensus of evangelical Protestant Christianity begin to give way. Inheriting the Enlightenment's rejection of external authority, the depravity of man and the need for external revelation, liberal theology attacked the very foundations of the long-standing orthodox consensus, leaving many disillusioned and skeptical about the existence of absolute truth, particularly in religious matters. With the collapse of orthodox views of revelation and the abandonment of objective truth came the erection of a liberal view of revelation that placed emphasis on rationalism as the method for obtaining truth and proposed an optimistic view of human reason such that subjective human experience and personal encounters with God became the modes of divine revelation.

The fountainhead of the emergent liberal school of theology was Friedrich Schleiermacher (1768-1834), who defined religion as "the feeling of dependence we have for God" and sought to defend the Christian faith from rationalism and traditionalism by "placing the authority of Christianity in the inner self." While Schleiermacher’s attempt at a radical subjective view of revelation

53Consider, for example, the comments of Hester Hunter: “It been de rule to follow what de Bible say do, in dat day en’ time. En’ now, it seem like de rule must be, do like you see de other fellow is doin’.” In Mellon, Bullwhip Days, p. 190.


and authority ultimately failed, liberal theology nevertheless found a cozy resting place in late 1800s America and vied for the dominant Christian interpretation through the mid-1900s.\(^{57}\) During its heyday between 1930 and 1960, liberal theological inquiry and method made inroads into the African American church by welcoming aspiring African American churchmen into liberally-inclined academic institutions, as notable conservative seminaries and divinity schools gripped by racist prejudice shut their doors to black applicants. It was in this social and academic context that Howard Thurman contributed to the devolution of African American theology and the doctrine of revelation.

**Howard Thurman: Revelation and mysticism.** In the history of theology in the African American church, Howard Thurman (1900-1981) stands as perhaps the most innovative theological thinker. While his enslaved forebears held that revelation through visions and voices possessed an inner dimension, it was Thurman who successfully supplanted orthodox eighteenth- and nineteenth-century commitments to the authority and sufficiency of Scripture with a person-centered and mystical doctrine of revelation and authority. In doing so, Thurman became the wellspring of a theologically liberal view of revelation, and consequently, of theological liberalism in the African American church.

The impetuses for leaving behind earlier doctrines of revelation were probably evident as early as Thurman’s youth. Growing up, Thurman’s privately religious mother, while not vocal about her Christian beliefs, nevertheless greatly impressed Thurman with her sturdy faith and fervency in prayer.\(^{58}\) Her example likely planted the seeds for what Thurman later regarded as the private dimensions of religious experience. In his autobiography, *With Head and Heart*, Thurman also recalled schoolyard disputes and divisions over baptism between local Baptist and Methodist school children.\(^{59}\) Thurman’s learned proclivity toward privatized individual faith, combined with these schoolyard divisions, left him with a disdain for sectarian practices that divided people rather than uniting them. For Thurman, creedal formulations and concern for orthodoxy were the main culprits in this division. In his opinion, religion had

\(^{57}\)Ibid., p. 62.
\(^{59}\)Ibid., p. 10.
I Once Was Blind, but Now I See

become too “identified with sectarianism, and its essence so distorted by it” that Thurman felt compelled to devote his entire self to furthering “the one-ness of the human quest.”

Academically, Thurman found guidance and mentorship from George Cross, a professor of systematic theology at Rochester Theological Seminary in Rochester, New York. Cross steeped Thurman in the broader liberal understandings of the day, and encouraged his young student to “trust and value the insights of his own personality, such that it serves as the interpreter of religion that provides new meanings and directions for the faith.” In other words, personal thoughts, experiences and insights, frequently referred to as “Personality” in Thurman’s writings, replaced the Bible as the authoritative standard for interpreting and judging religious truth. Cross’s emphasis on personality aligned well with Thurman’s nascent inclination toward a more privatized, less doctrinal basis for religious experience.

Later, while a professor and dean of Marsh Chapel at Boston University, Thurman’s view of revelation crystallized and found clear expression in his classroom lectures on the spiritual life and spiritual disciplines. He regarded “the life of the spirit and the meaning of religious experience [as] intensely personal. It communicated itself in certain worship settings . . . but it was not the sort of thing that one talked about. One spoke out of it, and one undertook to live out of it, and react out of it, but to make it literal and regularly accessible . . . would be difficult indeed.” It was through the personality and through religious experience (direct encounters with God) that revelation primarily took place. Thurman believed God revealed himself in nature and in the religious texts of all religions. However, the filter of individual personality was necessary for understanding any revelation no matter its source. Here, Thurman’s view of revelation followed the theological Personalism of Edgar Sheffield Brightman (1884-1953) and Brightman’s teacher Borden Parker Bowne (1847-1910), whose “influence on many generations of students at the Boston University School of Theology . . . contributed decisively to liberalizing the

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60Ibid., p. 199.
62Thurman, With Head and Heart, p. 177, emphasis added.
63Ibid., pp. 7, 265.
leadership of the Methodist Church and influenced prominent Southern Baptist E. Y. Mullins (1860-1928).

