

Liberation to Mutual Fund:
The Political Consequences of Differing Conceptions of Christ in the
African American Church

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*Do not suppose that I have come to bring peace to the earth.
I did not come to bring peace, but a sword.
Matthew 10:34*

*With me are riches and honor,
enduring wealth and prosperity.
My fruit is better than fine gold;
what I yield surpasses choice silver.
I walk in the way of righteousness,
along the paths of justice,
bestowing wealth on those who love me
and making their treasuries full.
Proverbs 8: 18-21*

Introduction

When studying the influence of the church on political behavior, social science literature has tended to approach the black church as a social, political, and religious organization. Investigating the connection between the church and political action, this research stresses either the organizational resources that accrue to black churchgoers, such as the networks, skills, mobilization, and contact opportunities nurtured in the church, (McAdam 1982, Morris 1984, Brady, Verba, and Scholzman 1995) or seeks to map the psychological resources that contribute to the political actions of black church congregants, such as self-esteem and internal efficacy. (Harris 1999, Calhoun-Brown 1996, Ellison 1993) This research tends to think of the church as a structure that brings actors into contact with one another, it has paid less attention to the church as a place that brings actors into contact with ideas. Social science has rarely asked what are the political implications of black theology?

This chapter will try to address this omission by beginning to tease out an argument about the connection between black theology and political action. It investigates two traditions of black ministry: Black Liberation Theology, emerging from the 1960s black power movement, and the Prosperity Gospel, popular in many contemporary mega-

churches. Specifically, the chapter asks, how do these theological traditions define Jesus Christ and his relationship with the body of believers, and what are the political implications of these understandings of Christ within a black religious tradition?

Politics and the African American Church

The study of African American religiosity and political behavior has largely centered on one defining question: does Christianity encourage or discourage political activism among African Americans? Lincoln and Mamiya review the literature on black churches and claim that several models dominate our understanding of the black church. The assimilation model advanced by scholars like Frazier (1963) argues that the church hampers ethnic assimilation into the American state and criticizes black religion as anti-intellectual and authoritarian.¹ Isolation model scholars such as Orum (1966) and Silberman (1964) argue that the church is isolated from civic affairs, is lower class, and is other-worldly in focus. Urban researchers Drake and Cayton (1962) characterize the church as a compensatory institution that allows the masses to flirt with the power, control, and acclaim that is unavailable in daily life. Assimilation, isolation, and compensatory models are all part of what political scientist Fred Harris would call opiate models, discouraging political action through an other-worldly focus on divine restitution in the afterlife. “Opiate theorists argue that religion works as a means of social control offering African Americans a way to cope with personal and societal difficulties and undermining their willingness to actively challenge racial inequalities.” (Harris 1999, 5) Scholars in this tradition include Gary Marx (1967), Gunnar Myrdal (1947), E. Franklin Frazier (1963), and Adolph Reed (1986).

¹ Frazier’s critique of the black church is among the harshest and most clearly articulated in this tradition. “The petty tyrants in the Negro churches have their counterparts in practically all other Negro organizations. As a consequence, Negroes have had little education in democratic processes. Moreover, the Negro church and Negro religion have cast a shadow over the entire intellectual life of Negroes and have been responsible for the so-called backwardness of American Negroes” (Frazier 1963,90)

Alternatively, there are researchers who claim that the black church acts as an inspiration for political action by galvanizing black people to work toward political righteousness. Important contributors on this side of the debate include Genovese (1974), Childs (1980), McAdam (1982), and Morris (1984). This work claims that the black church was crucial in initiating and sustaining the modern civil rights movement. Morris articulates this position stating, “the black church functioned as the institutional center of the modern civil rights movement. Churches provided the movement with an organized mass base leadership of clergymen; an institutionalized financial base; and meeting places where the masses planned tactics and strategies and collectively committed themselves to the struggle.” (Morris 1984, 4) Reed (1986) critiques the connection between the church and progressive, racial, social movements as “mythology.” But scholars of the black church like Lincoln and Mamiya (1990), and researchers of black political behavior such as Tate (1994), continue to find empirical evidence linking black churches to the political mobilization of African Americans. Whether it is the mid-century civil rights movement or the 1980s presidential bids of Jesse Jackson, the black church appears to provide organizational resources for black political involvement. (Nelsen, Madron, and Yokley 1975, Dawson 1994)

Working in this tradition, Harris (1999) takes a multidimensional approach that looks at the multiple structures and influences within the black protestant tradition and ultimately uncovers both macro and micro resources that support a variety of political activities by African Americans. Macro resources include “indigenous leadership, communication networks, easy availability of mass memberships, and social interaction of political actors.” (Harris 1999, 28) Micro resources include the psychological and cultural factors that help individuals do the work of politics, including religiously inspired efficacy and oppositional civic culture. Harris’ model links internal religiosity to both self-esteem and

personal efficacy, which both contribute to political efficacy and activism. “Religion’s psychological dimensions could potentially empower individuals with a sense of competence and resilience, inspiring them to believe in their own ability, with the assistance of an acknowledged sacred force, to influence or affect governmental affairs, thus- in some instances- to act politically.”(Harris 1999, 82)

Similarly, Ellison finds that religious involvement fosters self-esteem and personal empowerment among African Americans through networks, socio-emotional support and tangible aid. He argues that the black church allows African Americans to see themselves through a lens that asserts their inherent uniqueness as individuals and emphasizes spiritual qualities, such as wisdom and morality, over material possessions as a standard for self-evaluation. (Ellison 1993)

Also in this tradition, Calhoun-Brown (1996) advances a model that seeks to specify the psychological resources that accrue to African American churchgoers and contribute to political action. Using data from electoral participation in the 1984 and 1988 Jackson campaigns for President, Calhoun-Brown makes an important distinction between political and nonpolitical churches. Reflecting the diversity that exists within the black religious tradition, she finds little evidence supporting a general connection between political sophistication and church attendance, but she does find an important link with political churches. “Politically speaking all African American churches are not created equal. Context is an integral factor in influencing political participation... the direct influence of African American churches in the political arena is significant, it is largely confined to political churches...these political churches have the capacity not only to coordinate tangible and intangible resources needed for political action but to impact the motivations and consciousness of individuals as well.”(Calhoun-Brown 1996, 946-951)

There is still debate about whether the black church discourages political action by encouraging followers to focus on the rewards of an afterlife, but there is a good deal of respected, empirical evidence that many black churches are actively committed to providing worshippers with the organizational and psychological resources necessary for political action. Lincoln and Mamiya (1990) remind us that the black church is deeply embedded in black culture in general so that the sphere of politics in the African American community cannot be easily separated from it. The historical and empirical evidence indicates that whether it is through organizational contact or psychological resources, religiosity and church attendance generally encourage a more politically engaged African American electorate.

