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**The Negative Effects of Abusive/Legalistic
Christian Religion: A Call to Prophetic and
Covenantal Theology**

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I. Deconstructing Religious Legalism

One of many classes that I teach is a World Religion class. In some of our early sessions which I label, *Why Religion: A Deconstructive and Reconstructive Theology* our class discusses the different perspectives and functions of religion (please note that I will use religion and theology interchangeably throughout this essay although technically, religion relates to practices and rituals while theology relates to the ideas and concepts that undergird those practices and rituals). One assertion is that religion and theology at its core is mythical and has been used or perceived by some to be an

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“opium of the masses.”² Another concept is that theology is very practical and is used to give people the mental, emotional and even physical strength that is needed to deal with the harsh realities of human life on earth. The other idea we discuss, which I argue is the most prevalent, is theology as a transcendental hope in another life beyond the life in this realm and sphere of existence. Under this school of thought, the fundamental cause of religion is not to assist us in a coping or conquering methodology that equips us to prosper and progress in this life, but moreover, an insurance policy that guarantees us a utopian, paradise laced existence in whatever “life” is after we leave earth.

It plagued me, as a child of the Black Church Tradition in the late 20th and early 21st century, to discover that this prevalent theological sentiment was the one that I would spend a lot of my academic and ministerial life attempting to deconstruct. During my training in seminary and on countless street corners that I would frequent, I found that the transcendental theology was connected to notions of Hell, Fire and Brimstone, Eternal Damnation and other antiquated theories that are often times extra-biblical and rooted in fear mongered, greedy, irrelevant, legalistic and abusive Christian religious understandings (or dare I suggest, misunderstandings).

Although customarily legalistic religion is approached from a works righteousness perspective I think the more important interrogation and analysis is on the root causes of such theories and that is relative to theories of conversion and puritanical projection of religious ideals. In other words, if one subscribes to a theory that salvation and divine approval is contingent upon human agency, which humans had (or have) the authority to interpret which works are divinely affirmed as righteous in the first place? Often times as we approach biblical literature we do so with the assumption that the authors and narrators who psychoanalyze God’s thoughts, unctious, desires and judgments do so without fallibility. With this as the starting point, conversion necessitates an endorsement of a particular type and brand of biblical interpretation which would bring about a certain understanding regarding purity relative to righteousness. I

² K. Marx: "Briefe aus den Deutsch-Französischen Jahrbüchern," *Marx-Engels-Werke*, Bd. 1, [pp. 337-346](#).

believe this is a faulty and mythical starting line. It presupposes a universal experience that groups peoples together and functions similar to a standardized test. When it comes to religion and theology, a one-size-fits-all approach is borderline blasphemous. It voids the specificity of God’s creation and intentionality for humanity to be one of diversity. Therefore when it comes to matters of conversion we presume everyone ought to share the same story.³

The reality that contemporary theologians, clergypersons and religious practitioners must come to grips with is the fact that many “converts” to Christianity in times past were not converted or “won over” to Christ out of a deep Spiritual transformation (although it could be argued that some did experience such in times subsequent to “receiving Christ in the pardon of their sins”) but moreover their “conversions” were reactions to the imposition of a hegemonic understanding of the necessity of salvation as a means to avoid an even worse existence than the one the “sinner” was currently caught in the throes of. This is by and large my hermeneutical approach to the negative effects of abusive and legalistic religion. This type of approach fosters a climate that minimizes a deep spiritual identification with a power that is able to transform and transcend individuals and systems and offer what Walter Brueggemann calls an, “consciousness and perceptions alternative to the consciousness and perception of the dominant culture around us.”⁴ This alternative vision of existing revolutionizes people and systems and tilts them towards a collective and common good. It has cultivated a counter-productive gap between the faith we proclaim and the faith we are able to practice. An anti-engaging, exclusionary and oppressive theology, I believe, is the root cause of the decline of (corporate and institutionalized) Christianity in America. Yet, this might not be a bad thing.

Leonard Sweet suggests that the current climate in our culture relative to faith and theology has situated us in a place by which we ought to be “poised to ignite revival.” This phrase implies that a

³ This is the only way works righteousness is even remotely plausible because if there is no set-in-stone methodology on how to work the righteousness then God ceases to be righteous God’s self.