This philosophical orientation led Thurman to a number of conclusions regarding the sources and nature of revelation that stood in marked contrast to the orthodox view of the Bible that preceded him. For instance, Thurman insisted that other religions and religious texts were also true. Thurman's goal was not to demonstrate the truthfulness of Christianity and the falsehood of all other religious forms, but to seek the “essence” of Christianity, and therein, all religions. While he held that Christianity was the highest expression of truth, he mounted no apologetic stance to defend that claim. Instead, he fell back on a formulation that for him held more unifying potential—“what is true in any religion is in the religion because it is true, it is not true because it is in the religion.”

By contrast, Jupiter Hammon, Lemuel Haynes (1753-1833), Richard Allen (1760-1831) and Daniel A. Payne could hardly be imagined supporting such a view.

Not surprisingly, Thurman’s doctrine of revelation led him to a low view of the Bible and of Jesus as well. One biographer summarized Thurman’s view of the Bible as “a collection of books which reveals the drama of God making covenant with a people (Israel), and the prophetic interpretation of the meaning of this relationship given through the teachings and person of Jesus. Jesus and the Bible, according to Thurman, are not the final source of authority for religion. They are a particular way to the authority.”

Regarded in historic Christianity as the authoritative, unique and specific revelation of God, the Bible and Jesus became insufficient instruments and intermediaries to an intensely personal and privatized authority in Thurman’s theology. Thurman held that Jesus was an example, “the example which inspires”; and, Jesus “exercises a moral and spiritual influence,” even revealing how personality is perfected and how life should be lived. But nowhere in Thurman’s writings does Jesus appear as the revelation of God to be worshiped and imitated. Accordingly, Thurman believed that “the church should not

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65 Thurman, With Head and Heart, p. 144.
66 Smith, Howard Thurman, p. 86, emphasis added.
67 Ibid., pp. 67, 71-72.
limit its sources of religious insight to Jesus and the Bible. Other religions’ faith claims, materials from the arts, and any discovery which opens a door to knowing God are useful to Christian nurture.\(^{68}\)

Through his work as educator, preacher and pastor, Howard Thurman delivered the mood and thought of liberal theology to the African American church. Hailed by \textit{Life Magazine} in 1953 as one the twelve most influential religious leaders of his era and \textit{Ebony Magazine} in 1954 as one of the ten greatest Negro preachers in the United States, he influenced a generation of African American churchmen, pastors and preachers.\(^{69}\) His view of revelation was essentially subjective, rejecting the authority of externally revealed texts and centering on the person’s experience as the primary conduit for receiving revelation of God. Scripture was regarded as a useful guide in Thurman’s opinion, but not authoritatively or regulative in any sense. The Bible was a framework, a grid through which an individual read her or his experience. And insofar as the Bible and a denominational allegiance was only a framework, they were to be jettisoned when the individual eclipsed them in her or his understanding of religious experience. Thurman’s theology may be regarded as the head of a consciously liberal stream of African American Christian theology.

**CIVIL RIGHTS ERA (1950-1979)**

The Civil Rights era was a period of explosive change and conflict in the United States. Civic upheaval and protest ruptured the country’s long-standing racial caste system known as segregation. The nonviolent protests typified by Martin Luther King Jr. (1929-1968) disturbed the slumbering conscience of a society drowsy with racial indifference and intolerance. And on the heels of nonviolent civil protest came the politically radical wake up call of Black Power, which demanded the liberation of black peoples “by any means necessary.” The Black Power advocates of the 1960s, including Malcolm X (1925-1965) and the Nation of Islam, Stokely Carmichael (1941-1998) and the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, Black Panthers like Eldridge Cleaver (1935-1998) and Huey P. Newton (1942-1989), cultural nationalists Amiri Baraka (b. 1934) and Maulana Karenga (b. 1941), and

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\(^{68}\)Ibid., p. 87.  
\(^{69}\)Ibid., p. 192.
others, called black Americans to reject the oppressive structures, culture and worldviews of white America and to embrace a self-defining blackness as a beautiful and legitimate expression of black life.