In this chapter I will take up a related, but slightly different line of inquiry. Rather than thinking of the church as a place where individuals come into contact with resources, both organizational and personal, I want to think about the church as a place where people come into contact with ideas. I want to ask: what are the important *ideas* in contemporary black churches? That is, what is the content of African American theology and ministry? Then I will question the political implications of those ideas. How might we expect black Christians to behave in the political world as a result of contact with these ideas? I present two schools of black religious thought, Black Theology as it emerged in the 1960s and prosperity gospel as it is practiced in some of today's largest black congregations. To constrain the discussion I focus specifically on notions of Christ as they emerge in these theological traditions and then argue for the political implications of each understanding of Christ. The chapter first provides a brief history of black theology, lays out its central tenets and explores the understandings of Christ that are central to it. The same is done for the prosperity gospel. I then work through the political implications of each tradition, offer

some ideas about how the future of black politics might be influenced by each. Finally, I offer some initial empirical evidence through an analysis of data from the 1994 National Black Politics Study.

Christ as Liberator: Black Power and Black Theology

The African American church developed as a separate institutional structure as early as Reconstruction. Blacks living as freedmen in the North and newly emancipated African Americans in the South constructed the church as a central institution in black life. But the organizational separation of the black church did not necessarily reflect the creation of a separate black religion. Cone and Wilmore argue, “when blacks separated themselves from White denominations and organized their own churches in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries they did not perceive their actions as being motivated by theological differences. They accepted without alteration the church doctrines and politics of the White denominations from which they separated.” (Cone and Wilmore 1993, 89) In some ways this assertion is an overstatement, one that does not credit the distinct worship styles and religious emphases that distinguished slave religion from the Christianity of white Americans, but it does reflect the lack of a fully articulated theological perspective to guide black Christian worship.

In 1964 Joseph Washington, an African American professor of theology, leveled a harsh and controversial critique, that argued black churches are not Christian because they lack the guidance of an overarching theological approach. Asserting a derisive view of black religious traditions, Washington writes, “there is little theology in Negro Protestantism. Past alienation from the theological roots of Protestantism, social separation from white Protestants and their historical and cultural extensions of the European tradition, addiction to religion as personal salvation by means of moral purity, worship as the primary means of

release and the occasion for class identification- these are the bases for the religion of the Negro.” (Washington 1964, 97) While Washington acknowledged the existence of unique patterns of worship among blacks, he places these practices outside of a Christian tradition because they are not guided by an articulated theology.

By the late sixties, a group of African American ministers and theologians offered a corrective to this lack by engaging in the development of a distinct Black Theology. Emerging out of the Black Power movement, Black Theology began as a response to the challenge of making Christianity relevant for African Americans who were engaged in political and cultural struggle against white racism. Black Theology addressed the need “not only to vindicate the young civil rights workers laboring in the rural South, . . .but also to galvanize the left wing of the Southern-based civil rights movement and reassemble it within the province of the Black Christians who lived in the urban North.”(Cone and Wilmore 1993, 16) The Black Theology movement began with a statement by the National Committee of Negro Churchmen, published in the *New York Times* July 31, 1966. This informal group of black ministers responded to the emergence of Black Power by writing, “from the point of view of Christian faith, there is nothing necessarily wrong with concern for power. . . .At issue in the relations between whites and Negroes in American of the problem of inequality of power. . . .This is a fundamental root of human injustice in America.”(NCNC 1966, 20) From these beginnings emerged a fully articulated Black Theology in the late sixties and early seventies.

Albert Cleages’s (1968) *The Black Messiah*, James Cone’s (1969) *Black Theology and Black Power*, and J. Detois Roberts’ (1974) *Black Political Theology* are foundational texts in Black Theology. At its core Black Theology is predicated on the assertion that God has a unique relationship with African Americans. God is not a passive bystander in human

history, but rather an active participant in the struggles of oppressed and dispossessed people. In the American context this means that God is on the side of blacks as they struggle against the social, political, and economic marginalization caused by the legacy and persistence of white American racism. Liberation is the theological center of this approach. It is the struggle for liberation that defines the ministry of Christ and the experience of Africans in America.

Cleage asserts, “the purpose of Christianity is to free black people, to rid black people of injustice.” (Cleage 1968, 20) Cone argues, “It would seem that Black Power and Christianity have this in common: the liberation of man! If the work of Christ is that of liberating man from alien loyalties, and if racism is an alien faith, then there must be some correlation between Black Power and Christianity” (Cone 1969, 39). Roberts assures “God is aware of centuries of undeserved Black suffering. He is aware of our experience of oppression... Black hope stems from the assurance that God seeks the liberation of the oppressed.” (Roberts 1973, 115)

Black Theology emerges from a specific historical moment. It articulates both the political and spiritual yearning for a black-centered and Christian-inspired understanding of black suffering and resistance. But, it would be incorrect to think of Black Theology as entirely historically constrained. Black Theologians trace their ancestry to liberatory elements of slave religion. Black Theologians argue that while slavemasters talked of the meek inheriting the earth, slaves spoke of God’s delivering the Israelites from bondage. Even in these early articulations, there is beginning of a Black Liberation Theology.

African and African American enslaved workers constructed a new religion drawing on three sources—memories of African religious beliefs, commonsense wisdom from everyday life, and a reinterpretation of the white-supremacy Christianity introduced

to them by their Christian slave masters. The cornerstone of a black theology of liberation was thus a slave religion of freedom. (Hopkins 1999, 16)

While Black Theology is first fully articulated in response to the challenges of the black power movement, it is not born fully formed in the mid twentieth century, it is indelibly linked to an organic, folk theological tradition apparent in the freedom narratives of slave religion.

Black Theology must be understood within the context of its emergence, but also appreciated within its tradition and trajectory. Black Theology continues to inspire the work of a new generation of academics and preachers. Cleage, Cone, Roberts, and Wilmore are the first generation of black theologians. In the eighties and nineties a new generation of black seminarians built on the work of Black Theology in order to convey its continued relevance to black religiosity. (Young 1986, Evans 1992, Hopkins 1993, 2001) Hopkins (1999) traces the emergence of second generation scholars to the publication of both Jacquelyn Grant's "Black Theology and Black Women" and Cornel West's "Black Theology and Marxist Thought" in 1979. From these texts emerged a second generation of male black theologians interested in reevaluating Black Theology in light of popular culture, ordinary religious experiences of the black poor, Afrocentrity and globalization. (Spencer 1989, Hopkins 1993, Felder 1989, Davis 1990, Young 1986) At this same time, a unique tradition emerged within Black Theology focused on the intersections of race, gender, class, and sexual orientation within the black church and religious experience. These womanist theologians are arguably the most important contributors to contemporary Black Theology. (Grant 1989, Cannon 1988 1995, Weems 1988, Williams 1993)