⁴ W. Brueggemann, *The Prophetic Imagination*, 2nd Ed. (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2001), 3.

revival (as he goes on to assert) is actually needed or necessary in order to place the faith and its historical tradition on a sustainable path into the future. Sweet does a generational comparison on the ways in which the Gospel has been translated and transported from those within “tribes” he labels as “Googlers” and “Gutenbergers.” He draws the subtle similarities and the stark differences between “the Googlers – the digitized, globalized group that spends much of its life getting to know one another in a virtual word” and “the Gutenbergers – those who arrived from the twentieth century bringing with them influences and assumptions launched long before, in the fifteenth century.”⁵

Within this framework, Sweet highlights and emphasizes, albeit not as aggressively as I would have preferred, some of the roots of legalistic religion and theology. When the Christian tradition made its transition from oral and aural transmission to a more fixed and literary dissemination it was incumbent upon the canonizers, redactors and publishers to attempt to communicate a sort of stoic and stagnant doctrinal message in order to bring unification to a diasporic people.⁶ What this did simultaneously was create a mythical line of demarcation between those who were “worthy” of receiving and sharing the faith and those who were beyond the arc of safety due to their lack of access to the “written word of God.” If you add to these roots the contaminated water of systematic oppression and discrimination that was already at work throughout the world, an abusive and legalistic religion was inevitable. The irony is, a faith founded on a liberating revolution from oppressive powers (both federal and private) gets wed, somehow, with hegemonic forces of elitism and even patriotic nationalism and begins to function as a tool of systematic oppression while often times becoming labeled as systematic theology.

⁵ L. Sweet, *Viral: How Social Networking Is Poised to Ignite Revival* (Colorado Springs: WaterBrook Press, 2012), 3.

⁶ The term diasporic is used here to describe a group of people who ought be unified in faith, not necessarily in thought, but find themselves spread abroad and separate from each other physically due to circumstances beyond their control.

II. Systematic Theology's Contributions to Legalism

Before strands of liberation theology (i.e. Black Theology, Hispanic Theology, Feminist Theology, Womanist Theology, Queer Theology, etc.)⁷ emerged the religious practices and the concepts that served as the foundation that those practices stood on were (and still continue to be) exclusive and abusive. Especially in America, systematic theology has been saturated with a middle-to-upper-middle-class, heterosexist, Anglo-Saxon, protestant, patriotic extremist hermeneutic. James Cone argues, “In America, at least, the Christian tradition is identified with the structures of racism in their oppression of black people. This was the reason for the white church’s compliance with black slavery, its subsequent indifference toward oppression generally, and its failure to respond to the authentic demands of black reparations.”⁸ Cone expresses some of the impact that the aforementioned hermeneutic, that became branded as systematic theology, had on the way people saw (and still see) God at work in the world, yet the critique is not limited to race; it is genderized, sexualized, economic and elemental beyond that which our eyes can see.

Fundamentally, the rift that legalistic and subsequently abusive religion brought to bear was an ideological, theological, social and political split between people of faith who share the same historical sacred references and (at least to a degree) the same messiah. As some concepts about God’s work through Jesus and the ancient Hebrew people were being concretized (while indirectly excluding other theories and theological presuppositions) there was a scattering of the sheep taking place simultaneously. The question became, “Who are the REAL Christians.” Sadly, the residue of this school of thought is still prevalent today. And most often those who were (and are) in power were stamping a seal of superiority on their religion and demonizing those who thought, worshipped, read, prayed and practiced differently. Certain readings and interpretations of biblical

⁷ These theological genres are all consistent with any theology that seeks to liberate an oppressed group from the dominant forces, systems and individuals they find themselves subject to. Several scholars have done and continue to produce work in these areas.

⁸ J. Cone, *Risks of Faith: The Emergence of a Black Theology of Liberation 1968-1988*, p. 33

text were being promoted while others were being rejected (even if they bore a certain rational, logical, literary and even theological truth). Religion has thereby become corporatized and commodified; packaged in a palatable paradigm that serves an unjust status quo. Often times what and who are labeled as the “REAL” Christians are those who have personified all of those things that Jesus of Nazareth stood in opposition of – exclusion, oppression, fear and insensitivity.