During this period, with the burning force of an inner-city race riot, Black Theology erupted onto the theological scene. Black Theology demanded a radical reformulation of theological questions and insights that would mirror the call for Black Power heard in the streets of America's cities. The fuse that lit this explosion was James Cone's *Black Theology and Black Power*. Cone endeavored to bring to theological discourse “a special attitude permeated with black consciousness.” In a sense, Cone's theological speculations began at the same place where Howard Thurman's reflections began: both men were prompted by a concern for whether or not Christianity had anything to say about the condition of suffering and oppression experienced by African Americans and other oppressed people. While Thurman ultimately opted for a mystical, individualistic set of responses to that driving question, Cone centered his theological ideas on the group experience of blacks during the segregated period of the Black Power movement.

*James Cone, Black Theology, and the doctrine of revelation.* James Cone grew up during the 1940s and early 1950s—the age of Jim Crow—in the “Cotton Belt” or “colored” section of Bearden, Arkansas, a rural town of 1,200 residents. Acquainted with the prejudice and racial caste of the era and region, Cone “encountered Jesus through rousing sermons, fervent prayers, spirited gospel songs, and the passionate testimonies of the people” at Macedonia AME Church in Bearden. The faith he acquired at Macedonia provided “a powerful antidote against the belief that blacks were less than whites.” Young Cone struggled with a series of inadequacies and contradictions he encountered in Bearden—white churches claiming to love the Lord and to welcome all people while simultaneously practicing segregation; spiritually resilient black churches that nonetheless repressed intellectual exploration. As a recently graduated teacher of systematic theology, Cone found Christian inspiration in the activist theology of Martin Luther King Jr. and a renewed appreciation of his blackness in the critique of Malcolm X (1925-1965) and the Black Power movement he spawned. In 1967, following the Detroit riots, the

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dual influences of King and Malcolm coalesced in Cone’s *Black Theology and Black Power*, an attempt to apply critical theological reflection to the struggle for racial freedom among black people in America.\(^71\)

Concerned as he was with the political, economic and social condition of African Americans during the 1960s, Cone offered a decidedly different view of divine revelation than that held by the generations of preachers and theologians before him. Rejecting the previous orthodox view that divine revelation consisted of God revealing himself in nature and Scripture, Cone insisted that God’s self-disclosure must be found only in the person of Jesus Christ and that Jesus can only be found *in the context of liberation*.\(^72\) Cone asserted that revelation “meant a manifestation of God in human history,” where God meets humanity in the concrete human situation, “not as an idea or concept that is self-evidently true” and certainly not in the limiting and inadequate formulation of “revelation as the word of God, witnessed in Scripture and defined by the creeds and dogmas of Western Christianity.”\(^73\)

Cone presupposed an inseparable connection between the doctrine of revelation and the act of liberation. He wrote:

> To know God is to know God’s work of liberation in behalf of the oppressed. God’s revelation means liberation, an emancipation from death-dealing political, economic, and social structures of society. This is the essence of biblical revelation.

> There is no revelation of God without a condition of oppression which develops into a situation of liberation. Revelation is only for the oppressed of the land. God comes to those who have been enslaved and abused and declares total identification with their situation, disclosing to them the rightness of their emancipation on their own terms.\(^74\)

> “In a word,” Cone argued, “God’s revelation means liberation—nothing more, nothing less.”\(^75\) This notion of revelation as liberation belonged uniquely to the oppressed of a society and included the benefit of God’s unadulterated af-

\(^73\)Ibid.
\(^74\)Ibid., pp. 45-46.
\(^75\)Ibid., p. 46.
filiation with that people in their struggle. The definition and purpose of revelation was to explain how God, Jesus and Christianity were relevant to the struggles and hopes of African Americans and to provide what Cone labeled an “epistemological justification of the claims of a community about ontological reality.”

Indeed, Cone’s Black Theology held that blackness was his ultimate reality and the controlling principle and experience in any Christian doctrine of revelation. Blackness, Cone theorized, had “very little to do with skin color”; rather it was the concrete identification of an individual with the needs, means and aims of the oppressed striving for freedom. To be “black,” then, was to take the side of the oppressed against the injustice they faced. To think of blackness in Black Theology was to think about an “ultimate reality” that superintended meaning, values and revelation in a way never understood in previous generations. Cone wrote that there was “no ‘abstract’ revelation, independent of human experiences, to which theologians can appeal for evidence of what they say about the gospel.”