Images of Christ in the Black Theology Tradition

Perhaps the most important element of Black Theology is the centrality of a black Christ. First articulated by Albert Cleage, a theologian, preacher, and founder of the Shrine of the Black Madonna, in Detroit Michigan. Cleage was long time friend of Malcolm X. While he was a revolutionary black nationalist, he refused to concede Christianity to whites and join Malcolm in the assertion that Islam was the only spiritual home for blacks. Cleage's *The Black Messiah* (1968) is a collection of sermons aimed at reclaiming Christianity for the eager young revolutionaries of the Black Power movement. In this volume Cleage argues that Jesus of Nazareth was ethnically black. Using biblical genealogy he traces Jesus' maternal ancestry to provide evidence of an African bloodline. "Jesus was a revolutionary black leader, a Zealot seeking to lead a Black Nation to freedom." (Cleage 1968, 4) Cleage was a practicing minister in the trenches of an urban church during a crisis in black Christianity as it sought to redefine its relationship to African Americans in the context of nationalist political struggle. Black Jesus restored the dignity of black Americans and gave them a sense of connection to the divine. "We issue a call to all black Churches. Put down this white Jesus who has been tearing you to pieces. Forget your white God. Remember that we are worshipping a Black Jesus who was a Black Messiah. God must be black if he created us in his own image. You can't build dignity in black people if they go down on their knees everyday worshipping a white Jesus" (Cleage 1968, 98)

Black Christ is also central to James Cone's articulation of Black Theology. For Cone, Jesus' blackness is ontological, rather than biological. Cone reasons that Christ aligns himself with those who are in struggle against oppression. Christ takes on the position of the poorest and most despised in any historical moment. Thus, within the American context, Christ must be understood as black. Blackness is therefore redefined as a gift of God, rather

than a despised condition. “In a world which has taught blacks to hate themselves, the new black man does not transcend blackness, but accepts it, loves it as a gift of the Creator.” (Cone 1969, 53) Although Cleage’s assertion is of ancestral blackness, while Cone’s is of ontological blackness, each sees the Black Messiah as a necessary element of Black Theology because African Americans can only develop a full respect for their own humanity and dignity if they see themselves as reflections of a black Jesus. Black theology calls African Americans to remember that, “Jesus was born in a barn, wrapped in a blanket used for sick cattle, and placed in a stall. He died on a city dump outside Jerusalem” (Johnson 1971, 208) and to envision “black Jesus walking the dark streets of the ghettos of the North and the sharecropper’s farm in the Deep South, without a job, busted, and emasculated.” (Johnson 1971, 206) These are the images of a black Christ that link Jesus indelibly to the black American experience

Black Theology not only asserts that Christ is black, it asserts that Christ’s essential character is that of a liberator. Cone reasons, “if the gospel is a gospel of liberation for the oppressed, then Jesus is where the oppressed are and continues to work his liberation there. Jesus is not safely confined in the first century. He is our contemporary...Christianity is not alien to Black Power; it is Black Power” (Cone 1969, 38) Johnson similarly argues for the contemporary significance of Christ by linking Christian identity with liberatory political action. “We must recognize that to be Christian is to be contemporaneous with Jesus, the Liberator. To be sure, to be Christian is not to hold views about Jesus but rather to become a contemporary with Jesus in his ministry of suffering and humiliation and of love and liberation...To be a Christian is to stand with Jesus and participate in his ministry of love and liberation at the crossways of the world where men are crucified on the crosses of poverty racism, war and exploitation.” (Johnson 1971, 213)

Black theology defines Christ as liberator. This is an important theological departure from much of European Christology for whom the essential nature of Christ is manifest in his incarnation. In the Nicene Creed, what is important about Christ is that he was divinely conceived, born of a virgin, crucified for human sin, and resurrected according to scriptural prophecy.² Scholars writing in the Black Theology tradition argue that this understanding of Christ asserts that it is his birth, death, and resurrection that make Jesus the Christ, the work of his ministry is irrelevant for understanding his divinity. Black Theology instead asserts that it is not the incarnation, but the work of liberation that is most relevant for understand the fundamental nature of Jesus. “It does not begin with abstract speculation about Jesus’ metaphysical nature. Instead it starts in history with Jesus’ ministry as that is recorded in the Gospels. What Jesus did is what it means for him to be the Christ.” (Douglas 2001, 113) By focusing on the ministry of Jesus, black theology asserts the centrality of the liberation work for modern Christians.

The understanding of Jesus in Black Theology is unique in two important ways. First, black theology constructs Christ as a Black Messiah with a specific connection with and message for African Americans. Second, Black Theology claims that it is in his role as liberator that Jesus becomes Christ. It is his ministry to the poor and dispossessed that is the central message of Jesus for Christians. Although Black Theology is itself an internally

² Those from an Episcopal tradition will be familiar with the Nicene creed that proceeds: We believe in one God, the Father, the Almighty, maker of heaven and earth, of all that is, seen and unseen. We believe in one Lord, Jesus Christ, the only Son of God, eternally begotten of the Father, God from God, Light from Light, true God from true God, begotten, not made, of one Being with the Father. Through him all things were made. For us and for our salvation he came down from heaven: by the power of the Holy Spirit he became incarnate from the Virgin Mary, and was made man. For our sake he was crucified under Pontius Pilate; he suffered death and was buried. On the third day he rose again in accordance with the Scriptures; he ascended into heaven and is seated at the right hand of the Father. He will come again in glory to judge the living and the dead, and his kingdom will have no end.

contested field of inquiry³ these two elements of Christ as black and as liberator are consistent across three decades of theological inquiry.⁴

Christ as Investment: Prosperity Theology and the Politics of Uplift

Across America thousands of black Christians pour into mega-churches on Sunday mornings.⁵ *Emerge* magazine first reported on this phenomenon in 1997. Churches of two thousand or more members are a fast growing segment of black churches in America. These churches are can be found in traditional migration cities like Philadelphia and Chicago, in Californian enclaves like Oakland, but are mostly concentrated in Southern sunbelt cities like Atlanta and Dallas. Black mega-churches tend to be located in or near large African American suburban communities. (Smith and Tucker-Worgs 2000) These churches are attracting increased journalistic and scholarly attention and criticism as observers question, “whether black mega-churches have effectively maintained the African American church’s traditional commitment to an active engagement with broad black-community issues.” (Smith and Tucker-Worgs 2000)

For the most part it is not Black Liberation Theology that is attracting these massive congregations. In fact, after thirty years of serious theological engagement with the academy, Black Theology has largely failed to penetrate the ministry of black churches.

Lincoln and Mamiya (1990) produce both survey data and qualitative responses that show

3 Hopkins (1999) draws out several important cleavages within the field. Among first generation Black Theologians Hopkins identifies both a political (Cleage and Cone) and cultural (Wilmore and Long) trend. “Political theologians move to confront harmful white power relations, their cultural colleagues move toward a focus on blackness.” (Hopkins 1999, 86) Hopkins further highlights contemporary confrontations between womanist Theologians and earlier masculinist trends in first generation thought. Hopkins also points to the differing emphases on popular culture, Afrocentrity, and globalization being taken up by second generation men. All of these dimensions are sources of complexity and contestation within Black Theology.

