

The Discerner

the voice of... **Religion Analysis Service**

A QUARTERLY EXPOSING
UNBIBLICAL TEACHING & MOVEMENTS

Volume 31, Number 4

October • November • December 2011

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Buddhism
Scientology
Satanism

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In This Edition:

Office Notes2
RAS Team

Dear Reader3
by Rev. Laurence J. Sutherland

With This Issue4
by Rev. Laurence J. Sutherland

“Black Theology, Black Power, and the Black Experience” Part Two in a Three-Part Series on Liberation Theology.....5
by Dr. Ron Rhodes

Book Review on DECISION POINTS *by*
President George W. Bush21
Reviewed by: Dr. Robert L. Sumner

When They Come to Your Door.....25
by Rev. Steve Lagoon

QUIZ: Religion and Sports.....28

Articles in Archive30



*"Hereby know we the spirit of truth
and the spirit of error" 1 John 4:6*

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OFFICE NOTES

NEW PRESIDENT OF RELIGION ANALYSIS SERVICE – REV. STEVE LAGOON

Rev. Steve Lagoon has been long identified with RAS, serving in the office, serving on the board, writing articles for *The Discerner*, and now he will oversee our ministry as President. He also ministered as pastor of Faith Community Church of Independence, MN from 2000-2010. He is 48 years old and is married to his wife Sherry for 26 years. They have six children and reside in Cottage Grove, MN.

Steve has a Bachelor of Arts Degree and a Master of Arts Degree in Theology, both from Northwestern College in St. Paul, MN. He is currently working on a Master of Divinity Degree (Northwestern College) to be completed in the spring of 2013.

He is co-author (with Steve DeVore) of "Blood, Medicine, and Jehovah's Witnesses" published in 1995 and (with Thomas Sheehy) of "Oneness Pentecostalism: New Truth or Old Heresy" in 2000. The *Discerner* readers will also surely note that he has written numerous articles on various counter-cult and apologetics issues over the years.

We welcome our new President and wish him God's blessing in his new ministry position.

RAS TEAM

DEAR READER

First of all, the RAS team and I wish you God's richest blessings in the New Year.

A recent Pew Research Institute report on marriage (Huffington Post, 12/14/11) should disturb us. We read that barely half of Americans over the age of 18 are legally married. From 1960 to 2010 there has been a percentage decrease from 72% to 51%, respectively. Then too most men who get married for the first time are around 29 years of age and most women who get married for the first time are nearly 27 years of age.

The report goes on to explain these phenomena: 1) Living arrangements seem to be getting more socially acceptable now: cohabitation; living a single life, for instance, to pursue educational or vocational goals; living a single life as a parent; and to gain sufficient financial security to marry. 2) Other factors such as the marital, social, and vocational patterns of parents influence the subsequent life styles of the children.

Of course, the Pew Institute is a secular research agency and is not identified with any religious group, but it should recognize the significance of religious convictions and practices in molding American marriage realities. As a counterweight to the sociological observations above, but without lengthy analysis, I submit the following biblical standards for consideration: 1) Chastity before and during marriage, the "marriage bed" is honorable and adulterous relationships condemned; 2) Some willingly choose celibacy for the sake of a higher calling, some should not or are unable to marry; 3) Marriage is exclusively between one/a man and one/a woman; 4) Children are blessings from the Lord and should be trained in the fear and admonition of the Lord; 5) God hates divorce and Jesus' permission because of adultery is allowed but not necessarily desirable; temporary separation of the married partners because of differences is allowed; and (6) Love for and respect for the spouse should rule and reign and be the modus operandi for conjugal relationships.

Yours sincerely, yours gratefully,

Laurence J. Sutherland

WITH THIS ISSUE

In my years of teaching at a theological school in Germany, I had the privilege to study under Professor Peter Beyerhaus at the University of Tuebingen. One of his courses had to do with Liberation Theology and a corollary study on Black Theology. Professor Beyerhaus had served as a missionary in South Africa and was well acquainted with the raging issues at that time on Apartheid government. He introduced us also to the variations of Liberation Theology as advanced by James Cone and others in the Americas, including South America, Central America, and the USA. These theologies remain issues of concern for us, even up to our present presidential elections in the USA.

In our lead article Dr. Ron Rhodes presents an expose of Liberation Theology that is excellent in historical and analytical depth. He painstakingly and succinctly supplies the information that we need to know and understand Liberation Theology. It will surely be enlightening to many of our readers as to the prevalence of its philosophical, theological and political underpinnings even in modern America.