Cone wrote that there was “no ‘abstract’ revelation, independent of human experiences, to which theologians can appeal for evidence of what they say about the gospel.” He proffered an “anthropocentric point of departure for theology,” and, more specifically, a point of departure that featured at its center the black man as representative oppressed man. Cone’s hermeneutical approach and the doctrine of revelation. Not surprisingly, Cone’s hermeneutical approach to theology resulted in both a significantly lowered view of special revelation and a drastically amended understanding of general revelation. Cone posited six related sources for constructing a Black Theology of liberation, including: black experience, black history, black culture, revelation (by which Cone meant God’s liberating action in space-time history in the person of Jesus Christ who sides with the black oppressed), Scripture and tradition. Cone construed the sources as “interdependent” and, more or less, equally important, but argued that “revelation is [not] comprehensible from a black theological perspective without a prior understanding of the concrete manifestation of revelation in the black community as seen in the black experience, black history, and black culture.” So practically speaking,
the black community’s experience, history and culture controlled any under-
standing of Jesus, Scripture and tradition and were the medium through
which revelation was to be understood. The theologian’s task was to bring the
concerns and perspectives of a community to the Scriptures, holding in ten-
sion the concerns of the biblical and the contemporary community. The theo-
logian was to do this by creating

a theological norm in harmony with the black condition and biblical revelation.
On the one hand, the norm must not be a private norm of an individual theolo-
gian but must arise from the black community itself. This means that there can
be no norm for the black community that does not take seriously its reality in
the world and what that means in a white racist society. Theology cannot be in-
different to the importance of blackness by making some kind of existential leap
beyond blackness to an undefined universalism. It must take seriously the ques-
tions which arise from black existence and not even try to answer white ques-
tions, questions coming from the lips of those who know oppressed existence
only through abstract reflections.81

Cone’s understanding of what black history, experience and culture entailed
was an extremely narrow conception. He viewed black experience in singular
terms—“a life of humiliation and suffering” and an existence “where babies are
tortured, women are raped, and men are shot” in a system of white racism.82
Cone seemed unable to imagine a view of blackness not bound by extreme suf-
ferring. This framework effectively limited Scripture and tradition—two of the
three sources of historical orthodox theology—to instrumental roles in service
to political interests of the community. And, by demanding that the norms for
theological inquiry must be based in group interests and group questions,
Cone’s doctrine of revelation consigned the more individualistic questions of
salvation and personal communion with God to nonexistence.

View of the Bible. Where individual personality in the theology of Howard
Thurman rendered Scripture a “useful guide” for individual spiritual explora-
tion, it was the collective experience of oppression and the struggle for free-
dom that subjugated the Bible in the theological framework of James Cone.
Black Theology reduced the Bible—once believed to be God’s special revela-

81Ibid., p. 36.
82Cone, Black Theology of Liberation, pp. 23-24.
tion of himself—to "a guide for checking the contemporary interpretation of God's revelation, making certain that our interpretation is consistent with the biblical witness"; it disregarded any claims to infallibility and inspiration. "God was not the author of the Bible, nor were its writers mere secretaries." Here, Cone aligned himself with the neo-orthodox views of Scripture and revelation, and, by mischaracterizing orthodox views of inspiration as reducing the writers of Scripture to "mere secretaries," set himself against the earlier positions of predecessors like Lemuel Haynes, Jupiter Hammon, Daniel Alexander Payne, and even revolutionary preachers admired by Cone like Nat Turner (1800-1831) and Denmark Vessey (?-1822).

Cone's Black Theology judged debates over infallibility irrelevant and touted an instrumental view of Scripture that deemed the sole criteria of "whether it [Scripture] can serve as a weapon against oppressors" as supremely important. This was true of Cone's view of tradition as well. "Literalism" enabled the justification of "all kinds of political oppression in the name of God and country" and obscured the essential meaning of the biblical text and true biblical inspiration—in Cone's view, black liberation. He concluded, "Black theology is concerned only with the tradition of Christianity that is usable in the black liberation struggle." Real inspiration consisted of the encounter between community and the resurrected Jesus who calls the oppressed to "risk everything for earthly freedom." With the advent of Black Theology, Scripture was vanquished from its once vaulted place as the special voice of God ruling and interpreting matters of faith and conduct and reduced to the handmaiden of liberation ethics. Perhaps Cone stated his position most clearly in the preface to his later work, God of the Oppressed:

I still regard the Bible as an important source of my theological reflections, but not the starting point. The black experience and the Bible together in dialectical tension serve as my point of departure today and yesterday. The order is significant. I am black first—and everything else comes after that. This means that I read the Bible through the lens of a black tradition of struggle and not as the objective

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83Ibid., p. 31, emphasis added. Cone also observed a distinction between the black view of infallibility and reliability of Scripture. Without contending for the infallibility of Scripture, black people trusted in the reliability of Scripture in revealing Jesus Christ. This, Cone concluded, was the basis for the sustained authority of the Bible in the black experience. See James H. Cone, God of the Oppressed (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1997), p. 102.
84Cone, Black Theology of Liberation, pp. 31-33, 35.
Word of God. The Bible therefore is one witness to God’s empowering presence in human affairs, along with other important testimonies.  