Many of us have adopted an Ameri-centric theology of convenience that is inconsistent and practically incompatible with the theology of Jesus.⁹ We’ve sacrificed truths of liberation, inclusion and tolerance at the altar of patriotism and capitalism. White evangelicals have attempted to monopolize and more readily co-opt Christianity with an extremist and exclusionary litmus test that is contrary to the Spirit of Jesus of Nazareth. These sentiments were supported by lopsided and often times racist, sexist and classist interpretations of sacred texts that developed into doctrines and “theologies” that produced negative, oppressive and regressive realities to minorities and underprivileged peoples who needed a liberating messiah, faith and theology to sustain and transcend them from the wretched realities in which they lived.

When this matrix of insensitivity and neglect relative to the unique experience of underprivileged peoples are inflicted upon those who desire and/or need spiritual formation and transformation, the result is often times a spiritual insecurity that often leads to religious rejection at worse or a psycho-spiritual inferiority at best. It is therefore no wonder that as the white supremacist infrastructure of the early American ethos was being constructed ideologies like the Ham Doctrine¹⁰ gained traction and subsequently lead several black and

⁹ A Theology of Convenience is a concept of God whereby we can use certain scriptural references to support our rituals and practices, even if they are oppressive, when it is convenient and expedient. If we encounter a text, or even a Jesus, that requires a radical and revolutionary change or forfeiting of our own privileges we can conveniently ignore or reject it at our leisure and still proclaim an approved relationship with God. For example, we can only support the death penalty if we conveniently ignore the commandment, Thou shall not kill or Jesus nonviolent methodology.

¹⁰ The Ham Doctrine, also referred to as The Curse of Ham, was an interpretation based off of Genesis 9 that argued that it was God’s will that Blacks be enslaved (“hewers of wood and drawers of water” from Joshua 9:34) due to the [Footnote continued on next page ...]

brown people to accept a “christianity” that ultimately did them more spiritual harm than good. Under this umbrella of conversion as necessity for removal of “sin” (even if said sin was the skin color or the social impacts thereof) there was little room for a deep engagement and embracing of the religion and theology that was being shared. Yet, this approach was necessary in order to maintain the hierarchal structure that was being implemented. It is impossible to build a society on Christian values and simultaneously build an empire. The theology that was being projected had to tilt towards those in power and thereby not allow those at the bottom of society’s chain to be able to ask the critical questions that deep faith requires, because those questions would deconstruct the empirical system that was emerging. This was causing a chiasm to be formed between the faith that the people were being compelled to practice and the harsh reality of their experience. Ancient (and even contemporary) legalistic religion did not (and does not) line up with the experiences of the people who arguably need a transcendental vehicle the most.

We see the residue of these early strands of legalistic religion in some of the stories that have been shared by several writers, poets and clergy-persons that exacerbate the gulf between the faith that is proclaimed and the faith that is practiced. Fredrick Douglas describes the paradoxical reality of a God of liberation with a god of legalism replicated in a slave-state with his description of his slave master’s shallow conversion that he labels “experiencing religion.” Douglas says,

In August, 1832, my master attended a Methodist camp-meeting held in the Bay-side, Talbot county, and there experienced religion. I indulged a faint hope that his conversion would lead him to emancipate his slaves, and that, if he did not do this, it would, at any rate, make him more kind and human. I was disappointed in both these respects. It neither made him to be humane to his slaves, nor to emancipate them. If it had any effect on his character, it made him more cruel and hateful in all his ways; for I believe him to have been a much worse man after his conversion than before. Prior to his conversion, he relied upon his own depravity to shield and sustain him in his savage barbarity; but after his conversion, he found religions sanction and support for his slaveholding

presumption that all black are descendants of Ham who saw the “nakedness” of his father Noah and thereby committed a sinful act by not “covering” him. Noah subsequently curses Canaan (Ham’s son).