4 Admittedly some Black Theologians make Cleage’s argument for an ethnically black Christ and others remain committed to Cone’s ontological sense of blackness, but all have some notion that Christ has a unique relationship to African Americans that is best represented by understanding Jesus as black.

5 Mega-churches are not just an African American phenomenon. A trailblazer in this style is Willow Creek Community Church outside of Chicago. They describe their ministry as “Through drama, multi-media presentations, contemporary music and practical messages, we present the ageless truths of the Bible in a format that's easy to understand, even if you've never been to church.” (WillowCreek.org)

black liberation theology has a relatively limited influence upon the urban clergy. They find that ministers under forty and educated ministers were most likely to have an engagement with and positive view of Black Theology, but that only a little more than one third of black pastors interviewed claimed to be influenced at all by Black Theology. A decade later, Pinn (2002) argues that Black theology never penetrated black churches very deeply, “most black churches are not significantly influenced by academic discussions.” (Pinn 2002, 24)

If it is not black Christ, the Liberator that tens of thousands of black people meet on Sunday morning, who is the Jesus that they come to worship? In many cases, black mega-churches are preaching a prosperity gospel rather than a liberation theology.⁶ Many observers have argued that in the focus on building bigger, slicker congregations, these churches have lost sight of a black religious political tradition. “Admire the euphoria and excitement over their new ventures there’s real worry that many black ministers have developed terminal amnesia over the titanic historic role many black churches played in the struggle for civil rights and social justice.” (Hutchinson 2001)

Prosperity gospel is a constellation of beliefs that are variously grouped under the titles Health-Wealth, Word-Faith, or Name it-Claim it. In its crudest form prosperity gospel teaches that followers who tithe regularly and maintain positive, faithful attitudes and language will reap financial gains in the form of higher incomes and nicer homes and cars. In more subtle forms, prosperity gospel connects God’s mission for his people to financial freedom and security for individual Christians. Visualization and positive confession are advanced as part of a spiritual law that encourages God to bless individuals. Wealth is seen

⁶ This is not always true. The mega-church structure and the prosperity gospel approach are not synonymous. There are Black Liberation Theology mega-churches like Trinity United Church of Christ in Chicago, Illinois and there are certainly countless small congregations whose theology is prosperity gospel. However, many of the black mega-churches are prosperity gospel ministries. I will focus primarily on T.D. Jakes of the Potter’s House in Dallas Texas in this paper.

as evidence of God's blessing and Christians who follow certain formulas in their personal and spiritual lives will reap substantial material rewards. (Spotlight Ministries 2001) It is not a uniquely black religious tradition. The major figures in American prosperity gospel are charismatic white evangelicals such as Oral Roberts, Kenneth Copeland, Kenneth Hagin, and Robert Tilton.⁷ (Gilley 1999) Further, the prosperity gospel is an international phenomenon that is also prevalent in Africa and Latin America. (Robinson 2000, Onishi 2002, Ribeiro 1999)

Many observers and critics in the American Christian faith use the term "prosperity gospel" as a derogatory description of the relationship between manipulative, wealth-seeking pastors and docile, naive congregants willing to tithe themselves into financial ruin hoping for greater economic returns promised by God. This is certainly one variation of the prosperity gospel. Reverend Creflo Dollar of the World Changers Church International in College Park, Georgia is probably the most egregious example of a black minister in this tradition.⁸ His ministry asserts that those who tithe and have sufficient faith will be rewarded with money and property. Dollar tells his followers "You ain't gonna have no love and joy and peace until you get some money" and claims that all those who critique him are "operating by a spirit of poverty." (Dollar on *Praise the Lord*, July 20, 1999) However, I hope to avoid the all-encompassing denunciation of prosperity ministries as heretical. Unlike theologians, I am not interested in the biblical accuracy of the doctrine per se, rather I want to claim prosperity gospel as an important development in the contemporary black church

7 Black Entertainment Television drew a great deal of criticism when it made Robert Tilton's ministry a regular programming feature in 2000. "A network that pats itself on the back by saying it serves the black community ought to stop selling time to people who take advantage of them." Bender, Stephen. Oh God, You devil: Is BE T giving people what they want, or taking advantage of the faithful? November 21, 2000.

8 Creflo Dollar is the founder and pastor of World Changers Church International in College Park, Georgia. His ministry is broadcast of TBN and he is the author of several books, including "the Miracle of Debt Release." Other popular African American prosperity gospel ministers include Fredrick K.C. Price the pastor and founder of Crenshaw Christian Center in Inglewood, California. Price's television ministry, "Ever Increasing Faith" airs in 15 of the largest markets in the United States .

and to investigate the consequences of this theological position for the political action of African Americans.

Unlike Black Theology that has been articulated by two generations of academic theologians, prosperity gospel is folk theology. Some may argue that prosperity gospel should not rightly be understood as theology, because it is not tied to a scholarly tradition of inquiry. However, there is important reason to understand this ministry tradition as a kind of folk theology. In making a claim for the creation of Black Theology in 1969, the National Committee of Black Churchmen claims that theology is not the exclusive domain of intellectual elites in academic seminaries, it is experiential. “Black Theology was already present in the spirituals and slave songs and exhortations of slave preachers and their descendants. All theologies arise out of communal experience with God. At this moment in time, the black community seeks to express its theology in language that speaks to the contemporary mood of black people.” (NCNB 1969, 37) A similar claim can be made for understanding prosperity gospel as a contemporary theology. It arises from the work of preachers in their ministries, out of a communal experience with God, and seeks to speak to the contemporary mood of churchgoers.

Other critics may concede that prosperity gospel should be studied as an organic theology, but may question the relevance of studying the prosperity gospel within the African American religious tradition. Unlike Black Liberation Theology, which has been explicitly developed to speak to African American Christians, prosperity gospel appears to be little more than a derivative of a white evangelical movement.⁹ I maintain that prosperity gospel is relevant to the study of black religion and politics for two reasons. First, tens of thousands of African Americans are consumers of various forms of prosperity gospel,

⁹ Bruce Wilkinson's *The Prayer of Jabez* is a best-selling book that promises material gain to faithful followers who invoke particular prayer rituals. This text reflects the white evangelical tradition in prosperity gospel.

whether as members in ministries or as consumers of books videos, and tapes produced by prosperity gospel preachers. The very breadth of influence on contemporary black Christians makes prosperity gospel a meaningful field of inquiry for scholars of the African American religious experience. Secondly, I maintain that although prosperity gospel is closely linked to its white counterpart, it also has roots in indigenous black traditions. It is not an entirely derivate theology. Specifically, black prosperity gospel can be understood as a contemporary form of the uplift ideology. Historian Kevin Gaines describes this tradition writing, “for many black elites, uplift came to mean an emphasis on self-help, racial solidarity, temperance, thrift, chastity, social purity, patriarchal authority and the accumulation of wealth.” (Gaines 1996, 2) Prosperity theology, as it is practiced by many black ministers, reflects these same themes and concerns. Just as elements of slave religion operate as a black historical tradition underlying black liberation theology, uplift ideology ties prosperity gospel to an indigenous black tradition.