*View of general revelation.* Previous generations of theologians wrestled with the question of whether or not any true and accurate knowledge of God could be discerned from sources other than the Bible. Cone regarded the question as irrelevant and simultaneously called theologians to discern God’s presence and self-disclosure in contemporary problems related to human affairs. During the Black Power movement, the major human drama requiring the reflection of theologians was the fight for freedom among African Americans, where the innate desire for autonomy was fully displayed. Cone defined the concept of general revelation as “a sense of the presence of God, a feeling of awe . . . that makes [human beings] creatures who always rebel against domestication." He wrote:

According to black theology, the idea of general revelation is primarily applicable to oppressed peoples. To the extent that we are creatures who rebel against ungodly treatment, God’s self-revelation is granted. All human acts against alienative powers of enslavement are acts of God. We do not need to read the Bible to know that human enslavement is ungodly, and that slaves will do everything possible to break their chains. God has created all persons in such a way that none will cooperate contentedly in their own oppression. We are not creatures who can be domesticated. In this sense, whether all persons know what some Christians call special revelation, they nevertheless know God—that is, it is their identity with the divine that makes all slaves rebel against their masters. 

The oppressed community’s impulse toward liberation unveiled God as liberator and friend of the oppressed. Cone summarized black theology’s view of general revelation as that revelation given to all persons indicating that “human oppression is contradictory to the idea of the holy, and every blow for liberation is the work of God. God will not be without a witness." 

However, this same general revelation of God as liberator simultaneously uncovered the sinfulness of oppression and the oppressor. General revelation, then, pardoned and affirmed the oppressed and condemned the oppressor, an

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85Cone, *God of the Oppressed*, p. xi.
86Cone, *Black Theology of Liberation*, p. 58.
87Ibid., p. 50.
88Ibid., p. 51.
application of moral law diametrically opposed to Bishop Payne’s assertion one hundred years earlier that the moral law of God was no respecter of persons being applied equally and evenly to both slave and slaveholder. The multifaceted character of God articulated by Daniel A. Payne vanished from view in James Cone’s doctrine of general revelation.

END OF CENTURY, POSTMODERN ERA (1980-PRESENT)

The turbulence and tumult of the Civil Rights and Black Power eras gave way to the individualistic concerns of the 1970s and 1980s. The generation of “me, myself and I” replaced the “power to the people” generation. As people dropped social concerns and became more solipsistic, and as material prosperity flowed over the country, so the theological interests of Christianity shifted to more therapeutic and postmodern questions.

Reemergence of charismatic gifts: Word of knowledge, word of prophecy. In the wake of Black Theology and liberal subjective views of revelation, the modern Charismatic movement arose. The Charismatic movement, typified by popular televangelists like Frederick K. C. Price (1932-) and Creflo A. Dollar Jr. (1962-), had its origins in the Holiness and Pentecostal efforts between the 1870s and early 1900s. Many envisioned themselves as the “third wave” of a divine act of God to restore the apostolic church—beginning with Pentecost in Jerusalem, succeeded by the Holiness and Pentecostal experiences, and culminating in the modern Charismatic reforms. In 1943, the Pentecostal forbearers of the Charismatics broke away from their socially more militant fundamentalist siblings and found a measure of mainstream acceptance in the National Association of Evangelicals. By 1975, the movement once viewed as crude fundamentalism or backward Pentecostalism came of age and found a respectable corner office in most major denominations—including Roman Catholicism.89

The Charismatic era ushered in the nadir of African American views on the doctrine of revelation. This deep low-point is characterized by an ambivalence not known in previous generations who were either committed to defending the orthodox perspective or wholly committed to undermining it. The charis-

matic generation lapsed into a muddled confusion of both poles.

On the one hand, proponents of the movement teach an “evangelical” view of divine revelation. Most, like their Pentecostal predecessors, would identify the Bible as the divine “Word of God.” Many would subscribe to some understanding of the Bible as authoritative for faith and conduct. For example, the websites for the two leaders mentioned earlier, Price and Dollar, include a brief statement of faith affirming the inspiration of Scripture. Price also acknowledges the Bible to be the “authoritative Word of God.”

On the other hand, at least as a natural result of their practices, many Charismatic believers do not hold the Scriptures to be sufficient for all matters of faith and conduct. No reference to the sufficiency of Scripture is mentioned in any of the four statements offered by Dollar and Price. In the view of many “word of faith” Charismatic leaders, God is believed to be “doing a new thing” among his people, and the traditions and doctrines of previous Christians are often treated with disdain.

While the ambivalence created by Charismatic thinkers is distinct from the commitments of both the conservative orthodox and the liberal heterodox schools that preceded it, the uncertainty is nonetheless the logical consequence of previous generations’ efforts at reformulating or attacking the doctrine of revelation. For example, though the early Pentecostals saw tongues as an evidence of Spirit baptism—a soteriological perspective and not primarily a revelatory emphasis—they nevertheless opened the door to the Charismatic promotion of all spiritual gifts, including those affecting the doctrine of revelation. The innovation introduced by Charismatic reforms expanded the doctrine of revelation to include direct revelations through the gifts of prophecy and words of knowledge.