cruelty.¹¹ He made the greatest pretensions to piety. His house was a house of prayer. He prayed morning, noon, and night. He very soon distinguished himself among his brethren, and was soon made a class-leader and exhorter. His activity in revivals was great, and he proved himself an instrument in the hands of the church in converting many souls.”¹²

Needless to say, if this is what religions empowers people to do (become more vicious slave owners who entrust themselves in a faith that dehumanizes others) the critical question would be, “Why would those being enslaved subscribe to such a religion.” The reality is, they didn’t! They were trust into the crucible of Christian criticism, without knowing that they were involved in the theological exercise. They were forced to find a way to embrace the redeeming qualities of the religion, all the while projecting a faith physically that they did not internalize spiritually. Even if they wanted to affirm the anti-liberative and legalistic religion that was dominant, they would have found such to be inadequate to serve their spiritual needs.

The compulsive pathos of people who deeply desire faith formation and transformation yet cannot connect their experience to the hegemonic religion that they were being force-fed is highlighted in Langston Hughes’ reflection on his experience with the “Mourners Bench” shared in his essay entitled, “Salvation” from his first autobiography, *The Big Sea*.¹³ To clarify, this bench served as the sacred space where sinful humans were asked (or often times mandated) to sit during revival. The bench is located in close proximity to the pulpit and the theory is that the preachers “Holy Ghost Fire” would spring forth and catch hold of the scullions that dwelled on the bench and thereby get them “caught up” and converted to receive salvation from sin.

When Hughes describes his conversion narrative it is grounded in a lack of spiritual transformation and expressed as a bi-product of social conformity (among other things). Hughes posits,

I was saved from sin when I was going on thirteen. But not really saved... There was a big revival at my Auntie Reed’s church... That night I was escorted

¹¹ See previous note on The Ham Doctrine.

¹² F. Douglas, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglas: An American Slave* (Radford: Wilder Publications, LLC: 2008), 69-70.

¹³ L. Hughes, *Salvation* (from *The Big Sea*, 1940; Rinehart Reader-Third Edition; Boston: Cengage Learning, 1999), 129.

to the front row and placed on the mourners' bench with all the other young sinners, who had not yet been brought to Jesus.

My aunt told me when you were saved you saw a light, and something happened to you inside! And Jesus came into your life! And God was with you from then on! She said you could see and hear and feel Jesus in your soul. I believed her... So I sat there calmly in the hot, crowded church, waiting for Jesus to come to me...

Finally all the young people had gone to the altar and were saved, but one boy and me. He was a rounder's son named Westley. Westley and I were surrounded by sisters and deacons praying. It was very hot in church, and getting late now. Finally Westly said to mein a whisper: "God damn! I'm tired o' sitting here. Let's get up and be saved." So he got up and was saved.

Then I was left all alone on the mourners' bench... And I kept waiting serenely for Jesus, waiting, waiting – but he didn't come. I wanted to see him, but nothing happened to me. Nothing! I wanted something to happen to me, but nothing happened...

...I began to wonder what God thought about Westley, who certainly hadn't seen Jesus either, but who was not sitting proudly on the platform, swinging his knickerbockered legs and grinning down at me... God had not struck Westley dead for taking his name in vain or for lying in the temple. So I decide that maybe to save further trouble, I'd better lie, too, and say that Jesus had come, and get up and be saved.

So I got up." ¹⁴

I am sure more people share this testimony than care to admit it. Again, this is not to suggest that Hughes (nor anyone with similar experience) never received the spiritual transformation, liberation, and empowerment that his soul desired. This is an attempt to describe the intensity that legalistic and hegemonic religion has had on the psyche of countless people – especially minorities. Many are compelled to make a public gesture that is inconsistent with their eternal unctions. To not do so leaves the individual as an outcaste within their religious community, even if their deep seated yearnings are consistent with those of others, the pathos of such pressure conditions people to live a lie. This learned behavior comes with paralyzing consequences. The result is an inevitable exodus of engagement and bitter dismissal of mainstream, institutionalized religion – especially that which has been associated with evangelical Christianity.

¹⁴ Ibid. 130-131.