The prosperity gospel is not a cohesive set of articulated religious concerns. There is no body of literature that contains the canonical thought of the movement. It is a folk theology, alive in practice and action. Therefore, the evidence for its theological content must come from the preaching and writings of the ministers in this tradition, rather than from scholars developing an approach within the academy. In order to focus the discussion I have chosen one popular minister in this tradition: T.D. Jakes. Jakes is widely popular among African Americans. His church outside of Dallas, Texas, boasts a membership of 26,000. Jakes is also a prolific writer. He has authored five books that have become bestsellers on Christian lists. And Jakes has a somewhat more nuanced message than other prosperity preachers. His definition of prosperity is broader than cash and property; he is

also concerned with a personal and familial prosperity. Thus, he is less easily dismissed than some of his counterparts.

Images of Christ in Prosperity Gospel: The Case of T.D. Jakes

Christ appears sparingly in the writings of T.D. Jakes. The nature of Jesus and his relationship to the people of God is implicit in the advice and prescriptions offered to readers rather than explicitly articulated as it is in Black Theology. The two central characteristics of Jesus in Black Theology are Christ's blackness and his role as Liberator. In the prosperity gospel Christ is an investment strategy and a personal life coach. Jakes' *The Great Investment: Balancing Faith, Family, and Finance to Build a Rich Spiritual Life*, is representative of the approach to Christ taken by prosperity Gospel ministers. Jakes suggests that Christians have been deceived by Puritan notions and monastic traditions that encourage material denial. While he warns that poverty, "doesn't at all indicate there is a lack of faith," he does suggest that with enough faith and the right tools, wealth is the available to all Christians. Jakes reinterprets the Exodus narrative that has been central to African American religion since slavery as salvation from scarcity into a land of prosperity. Seen by liberation theologians as historical evidence of God's role as a liberator, Jakes argues that, the story of the Israelites is an indication of God's desire to make his people independent, self-sufficient, and prosperous. "God delivered them from scarcity...This is where God wants us to be as well...God wants you to have more than enough. He wants you to be financially independent." (Jakes 2000, 37) Jakes claims that as slaves the Israelites had become dependent on their Egyptian captives. When God leads his people into the wilderness it was to "wean them from the breast milk of dependency to the strong nutrition of self-reliance." (Jakes 2000, 34) By this reading, God is concerned with freeing his people from

dependency, not from oppression. Christ then becomes a fulfillment of this same mission, a messiah of self-sufficiency and wealth.

In the prosperity gospel, Jesus operates as a vehicle for achieving financial and personal fulfillment. Jakes normally eschews reference to Jesus and speaks more generally of God. He makes frequent use of the Old Testament and of the epistles of Paul, downplaying the gospels that are central to Liberation Theology, but when he does speak of Jesus it is as a strategy or tool for personal gain. Jakes does not claim that all gains will be financial. He stresses the importance of strong family connections and personal authenticity. Jesus is a path to all these things, but this relationship to Christ is always constructed as an individual investment strategy. It is not simply that believers have a *personal* relationship with Christ; they have an *individual* relationship.

To understand how Jakes perceives Christ it is instructive to assess his advice about how believers should make use of Jesus. Jakes directs followers to cover their families in the blood of Jesus. “You simply pray the blood of Jesus will cover their hearts, minds, spirits, and bodies...Christ’s blood prayed daily over your family will keep the destroyer at bay. If you fail to pray and cover your family, through prayer, in Jesus’ blood you leave them open to potential spiritually destructive influences that can tear the family apart.” (Jakes 2000, 122) By this formulation, Jesus is a kind of talisman that can be invoked for strategic personal purposes. African-inspired religions such as voodoo and voodun claim a similar “magical” role for blood. In Jakes’ formulation, Christ acts a kind of individual good luck charm that can be used to gain wealth, protect one’s family, and achieve one’s goals. Also, those whose families do meet with misfortune can look to themselves for blame because they have failed to invoke the necessary incantation to protect their family from demonic forces. Christ is a tool to be wielded by believers, rather than an independent agent working on behalf of his

people as a collective. Both prosperous and tragic family circumstances can be traced back to the ways that believers either used or failed to use the power of Jesus.

Jesus also takes on the role of personal life coach in the prosperity gospel. Jakes asserts that Christ's primary role is to allow his followers to reach their full potential as individuals. Jakes interprets the story of the Samaritan woman's encounter with Christ in John 4, writing, "Jesus knew all that this woman had done in her life, but focused not on her sins, but on her need. It's not that God doesn't judge us or want us to know our mistakes, but He sent His Son because He loves us and wants to see us whole." (Jakes 2002, 157) The prosperity gospel understands Christ as engaged in the everyday lives of his followers. He is concerned with their well-being, but in Black Theology Christ is a liberator working on behalf of the race, in prosperity gospel he is counselor and comforter engaging in personal relationship with individual men and women.

Jakes stresses that Christ is a kind of personal trainer who gives his people exercises to strengthen their faith. "The best way to exercise a weak muscle is to expose it to resistance. Trials and tribulations are the training tools of faith. When you face a difficult time and God brings you through it, you develop faith that He will bring you through the next crisis. The more resistance training, the stronger the muscle of faith." (Jakes 2000, 171) For the prosperity gospel, faith is necessary because it is faith that allows access to personal and financial reward. Christ is a personal trainer of the faith muscle, which, when strong allows believers to claim their prosperity. Jakes looks to the example of doubting Thomas to show how Christians often fail to recognize the importance of using faith as the evidence of things not seen. "Many times we, too, are required to bypass our senses and embrace our conviction. We must believe without the crutch of sensual perception...we will be required to believe, without the benefit of our senses, against all odds, that we will achieve whatever

we set out to do.” (Jakes 2000, 164) Strong faith is necessary to access spiritual blessing and Christ is the coach that strengthens that faith.

In the prosperity gospel Christ is instrumental. His power can be accessed and used by believers in order to improve their finances, protect their families, strengthen their faith, and achieve personal authenticity. He is a benevolent and powerful friend who is engaged with the personal choices and trials of individual Christians. He expects obedience indicated through adherence to sound financial practices, kind intimate relations, and convicted professions of faith.¹⁰ Christ is predictable and generous. Once believers tap into the formula for success and faith, God is certain to reward their efforts with boundless blessing of material gain and personal happiness.