The African American versions of these doctrines rested, historically, upon two pillars—the early African slave’s belief in direct communication from God through visions and voices, and the Holiness-Pentecostal declaration that

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90The statement of faith for Creflo Dollar Ministries and World Changers International Church reads, “we believe . . . the Bible was written and inspired by God.” The statement of faith for Fred Price’s Ever Increasing Faith Ministries reads, “We believe the Bible to be the inspired and only infallible authoritative Word of God”; and the doctrinal statement for his Fellowship of Inner-City Word of Faith Ministries includes, “All scripture is given by inspiration of God.” Downloaded from <www.worldchangers.org>, <www.creflodollarministries.org>, <www.fcwfm.org> and <www.faithdome.org> on September 3, 2004.
tongues and other gifts were for the modern church. Both of these earlier theological perspectives provided fertile ground for the reception of teachings stressing ongoing divine revelation from God to his people.

Creflo Dollar provides an example of belief in continuing revelation through prophecy. Interested readers may access a listing of his prophecies at his ministry website.91 Dollar is to be commended for putting his prophecies in writing by date and making them available to the public. In doing so, he makes himself somewhat accountable for his utterances and sayings.

However, a reading of these prophecies reveals Dollar’s belief in continued revelation by God and an underlying deemphasis on the authority of Scripture. The website opens with the following definition of prophecy: "Prophecy is a divinely inspired Word from the Lord spoken through a man or woman of God." The site continues, "Prophecy is an exciting part of God’s plan for getting things done in the earth and the words He speaks come to pass in the lives of those who hear and release their faith for the manifestation."92 This definition of prophecy emphasizes continuing inspiration from the Lord and what might be called a functional or pragmatic role of prophecy, "getting things done in the earth." But unlike biblical prophecy, where God “makes known the end from the beginning” (Is 46:10) and brings to pass whatever he wills, Dollar emphasizes that this “divinely inspired Word from the Lord” requires a “release [of] faith for the manifestation” or fulfillment of the prophecy.

For example, in a prophecy called “The Great Release,” Dollar states:

“Now you are about to enter into a phase of great release for all of the pressure and trials that this day will hold. For My Word is at hand, and it is on the line, and it will stand. But through you I’ll show My master plan to this generation of this land. So today, is a day of turning points in your way—to move from that which has caused you to sway.

“Now rejoice and be exceedingly glad, for all of your enemies will be had. And I will wash your troubles away. But now know that this day will not be like others. And this time that you have gathered will push your trials further. Now prepare yourself in praise this day, for I will surely show you My way—a way that will lead you into a place—a place ordained for this very day.

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92 Ibid. Emphasis in original.
“So again, I say unto you, rejoice with all your might. Rejoice and begin to praise Me! And begin to praise Me, and I'll show up and set you free! So I am about to sit on you now, and when I am done, you won't have to wonder how, for the wisdom that I'll impart will be used to benefit you. And after you understand this day, you're going to know I'm going to bring you through,” saith the Spirit of God!93

Note that Dollar claims that the Spirit of God is speaking this message and his other prophecies. He contends that this is direct revelation from God, revelation of a “master plan” to be shown through Dollar's hearers.

In another prophecy, Dollar indicates that the plan of God involves the United States as a special country and foretells a time where many will turn from sin and be born again:

And as you seek Me and as you pray unto Me, then you allow Me to show you, and then you'll begin to see that I have not forsaken this land. I will not move from this country for it is in My plan. But now I must ask that you yield yourselves to Me; for there are many things in this day and time that I'd like for you to see. For I'll begin to show you and you'll speak it out loud and men will begin to tremble. And they'll cease in all of the foul.

The things that are foul in this place, that I have ordained as My land of grace, I'm about to turn around this day through you. Open your eyes and see and know. For these are the days where you'll cause the enemy to tremble. Because of what I'll show you and what you'll see, others will be born again and their peace will be sound and strong, and ready for these last days. And you'll find that it will become easy to persuade others to go this way.94

On the whole, the catalog of prophecies provided by Dollar at his ministry website contain general promises of blessing and prosperity. The prophecies allude to a coming time of progress and prosperity and sometimes to a period of widespread revival, evangelistic activity and conversion. For example, a prophecy called “A Great Revival” contends:

A great revival amongst My church I will begin. For many have known Me, accepted Me, pray to Me and call Me Lord. I love thee more and more. So forget