III. Post-Modern Responses to Legalism

The most scathing objection, rejection and negative effect of this has been a faith flight and decline in people who currently identify themselves as members of the institutional church. In his early writing, *MySpace to Sacred Space*, author Christian Piatt highlights statistics and studies that show how several young adults (ages 18-40 [esp. 18-25]) become increasingly more unacquainted with the institutional church.¹⁵ This means, it's fair to suggest; College Age (18-25 traditionally) is the age of what I call "Faith Flight." This trend is also telling because many of those in the current generation are not growing up de-churched (having been brought up in church as children and subsequently left) but un-churched (having little to no church experience at all).

According to Pew Research Polls,

Americans ages 18 to 29 are considerably less religious than older Americans. Fewer young adults belong to any particular faith than older people do today. They also are less likely to be affiliated than their parents' and grandparents' generations were when they were young. Fully one-in-four members of the Millennial generation - so called because they were born after 1980 and began to come of age around the year 2000 - are unaffiliated with any particular faith. Indeed, Millennials are significantly more unaffiliated than members of Generation X were at a comparable point in their life cycle (20% in the late 1990s) and twice as unaffiliated as Baby Boomers were as young adults (13% in the late 1970s)....¹⁶

I argue that this is the response to the fundamentalist and puritanical expressions of faith that were established prior to the late 20th and early 21st centuries. Quite often, "Faith Flight" is a response, rejection or dismissal of the rigidity of traditional religious assumptions implemented in the life of young people without space for the dialogue necessary to make faith make sense. In other words, when people are becoming more and more independent, they are less likely to pledge allegiance or commitment to anything they haven't been allowed to engage (and even interrogate) for the sake of their own well-being. Many times our churches have promoted a particular

¹⁵ See Amy and Christian Piatt, *My Space to Sacred Space: God For a New Generation*, (Danvers: Chalice Press, 2007)

¹⁶ See "Religions Among the Millennials" - www.pewforum.org/Age/Religion-Among-the-Millennials.aspx.

taboo type precedent in numerous matters and communicated an “our way or the hell-way” type of theology. This approach is almost a surefire method of marginalizing the college and young adult population. But this has been the dominant approach to faith formation and when met with the crossroads of conformity or rejection, at least for a season, most young adults today are choosing rejection. As the parameters of being a “real” Christian have been stitched in the psyche of Sunday school children and those who live in a culture that has used iconography and myth to promote a sect of the Christian faith as the standard, many people have decided to send Christians to hell.

We can see the shattering of the works righteousness theory by looking at how slave masters were perceived to be righteous and slaves assumed barbaric, heathenistic and unfit for the Kingdom of God. Yet after emancipation several freed slaves were able to express their spiritual commitment to love of God and humanity even when that meant finding ways to reclaim the faith while rejecting those with whom the faith had been projected by. The great mystic and scholar Howard Thurman shares the story of his grandmother who after being freed from slavery affirmed her faith in Jesus yet felt she had to choose which scriptural passages she wanted to affirm as inspired. J. D. Kline offers these reflections on Thurman’s experience in religiously rearing and aiding his grandmother. As Thurman assumed the responsibility of reading scripture to his illiterate Grandmother she instructed him to read to her anything except that which was written by the Apostle Paul. Her justification for such proof texting was that her slave owner used some of Paul’s letters to justify her (her ancestors and other slaves) enslavement. Kline says,

Howard Thurman, first African-American dean of the chapel at Boston University, tells the story of his grandmother, an ex-slave and deeply devout woman who never learned to read. Yet Thurman’s grandmother, while having little book learning, displayed a remarkable “soul” learning, allowing the central message of the Gospel to infuse her very being—permitting this incredible story of God’s love to refresh and renew all her living. Howard Thurman remembers his grandmother asking him to read for her from the Scriptures. She would frequently ask for readings from the Psalms, that ancient prayer book of the Hebrew people, from the prophet Isaiah with its glorious vision of God’s new creation, and from the Gospels, so filled with parables and stories of Jesus. But seldom did Thurman’s grandmother seek readings from the letters of the apostle

Paul, unless it was the magnificent love chapter in 1 Corinthians 13: “love is patient; love is kind; love is not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude.”