Theorizing on Consequences for Political Activism

It is tempting to take on a theological critique of Black Liberation Theology and prosperity gospel. We could line them up next to one another, compare them to biblical texts, assess them in light of canonical Christian theological texts and determine how well each performs with respect to certain theological criteria. As important as such an evaluation might be to Christian scholars, that is not the goal of this analysis. Instead I want to argue that these differing conceptions of Christ have potentially powerful implications for the politics of African Americans. Social science has provided us with the empirical evidence that religiosity, church attendance, and exposure to politics in black churches affect the likelihood that blacks will participate in electoral, communal, and protest action. From this evidence it is reasonable to hypothesize that black religious ideas, or theology, influence the direction and shape of black political action. These two religious traditions are

¹⁰ Jakes peppers his text with shadow boxes containing important insights such as “If you cannot handle the temptation to overextend your credit, get rid of all your credit cards;(35) “When a woman appreciates what her husband does, she is, in essence appreciating him;”(100) and “faith is believing in things when common sense tells you no to” (166).

particularly interesting for this endeavor because both Black Theology and prosperity gospel fall on the same side of the other-worldly/ this worldly divide. Critics of black religion have often suggested that the other-worldly focus of traditional black religion hampers political involvement by encouraging African Americans to remain meek and await their heavenly reward. Both Black Theology and the prosperity gospel encourage believers to focus on the requirements and rewards of this world, but the way that they direct that focus is radically different. How might these two approaches to Christ affect the ways that black Christians approach politics?

Black Liberation Theology is born out of and in conjunction with the political ideology of Black Power. It is inherently political in its inception. That the theology of a people would have to be fundamentally reconsidered and rearticulated in light of changing political realities is an assertion of the centrality of the sacred, spiritual world to African American political action. In the Black Theology tradition Christ is black. One of the justifications for advancing a black Christ is the psychological impact of religious symbols on those that worship them. To the extent that the Black Messiah translates into greater self-esteem and a greater sense of mastery or efficacy, we would expect the Black Messiah to act as a psychological resource that can be accessed for political action. Developmental theories frequently suggest that positive role models are important for developing a sense of personal esteem and connection for young people. Imagine a better role model than Christ! If Christ is black, like me, then I must by extension be a worthy human being, crafted in the image of God. Work by Harris (1999) and Ellison (1996) link self esteem to political participation. Those who are introduced to the black messiah may develop psychological resources important for encouraging political participation.

But, the question of the political influence of theology on politics goes beyond the question of frequency of participation and touches on a concern with the direction and spirit of political action. Through the narrative of Christ as liberator Black Theology mandates a collective approach to politics that contains a critique of a system of inequality. Christians are called by Jesus' example not just to serve the poor, but to destroy the structures that create and reproduce poverty. Black theology asserts a relationship between Jesus and a community and argues a moral imperative to progressive political action. In this tradition, Christianity is not a matter affective attachment to God or traditional practice of religious ritual; Christianity is action on behalf of and in conjunction with Jesus for the purpose of changing the structures that perpetuate racial inequality.

This is not to say that Black Theology is the only ideological corrective necessary for a progressive black politics. First-generation Black Theology has been rigorously critiqued by both leftist and Womanist theologians as being insufficiently engaged with non-racial systems of oppression like gender, class, and sexual identity. There is little reason to believe that Cleage's black messiah inspires African Americans to act on behalf black gay communities being ravaged by AIDS. It is not clear that a black Jesus has the same psychological impact on black women as it does on black men. Second generation Black Theology, especially the contributions of Womanists, are addressing these shortcomings. A fully articulated Black Liberation Theology sensitive to the interlocking systems of oppression by race, class, gender, and sexuality seems an ideal motivating ideology for progressive political action on behalf of African Americans.

But it is not Cone or Cannon who sell millions of books to black Christians, preach to twenty thousand black men and women in enormous arenas, or who are broadcast in weekly television programs. It is the prosperity gospel that has won the allegiance of

millions of contemporary African Americans. What are the potential political implications of such an alignment?

The answer is unclear. In *The State of Black America 2000*, R. Drew Smith and Tamelyn Tucker-Worgs released some of the first available data on black mega-churches. Based on surveys of more than fifty black churches with memberships over two thousand, these preliminary data suggest that mega-churches outperform their smaller counterparts in terms of both political activity and community development. Ninety-six percent of black mega-churches indicate that they have helped in voter registration drives, 87 percent have provided rides to polls, and 63 percent have advocated on behalf of ballot issues, 10 percent report participating in protest rallies or marches. “Black megachurches may not be as apolitical as they have sometimes been thought to be. The apolitical image is possibly a problem of perception, created by the fact that the political aspects of black megachurches have not been as conspicuous as other aspects of their ecclesiastical and community activities.” (Drew and Tucker Worgs 2000, 187)

While this data is useful in refuting the claim that mega-churches are unengaged politically, this data cannot fully respond to the question of the political implications of prosperity theology for several reasons. First, mega-churches are a common organizational vehicle for the prosperity gospel, but the two are not equivalent. This data tells us what happens in big churches, but it doesn't tell us anything about the theological content of these churches, reflecting the bias that is present in political science scholarship that tends to privilege the organization components of the church over the ideological ones. Second, much of prosperity theology is disseminated through books, tapes, and television rather than through traditional church membership. By focusing only on the activities of churches we cannot know the impact of these ideas on the thousands of African American who consume

prosperity theology outside of church walls. Finally, this data is highly aggregated. It asks about the activities of churches, not of individuals in the church. It is possible that a church can be classified as politically active, even if only one hundred of its ten thousand members are involved in political action. There is no way to discern from this data whether or not thousands of African Americans are being mobilized for action or not.

In the absence of this kind of empirical evidence it is important to theorize about the political implications of the prosperity gospel. In this tradition Christ is an investment strategy and a personal coach. Christ wants his people to prosper financially and personally. This is a pervasively individualistic conception of Christ. Faith is individual; rewards are individual. The individualistic tenor the prosperity gospel reduces even the history of black social action to an individualistic success.

Jakes interprets Rosa Parks' pivotal refusal to yield her seat on an Alabama bus. "Little did Rosa Parks know that when she refused to surrender her seat and move to the back of the bus, more was at stake than a ride home. She was moving center stage by being herself. No games, no lines, no makeup- this was the real Rosa, and God shined a light on her soul that made history." (Jakes DATE, 9) Parks is offered as an example of a woman who, in Jake's words, has become one of God's Leading Ladies. Her role in the Montgomery bus boycott and subsequent civil rights movement is defined as a moment of great personal achievement, rather than as a culmination of decades of resistance to segregation on public transportation. (Kelley 1994)

Jakes uses prosperity gospel to similarly cast Martin Luther King as an example of word-faith at work: "There is a simple equation that applies to all of life. Conviction + Confession = Change. When you have belief planted firmly in your heart and you speak that belief, you will effect change. It adds up only when both elements are present...if the mouth confesses

what the heart is convicted of, it produces a strong elixir that will bring about change. It changed the country when Dr. Martin Luther King J., opened his mouth and spoke what his heart believed. It changed how the world viewed civil liberties. Dr. King combines convictions with confession and he changed the world.” (Jakes 200?, 156) This interpretation reduces the civil rights movement to the accomplishment of a single, faithful individual working in conjunction with Christ. While King’s articulation of the mood, demands, and spirit of the movement were undeniably critical to its success; Jakes’ narrative renders the mass protest, sacrifice, and struggle of thousands of black men and women secondary to the words of a single religious leader.¹¹

Without the identity of Christ as liberator there is no moral imperative for social action. This is especially troublesome when we consider that the prosperity gospel’s audience is largely middle class and suburban blacks with a lot at stake in the status quo. Without a moral imperative, why should they risk their tenuous and newly won material comforts to address the continuing issues of racial inequality. To the extent that prosperity gospel promotes an individualized, dispositional understanding of the world it could discourage collective political action aimed at addressing the material circumstances of racial inequality.