93Prophecy delivered by Dr. Creflo A. Dollar on May 20, 2007, 11:00 a.m. at World Changers Church International, Atlanta, Ga.
94Prophecy delivered by Dr. Creflo A. Dollar on April 29, 2007, at 7:30 p.m., World Changers Church International, Atlanta, Ga. Emphasis in the original.
not this night and send all your worries and concerns to flight. For I can speak to you words that will direct you, lead you and guide you. If you would call upon Me in praise and great joy, submit unto Me, come with humble hearts and walk in child-like faith, I’ll cause these days, hours, minutes and seconds, I’ll call this time to be more glorious and awesome. And I’ll give you joy that you can’t express. For these are My days when I will increase in My power, in My manifestation in these last precious hours. For My Son will return and no man knows the day or the hour, but I will reveal to My prophets and like in other times they’ll know and you will. So, prepare yourselves. Look up and expect for these days will be great times of victory. Don’t focus on the judgment that’s outside the cloud. Focus on My Word and I will cause rough areas in your life to be mild.\textsuperscript{95}

But note that these prophecies sometimes go well beyond general statements regarding a period of blessing. In the prophecy above, Dollar maintains, under a claim of the Spirit of God’s inspiration, that prophets and the church in these times will know even the time for the return of the Son. In effect, this prophecy supplants the Lord’s teaching that no angel or man—not even Jesus himself—would know the day or hour of his return.\textsuperscript{96} In contradicting the very words of Jesus, Dollar’s “prophecy” and “revelation” force an unpleasant recognition—either the “prophet” speaks falsely things God has not said,\textsuperscript{97} or he is indeed a prophet and at least some portion of the Scripture can be said to be in error or abrogated. This view of revelation, along with many of its entailments, departs significantly from the historical understanding of African Americans up to the early Holiness-Pentecostal movement.

\textbf{SUMMARIZING THE DECLINE}

This chapter began with a brief look at the orthodox consensus that defined the doctrine of revelation at the advent of African American Christianity. That doctrine held a two-source view of revelation, with general revelation submitting to the superiority of the infallible, inspired special revelation of the Bible. Over the course of two and a half centuries, African American theology fell from the high view of revelation found in men like Jupiter Hammon to the nadir of ambiguity found today. As the generations from Thurman to Cone

\textsuperscript{95}Prophecy delivered by Dr. Creflo A. Dollar on April 27, 2005, 7:00 p.m., College Park, Ga.
\textsuperscript{96}See, for example, Mt 24:36 and Lk 12:40.
\textsuperscript{97}See, for example, Deut 13:1-4; 18:21-22; and Jer 28:9.
hacked away at the pillars of the previous orthodoxy, the epistemological certa-
tainty once accompanying that orthodoxy collapsed without support.

From Jupiter Hammon to James Cone to contemporary word-of-faith
leaders, the story of the doctrine of revelation in the African American church
has been one of widening and weakening the earlier evangelical tradition. The
earliest African American Christian forbearers were people who held to a high
view of Scripture as God’s special revelation and an orthodox view of general
revelation. One found that position in the Reformed theologies of occasional
preachers and poets like Hammon, long-time pastors like Lemuel Haynes,
and in the reverence for the Bible held among the most oppressed and uned-
ucated Christian slave. With the notable exception of the enslaved African's
belief that God revealed himself through visions, voices and dreams—a belief
not inconsistent with the biblical record—African American Christians and
the independent black church before Emancipation constituted, by most meas-
ures, a church with a view of divine revelation in sync with the longer 1800-
year history of Christianity.

However, after Emancipation, the Azusa Street revival and the consequent
rise of Pentecostalism prompted a significant redefinition of the doctrine of
revelation in some African American communities. Azusa Street initiated and
Pentecostalism codified the view that God was still pouring out supernatural
gifts like tongues and prophecy on the church. The Holiness-Pentecostal em-
phasis on supernatural gifts, and Seymour’s assumption that God was restor-
ing the true apostolic church through the Azusa Street movement, opened the
door for challenging the previous consensus that the Bible was a closed canon,
a challenge that eventually contributed to the questioning of the final author-
ity and sufficiency of the Scriptures as the only definitive and reliable inspired
message of God. The Pentecostal movement ushered in the present-day Char-
ismatic movement, which finally converted the earlier movement’s attention
to spiritual gifts into an expanded doctrine of revelation that included revela-

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98 See, for example, the visions of and voices recorded in several conversion stories in the New Testa-
ment book of Acts, including Paul’s conversion (Acts 9:1-18), Peter’s vision and visit to the Gentile
Cornelius’s house (Acts 10), and Paul’s call to minister in Corinth (Acts 18:9-11). For a good con-
temporary treatment of the compatibility between orthodox Christian belief and the continuation of
visions, prophecy, etc., see Wayne A. Grudem, Systematic Theology (Grand Rapids: Zondervan,
1995). For a cessationist response to Grudem, see O. Palmer Robertson, The Final Word: A Biblical
At the same time that some communities were widening their understanding of revelation, theological liberalism launched an intense assault on the nature of the Bible and on its suitability as an epistemological foundation. Previous views of inspiration and infallibility were rejected outright and replaced with mystical quests for the "essence of Christianity," the historical Jesus, and for liberation theologies. For many, earlier Christian claims that the Bible possessed objective, exclusive truth were either untenable or irrelevant.