Thurman once mustered the courage to ask his grandmother about her choice of scripture, and particularly why she seldom turned to the writings of Paul. His grandmother spoke of being raised as a slave on a southern plantation, where the slave owner would handpick white preachers to deliver a message for the slaves. Invariably those messages were based on a reading from Paul, the favorite being, “Slaves be obedient to your masters...as unto Christ.” Though she had little book learning, through her soul learning Thurman’s grandmother discovered how readily scripture could be abused and misused, the liberating kernel of its message distorted into rationale for perpetuating an oppressive and unjust status quo. Thurman’s grandmother had come to understand that Scripture invites us to partake of a lofty vision that expands and enlarges our experience of life and faith, rather than limiting and restricting that experience.”¹⁷

By her dismissal of Paul’s letters, legalistic theology (both the works righteousness theory and the exclusive and conformist ideology) is turned on its head. Through her lens the dominant theology is irrelevant at best and oppressive at worse. If we are to judge who is more Christian, would we say it is Grandma Thurman or her slave master? In a somewhat paradoxical sense Grandma Thurman does some solid exegetical work in light a contextual theology. If a particular reading and interpretation of a text doesn’t line up with the realities of our existence in a way this is liberating, why would we affirm it? Grandma Thurman actually highlights the tension between our being more Pauline than we are Christian.

Grandma Thurman and countless others are evidence that not all Christians have been willing to throw out the babe in Christ with the baptismal font water. There are stands within our tradition (especially the prophetic tradition which I’ll speak to later) that has separated the wheat from the snares and been courageous enough to reject that which is un-relatable, irrelevant and oppressive from that which is liberating and empowering. My mother used to share a metaphor with me in the past that has become a mantra in my ministerial efforts to enlightenment to those who have been battered by abusive and legalistic religion. She used to tell me to, “chew the meat and spit out the bones.” I have come to interpret this theology to mean that if what

¹⁷ See, J.D. Kline, “When Words Are Not Enough: Embracing the Challenge of Kingdom Living,” <http://wptest.zgraphicsdev.com/archive/120>

someone is attempting to project about the reality of God is not consistent with my experience, I do not have to affirm it. This is not a call to demonize other people's theology, although I must admit at times it is rather tempting and arguably necessary. But this method of discernment and search for that which is sustainable and relevant has liberated me to not have to accept any theology as complete truth but yet affirm that there is truth within in it when it connects with my lived experience. No one on earth – preacher, pastor, professor or parishioner - has the authority to designate who is and who is not a “real” Christian. Christian conversion is a matter of authenticity and internal transformation and cannot be deciphered by the human eye. It is a matter of the heart. Therefore, when it comes to considering which faith based expressions and narratives to affirm we use the Thessalonian instruction to, “...test everything... [and] hold fast to that which is good”¹⁸

IV. Towards a Prophetic and More Inclusive Theology

If what we desire today is an effective and fervent faith and religion then we must encourage reclamation of a theology of covenant. This brand of theology is rooted in the working relationship between God and humanity (as well as humanity with itself). One interpretation of the covenant God makes with Abraham is that it is not irrespective of anything Abraham has done to earn it. This would poke a hole in the theory of works righteousness in and of itself. From the perspective of the authors of Genesis and other Old Testament narratives, the deity's focus is based upon the nature of its love for the creation, humans included. This theology challenges humans to not only honor God who creates but also humans by which they coexist. In looking at theology from a liberationist perspective it becomes a violation to say one loves God who has not been seen and yet dehumanizes and oppresses their fellow human being whom they share the air, land and natural resources of the world with. Covenantal theology encourages not spiritual commitment but also a political commitment.

¹⁸ See 1 Thessalonians 5:21 (NRSV).