Empirical Evidence

The preponderance of social science research on the black church focuses on its organizational rather than its theological components. But, in the mid-1990s one national survey of African Americans provided a unique opportunity to connect specific African American religious beliefs with a broad range of black political action. The 1994 National Black Politics Study (NBPS) asks a battery of questions about perceptions of God and Christ

¹¹ I also can’t help but wonder what this says about the millions of Africans who died in the slave trade and in American slavery. Were they either insufficiently convicted or did they fail to convincingly articulate their desire for freedom!

and includes measures of political activity. The data from the NBPS come from a probability sample of all African American households, yielding 1206 observations who are African Americans eighteen years or older.¹² The survey was conducted between November 20, 1993 and February 20, 1994, with a response rate of sixty-five percent. The survey was administered through the University of Chicago with principal investigators Ronald Brown of Wayne State University and Michael Dawson of the University of Chicago. I use data from the NBPS to ask several questions. First, which African Americans are most likely to adhere to a conception of Christ that reflects Black Liberation Theology and which are most likely to understand God in a way consistent with the prosperity gospel? Second, do these beliefs have an independent influence on black political participation once we have accounted for other aspects of the black church? Finally, what are the directions of these effects?

I use two measures from the 1994 NBPS to model understandings of Christ that are consistent with Black Theology and prosperity gospel. The NBPS asked respondents: “When you speak or think of Christ, do you imagine Christ as being black or white?” Two hundred (22%) respondents report that they imagine Christ as black.¹³ This measure is an unambiguous indication of belief in a black Christ, a central tenet of Black Theology. The measure for the prosperity gospel is less obvious. The NBPS asks respondents to agree or disagree with the statement: “The humiliation and oppression experienced by black people is surely a sign that God is almost totally removed from the problems that confront black people.” Two hundred seven (22%) respondents reported agreement with this belief. This

12 The vast majority of respondents to the NBPS are Christian. Because I am specifically interested in the impact of these ideas on African American Christians this analysis retains only the 925 respondents who indicate that they are Protestant or Catholic.

13 Only 47 respondents indicated that they thought of Christ as white. Most asserted that their vision of Christ was neither white nor black.

measure is not a perfect indicator of the prosperity gospel, but it does capture an instrumental understanding of God. Prosperity gospel is centered in the belief that God's presence is manifested in tangible health, happiness, and wealth. Those who believe that oppression and humiliation are indicators of God's absence are subscribing to a similarly instrumental notion of God. If God brings good things, then bad things mean that God is absent. While imperfect, this measure does offer some leverage in attempting to understand the prevalence and influence of these ideas within black religious thought.

Who believes?

Each of these conceptions of God is measured as a dichotomous variable where 1 indicates agreement and 0 indicates disagreement with concept. The belief that Christ is black and the belief that African American racial problems indicate God's absence are separate dimensions of belief that are weakly, negatively correlated (-.02). Only 3 percent of respondents express agreement with both statements and the majority of the sample disagrees with both. To determine the individual characteristics that contribute to these theological understandings I model each as a dichotomous dependent variable as a function of gender, age, education, income, urban dwelling, denomination, and frequency of church attendance. Gender is a dichotomous variable with female coded as 1. Age is coded in years, with 43 the average age of the sample. Education is measured as the highest grade completed, with high school diploma as the modal response category. Income is annual household income measured in nine income categories ranging from under 10,000 to over 75,000. Urbanity is a dichotomous variable where those who report living in a city are coded as 1. Frequency of church attendance is coded on a unit range where 0 indicates never attending religious services and 1 indicates attending religious services at least once a week. Each equation is estimated using a maximum likelihood logistical estimation procedure.

The results indicate that black men are significantly more likely than black women to believe that Christ is black. Young people and those with higher levels of education are also far more likely to imagine a black Christ. Black Baptists (the vast majority of respondents) and urban dwellers are substantially more likely to envision a black Christ. Those who attend church frequently, however, are less likely to perceive Christ as Black. (Table 1) The pattern of effects is quite different when the same model is estimated with the instrumental conception of God as the dependent variable. There is no discernable effect of gender, age, urbanity, denomination, or frequency of church attendance. However, the belief that African American oppression is a sign of God's absence is more prevalent among African Americans with lower levels of education and with lower incomes. (Table 1)

Table 1: Models of Differing Notions of Christ

Variable	Christ is Black		God is Absent	
	Coefficient	SE	Coefficient	SE
Female	-.53**	.16	-.27	.17
Age	-.02**	.005	.004	.004
Education	.14**	.03	-.10**	.02
Income	.06	.04	-.10**	.04
City Dweller	.36*	.17	-.11	.15
Baptist	.38*	.17	.04	.16
Frequency of Church Attendance	-.89**	.34	-.33	.33
Constant	-2.55**	.54	.37	.48

Source: 1993-1994 National Black Politics Study.

Coefficients are derived from a maximum likelihood logistical estimation in STATA.

*denotes significance at $p < .05$, ** denotes significance at $p < .01$

Logit analysis allows us to translate these coefficients into predicted probabilities. The coefficients allow us to predict the likelihood that an individual with certain characteristics will hold particular religious beliefs. For example, the model predicts that the average female respondent, a 43-year-old, Baptist, with average education, income, and church attendance, living in the city has about a 16 percent likelihood of perceiving Christ as black. This same respondent has about a 14 percent likelihood of perceiving God's absence from black oppression. Her average male counterpart has a 24 percent likelihood of

believing in Christ's blackness and an 18 percent likelihood of believing that God is absent. A twenty-one year old male, city dwelling, Baptist with average education, income, and church attendance is has about a 31 percent likelihood of seeing Christ as black, but only about half that likelihood (17%) of citing black oppression as a reason to perceive God as absent. A sixty-five year old black woman of average characteristics has only about a 12 percent likelihood of envisioning a black Christ, but a greater probability (16%) of seeing black oppression as a reason to believe God is absent. However, if this older black woman is college educated and at the top of the income scale her likelihood of perceiving God as absent from black discrimination is halved to 8 percent.

Political Consequences

These results offer some leverage in understanding the individual characteristics associated with these differing conceptions of God, but a different analysis is necessary to determine the political consequences of these beliefs. The National Black Politics Study asks respondents about their involvement with a number of political activities. I construct a scale of political participation from responses to the following questions, (1) Did you vote in the last presidential election; in the past five years have you (2) contacted a public official; (3) attended a protest meeting or demonstration; (4) taken part in a neighborhood march; (5) signed a petition in support of or against something. This scale is coded on a unit range so that 0 means that the respondent did not engage in any of these political activities and 1 indicates that the respondent engaged in all of the political activities. This scale serves as a dependent variable in an ordinary least squares regression.