For some, the doctrine of revelation required no serious defense or study. That God revealed himself could be assumed, and how God made himself known might be as varied as how each individual person learns best. But if the doctrine of revelation is as inconsequential as some in the post-Emancipation African American church and academy seem to have treated it, how then can anyone know with certainty who God is and what God has said? And what effect does such a porous perspective have on the church and individuals?

The doctrine of revelation affects every sphere of Christian thought and conduct. To illustrate this point, consider three profound results that followed the widening doctrine of revelation and the weakening view of Scripture.

First, the Bible continued to be revered but no longer trusted as sufficient for all matters of faith and conduct in the African American church. If new revelations were possible, and if previous understandings of the Bible were wrong as liberal theology claimed, then the Bible could no longer speak to the needs of contemporary society and no longer possessed a relevant message. Consequently, many churches revered the Bible but never read it and certainly never used it to guide the details of daily church and personal life. And with the Bible deemed insufficient (whether explicitly or implicitly through indifference), fads and wrong ideas about how to govern itself preyed upon the vulnerable church while sometimes radical, sometimes subtle hermeneutical approaches undermined any objective authority possessed by the Bible. Individual Christians and entire congregations became susceptible to non-

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99 James Cone assumes, for example, that Jesus is the revelation of God and that Jesus is found revealing himself in the struggle of black people for complete liberation. Cone merely asserts this view without offering any real justification or defense for why such a view is desirable or necessary.

100 This seems to be the practical conclusion of Howard Thurman’s view of revelation, as dependent as it was on his view of personality and the importance of individual spiritual encounters.
biblical and anti-biblical worldviews, philosophies and moralities. With the insufficiency of Scripture established in practice, even taught explicitly in some cases, who could oppose the entrance of heretical ideas and claims? Without an objective standard or rule against which teachers were judged, disputes over doctrine seemed to many a wearisome exercise in futility with no possible solution and no obvious benefits. As Bruce Fields observed, “Experience, apart from the transcendent revelation embodied in Scripture and practiced in the community yielded to Scripture, cannot itself be evaluated. It simply rules in the interpretive role just as those with the loudest voices or most persuasive rhetoric may gain the position of defining what genuine life should look like in a given community.”

Second, the African American church finds itself without a standard or rule against which to judge “new” revelations. If the Bible is no longer the clearest or most complete revelation of the mind of God, then the random, often contradictory, and failed “prophecies” and “divine utterances” of many preachers cannot be checked. Adherents, in order to maintain membership in the church community and to find another source of authority, vest the preacher or “prophet” with a kind of authority once reserved for the Scriptures. So rather than find the truth in the sacred pages, the whimsy, insight, and charisma of a beloved pastor or leader become the final arbiters of divine truth, such that some African American Christians are now as likely to say they believe certain things about God “because my pastor said so” as they are likely to say “because the Scriptures teach it.” Where the early church members searched the Scripture to test the veracity of the apostles’ teachings (Acts 17:10-11), the present-day church offers only passive inspection, often accepting a church leader’s opinion as a satisfactory basis for defining core belief and conduct.

Third, this widened and weakened doctrine of revelation resulted in weaker, less biblical preaching. Increasingly, the kind of expository preaching modeled by Haynes gave way to the use of the Bible as a prop or convenience for sermons and speeches filled with the speaker’s commentary on contemporary issues. Uncovering the meaning of a passage of Scripture and applying it to one’s hearers fell out of fashion and political sermons emptied of biblical

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Theology took center stage. The very notion of a "good preacher" morphed from the faithful communication of God's word (even where knowledge of Scripture was extremely meager, as in the case of many slave preachers) to the witty, politically relevant social commentary. To be sure, African American preachers since the abolitionist movement spoke against the political concerns of their day. What was new by the Civil Rights era was the absence or radical refashioning of gospel priorities. The weakened doctrine of revelation undermined faithfulness to Scripture and the counsel of God declared in its pages. Most tragic of all, the preaching of the gospel vanished from many church pulpits, with faithful attendees in many churches never coming to know the wonderful God that makes himself known in the pages of holy writ. After all, how can one know God unless he reliably reveals himself?