One strand of this theology at work is with the emergent church movement. This sentiment and its bearings on an anti-legalistic theology is shared in the words of Peter Rollins,

the emerging [religious] community [is] a significant part of a wider religious movement which rejects both absolutism and relativism as idolatrous positions which hid their human origins in the modern myth of pure reason. Instead of following a Greek-influenced idea of orthodoxy as right belief... the emerging community is helping us to rediscover the more Hebraic and mystical notion of the orthodox Christian as one who believes the right way – that is, believing in a loving, sacrificial and Christlike manner... this approach opens up a Christian thinking that profoundly challenges some of the most basic ideas found in the contemporary Church. It is an approach which emphasizes the priority of love; not as something which stands opposed to knowledge of God, or even as simply more important than knowledge of God, but, more radically still, as knowledge of God.¹⁹

I believe Rollins marks the lines of the playing field here and uses the idea of knowledge of God in parallel with concepts on works righteousness. It has been a thing of doing, but is becoming a thing of being. Covenantal theology, as embraced by the emergent church philosophy holds us to a level of love that is practical and not merely rhetorical or theoretical.

My critique of traditional covenantal theology, however, is that covenantal theology has promoted a mythical sense of exceptionalism that is not inclusive enough for contemporary religious understanding. Therefore, even as we promote the theology of covenant, we have to make room for God's chosen people to be all of creation. This is possible if we affirm the idea that difference is not equated with deficiency. There must thereby be a certain type of beauty promoted and appreciated within covenantal theology that suggests that how God chooses to partner with one group does not mean that God does not partner with other groups; God does not forsake one group for the sake of another. God is all, God is in all and God loves all. God is inclusive and therefore our theology must reflect such.

One of the many things that the liberation theology movements have done is attempted to reclaim the voice and experiences of those who most often been negatively impacted by abusive and legalist

¹⁹ P. Rollins, *How Not To Speak of God* (Brewster: Paraclete Press, 2006), 2-3.

religion which couples political systems tilted towards the rich and religious systems tilted towards the elite. It is my belief that the only adequate antidote to war against the burden of legalism is to ground our theology in the prophetic tradition. While we can reference and celebrate theologies centered on prophets and the prophetic tradition, there is not a prevailing notion or understanding of a prophetic theology.²⁰ Therefore, my concluding thoughts will be an attempt to begin to carve out a trek and definition of a prophetic theology to be used as the foundation of my theological premises going forward.

One of the classic works on prophecy is Abraham Joshua Heschel's "The Prophets." Heschel projects theories of God's connection to the ancient 8th century Hebrew prophets of the Old Testament and eloquently waxes concepts relative to their psychology, rhetoric and mission.²¹

As is the case with conventional concepts of covenantal theology, we must see Heschel's works as relatively one sided also. He seems to be conditioned to tilt towards an affirmation of Jewish theological sensibilities, even at the expense of theological concepts that predate Hebrew prophecy. It is known that ancient Israeli and Hebrew theology is a bi-product of notions and concepts of God from other ethnic groups. Heschel and others have centered thoughts relative to prophecy and the prophetic tradition to the Old Testament prophets. Yet, R. E. Clements had already begun conceding that canonical prophets were not necessarily originals. This means that as we construct a prophetic theology we ought not to be bound to biblical witness alone. According to Clements, "...work of the canonical prophets arose out of the activity of a much larger prophetic movement in Israel..."²² It seems obvious to me that if what is represented canonically is not exhaustive of the movement in Israel,

²⁰ Much of what is done relative to prophetic theology is centered on prophetic discourse and rhetoric but not necessarily the theology concepts and constructs of prophetic figures. Also, much of the attempts at prophetic theology and critical religion are taking place in the UK and Africa. See, N. Koopman, "[Public theology as prophetic theology: more than utopianism and criticism?](#)" *Journal of Theology for Southern Africa*, no 134 JI 2009, p 117-130 and <http://criticalreligion.org>.

²¹ See A. J. Heschel, *The Prophets* (New York: Harper & Row, 1962).

²² R. E. Clements, *Prophecy and the Prophets* (Naperville: SCM Press LTD, 1965), 14.

clearly, there are other movements and traditions that share similarities and are in need of consideration as we lay the foundations of prophetic theology. Nevertheless, Heschel does highlight the shift towards a prophetic theology that is saturated with concepts of prophetic persona, theodicy, pathos and concern for those who are oppressed.