The estimated model accounts for several alternative hypotheses. The model tests the main hypothesis through the two measures of perceptions of Christ: the belief that Christ is black and the idea that black oppression indicates that God is absent. Three other

theological variables are included in the model. Denomination is included to capture some of the variation in religious teachings across denominations. The NBPS also asked respondents to indicate if religion provides guidance in their day-to-day living. This variable is coded on a unit range where higher values indicate that religion is more important as a daily guide. This measure is included to distinguish between those who compartmentalize their religiosity and those who perceive it as infusing other aspects of their lives. Finally, the model includes a measure that asked respondents; “how important is that all images and pictures of Christ in black churches show him as being black?” Although only 200 respondents report that they believe Christ is black, nearly 450 reported that it was important that images of Christ in black churches be black. While the vast majority of those who believe Christ is black also believe it is important to represent Him as black, there is not perfect convergence on these two measures. Both measures are included to account for the difference between a personal belief in a black Christ and more general belief that black images of Jesus are important.

In addition to these theological indicators the estimated model includes measures of the organizational elements of the black church that social science literature has more frequently explored. Brady, Verba, and Scholzman (1995) and Rosenstone and Hansen (1993) indicate that African Americans who regularly attend church develop skills useful for political participation and are more likely to be mobilized than those who do not attend church. Therefore, the model includes a measure of frequency of church attendance as a test of these hypotheses. Harris (1999) and Calhoun-Brown (1996) find that politicized black churches bring individuals into contact with personal and institutional resources that can be used in political participation. Using the measures available in the National Black Politics Survey it is possible to model participation in politicized churches.

Nearly half of respondents report engagement with some form of church-based political discussion. Thirty-four percent reported talking to people about political matters at church. Fifty percent heard a clergy member talk about the need for people to become involved in politics. Thirty-eight percent heard a political leader speak at church and twenty-three percent heard a church official suggest voting for or against certain candidates. Respondents were somewhat less likely to be engaged in political activity at church than in church-based political discussion, but nearly a quarter reported some involvement with church-based political action. Twenty-three percent, helped in a voter registration drive; twenty-five percent gave people a ride to the polls on election day; twenty-four percent gave money to a political candidate; twenty seven percent attended a candidate fund raiser; twenty three percent handed out campaign materials; and forty two percent signed a petition supporting a candidate as a part of her regular religious duties in the past two years. For the majority of African Americans, church is not a site of political conversation or action; but a substantial portion of blacks do encounter political ideas and opportunities for involvement in their religious lives. These measures are combined into additive scales of church-based political discussion and church-based political action and are included to account for earlier findings about the centrality of politicized black churches.

The model also includes two important measures of racial attitudes. Dawson (1994) and Tate (1993) shows that individuals who perceive their own fate as linked to the fate of the race are more likely to participate politically. The NBPS asks respondents if “what happens to black people affects what happens in my own life.” This measure of black linked fate is coded on a unit range where higher values indicate stronger connection with the fate of the race. The model also includes a measure of support for racial self-reliance. Black Liberation Theology emerged from black nationalists projects of the late sixties. It is

possible that those who believe Christ is black are more likely to be black nationalists and that any differences in political participation will be due to nationalist disposition rather than the religious beliefs. A measure of support for black self-reliance is coded from agreement with the statement “black people should rely on themselves not on others.” This measure is included to control for the effect of black nationalist sentiment. Finally, the model includes a number of demographics shown in earlier research to impact political participation: gender, age, income, education, and urban dwelling. Results from an ordinary least squares estimation of the model are reported in Table 2.

Table 2: Model of Political Action

	Coefficient	SE
Theology		
Christ is Black	.06**	.02
Images of Black Christ Important	-.01	.02
Problems mean God is absent	-.04*	.02
Religion provides daily guidance	-.01	.02
Baptist	.001	.001
Organizational Resources		
Frequency of Church Attendance	.08*	.03
Political Action in Church	.46**	.03
Political Discussion in Church	.02*	.01
Racial Attitudes		
Black Linked Fate	.07**	.02
Racial Self-Reliance	.06*	.02
Demographics		
Female	-.01	.01
Income	.01**	.002
Education	.005*	.002
Age	.0004	.0004
Urban Dweller	.01	.01

Source: 1993-1994 National Black Politics Study.

Coefficients are derived from ordinary least squares regression performed in STATA.

*denotes significance at $p < .05$ ** denotes significance at $p < .01$

$R^2 = .37$

The results confirm earlier findings about African American political participation. Socioeconomic status measured as education and income both positively influence political action. Consistent with findings of Shingles, Tate, and Dawson, those with a higher sense of black linked fate and those who support racial self-reliance are more likely to be politically involved. Further, the organizational resources model is supported. Those who attend church more frequently are more likely to engage in political action. When elected officials make appeals from the pulpit and clergy encourage political involvement it increases participation among worshippers. Most importantly, there is a strong and important connection between church-based political action and the likelihood of engaging in political activity outside the church. It is clear that the black church is an important site of gathering resources than can be deployed in political action.

While earlier notions of political participation are confirmed, this analysis also shows that there is an independent role for black theology in influencing African American political action. Even after controlling for demographic variables, racial attitudes, and organizational resources, key tenets of African American theology have a discernable impact on black political participation. Those who perceive Christ as a black messiah are significantly more likely to participate politically. Conversely, those who see God more instrumentally, asserting that black oppression is a reason for perceiving God as absent, are less likely to be politically engaged. The black Christ of Black Liberation theology has a separate, discernable, and positive impact on black political action.

Assessing the Visions

The church is a place where African Americans learn important civic skills. Those who are active learn about running meetings, passing motions, organizing groups, and mediating competing interests. All those skills can be used in the political realm. The

church is a place where black people become available to mobilization by political entrepreneurs and groups. Candidates, parties, and organizations go to black churches to find voters, campaign workers, and community organizers. The church is a place where African Americans develop psychological resources of self-esteem and efficacy. They learn about their intrinsic worth as human beings and use those psychological resources to bolster their capacity to engage with an often hostile American state. Political science has largely concerned itself with documenting these civic skills (Brady, Verba, Scholzman 1995), psychological resources (Harris 1999), and mobilizing opportunities (Rosenstone and Hansen 1993).

But the church is also a place where black people come into contact with ideas. When African Americans meet a black Christ, they are more likely to engage in political participation. Black Theology is prophetic. It is meant to provide a theological grounding for a marginalized people struggling for equality. By introducing African Americans to Christ the liberator, Black Theology supports the continuing struggle of African Americans by bolstering their participatory action. Conversely, when blacks encounter instrumental ideas of God that perceive black inequality as evidence of God's absence, they are less likely to engage politically. When Christ is a black liberator African Americans are emboldened to action, finding themselves able to ask, "what then shall we say to these things? If God is for us, who can be against us?" (Romans 8:31)

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