Along with the past works of Heschel, more contemporary seeds of prophetic theology have already been planted through the work of Dr. Andre Johnson and his rhetorical work on prophecy, especially his work on Bishop Henry McNeal Turner. Johnson grounds his work in what he calls “prophetic rhetoric.”²³ For Johnson, prophetic rhetoric is one of the vehicles at the prophet’s disposal to persuade his/her community to adopt the ideas the prophet has for the alternative vision of existence. These ideas, in my estimation, are part of a prophetic theology. Within his framing of such rhetoric he provides support for my argument relative to emergent church sensibilities, covenantal theology and inclusion. Johnson defines prophetic rhetoric as, “discourse grounded in the sacred and rooted in a community experience that offers a critique of existing communities and traditions by charging and challenging society to live up to the ideals espoused while offering celebration and hope for a brighter future.”²⁴

What I believe Johnson offers through his interpretation on prophetic rhetoric, is a chance to interrogate what theological concepts would cause one (or inspire one) to use such speech. This is the platform for us to construct prophetic theology.

I posit that prophetic theology is a concept of God that inspires one to use their gifts, skills, imagination, creativity and privileges to empower and equip those who have not. The type of theology is rooted in theories relative to justice, love and mercy for all peoples. It is not mere morality but a cosmological theology that includes humanity in the production of peace, even when that peace comes as a result of painful sacrifice or martyrdom. It is not mere social criticism but a “fire shut up in the bones” of one who deeply believes God is

²³ A. E. Johnson, *The Forgotten Prophet* (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2012), 6-8.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 7.

displeased with the state of society and thereby calls one to act using rhetorical and other vehicles of persuasion to improve the environment. The theology of the prophets has historically sought to represent God's will on behalf of those who are at the margins of society; the powerless, forgotten and left behind. I also contend that prophetic theology is not necessarily biblical theology. This makes prophetic theology (and thereby those who embrace such) more inclusive and sensitive by proxy. Prophetic theology is one that honors the best and brightest of the religious tradition yet has the courage and gumption to speak truth to power when the power is tilted towards the strong and not the weak, especially when this power is a religious and ecclesiastical power. Prophetic Theology is rooted in a love ethic which challenges its constituents to practice what they preach and thereby remain sensitive to the plight of the poor and oppressed even if it means changing their own place of residence. Unlike that systematic theology of the past, the theology of the prophets use divine inspiration to empower others and addresses the conformity and complacency of those who claim to walk in the ways of God or what Walter Brueggemann calls, "Royal Consciousness."²⁵ Prophetic theology is courageous, honest and cannot be commodified (because it doesn't pay well to speak out against those who have the most resources when they have used their resources to maintain power and privilege). We must study the prophetic tradition²⁶ to ensure that we are intentional when we represent God's will for humanity.

Prophetic theology, unlike legalistic theology, is not concerned with a personal piety as established by the status quo. While legalistic theology attempts to affirm righteous works based upon the

²⁵ See Brueggemann, p. 21.

²⁶ Prophetic Tradition here is not limited to ancient Hebrew prophecy but also includes ancient African theologies and oral traditions that are rooted in theories of love and justice. Ancient African Griots have by and large been left out of the conversation regarding prophets and prophecy. However, whenever there is social injustice, historically, there have been figures (of various ethnicities and nationalities) that have used their understanding of divine inspiration to speak out and represent those who are oppressed. Therefore we must have a more holistic and well-rounded understanding of the prophetic tradition itself, lest it become tainted with opportunists and a shallow litany of prophetic figures and witnesses.

maintenance of hegemonic control, prophetic theology realizes that righteous works will often times cause one to be marginalized, outcaste and even killed. Nevertheless, if we are to reclaim those who we have neglected, forsaken and forgotten, we must embrace and incorporate a more prophetic theology realizing that many of the systems we have set up (even in the name of God) have been anything but just and fair to the least of these.

If we are to revive and salvage the religious fervor and Spirit of Jesus and the early churches, these shifts from legalistic and abusive religion to a more covenantal, prophetic and inclusive theology must be made. Until then, we will continue to (both knowingly and unknowingly) abuse, marginalize, oppress and even kill others in the name of righteousness.



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