The book review by Dr. Robert L. Sumner treats the recent publication of “Decision Points” by Ex-President George W. Bush. Why does Dr. Sumner, an evangelical editor, review such a book and why do we include it in *The Discerner*? Our answer: Because it reveals Christianity as it is represented in the higher political echelons of our society and how President Bush’ decisions and opinion relate to evangelical Christianity. The book review should make us want to read this rather substantive tome.

What do you do when the cultists come to your door? Our new RAS president Steve Lagoon supplies helpful suggestions in talking with cultists in brief, tactful form.

Some of our readers love sports — it’s such a part of our culture. Perhaps the quiz on sports will quicken us to know more about the historical, societal, health, and religious values of our pastimes. Let’s hear about your scores on this quiz too!

Laurence J. Sutherland

“BLACK THEOLOGY, BLACK POWER, AND THE BLACK EXPERIENCE”

Part Two in a Three-Part Series on Liberation Theology

By Dr. Ron Rhodes

Between 1517 and 1840 it is estimated that twenty million blacks were captured in Africa, transported to America, and brutally enslaved. The experience of these blacks — and their descendants — serves as the backdrop for understanding contemporary black liberation theology.

During slave trading days, blacks were crammed into ships like sardines into a can and brought across the Atlantic. Many died at sea from dysentery, smallpox, and other diseases. “Some starved themselves to death refusing to eat. To prevent this form of suicide, hot coals were applied to the lips to force the slaves to open their mouths to eat.”¹

Upon arriving on American shores, the slaves — men, women, and children — were forced to work from sunrise to sunset. Even old and ailing slaves were forced to work.

The brutality shown to the slaves is among the saddest chapters in American history. Black theologian Anthony Evans tells us that “black women were raped at will by their masters at the threat of death while their husbands could only look on. Families were separated as they were bought and sold like cattle.”²

For tax purposes, slaves were counted as property — like domestic animals. Eventually, however, a question arose as to how to count slaves in the nation’s population. The Congress solved the problem by passing a bill that authorized the U.S. Census Bureau to count each slave as three-fifths of a person. This Congressional compromise resulted in what one Negro writer of the 1890s called “the ‘Inferior Race Theory,’ the placing of the Negro somewhere between the barnyard animals and human beings.”³

THE CHRISTIANIZATION OF SLAVERY

Initially, there was heated resistance to evangelizing among slaves. Black scholar C. Eric Lincoln tells us there were three principal

1 William L. Banks, *The Black Church in the U.S.* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1972), 12.

2 Anthony T. Evans, *Biblical Theology and the Black Experience* (Dallas: Black Evangelistic Enterprise, 1977), 19.

3 James W. English, “Could Racism Be Hereditary?,” *Eternity*, September 1970, 22.

reasons for this: “(1) the hearing of the gospel required time that could be economically productive; (2) slaves gathered together in a religious assembly might become conscious of their own strength and plot insurrections under cover of religious instruction; (3) there was an English tradition of long standing that once a slave became a Christian he could no longer be held a slave.”⁴

In addition, many whites were repulsed at the suggestion that blacks could go to heaven. Morgan Godwyn, a graduate of Oxford University who served in churches in Virginia around 1665, wrote that slavemasters would commonly exclaim, “What, such as they? What, those black dogs be made Christians? What, shall they be like us?”⁵

Some whites tried to argue that blacks were less than human. Buckener H. Payne, in his book *The Negro: What Is His Ethnological* blacks are present with us today, they must have been in the ark. There were only eight souls saved in the ark, however, and they are fully accounted for by Noah’s family. As one of the beasts in the ark, the black has no soul to be saved.⁶ So why try to evangelize them?

Regardless of such preposterous arguments, missionary work eventually began among the slaves in the early 1700s and many of them became Christians. The brand of Christianity that was preached to them, however, was one that justified slavery. It was argued that Paul and other New Testament writers issued specific instructions for master-slave relations, thus apparently sanctioning the practice. Moreover, a curse of slavery was placed on the “sons of Ham” (Gen. 9:20-27) — who were interpreted to be blacks. Furthermore, slavery was considered a “religious good,” for it amounted to importing unsaved heathens to a Christian land where they could hear the gospel and be saved.

(However, though Paul gave instructions on master-slave relations, his underlying belief was that slaves should be freed [1 Cor. 7:21]. Moreover, a curse of slavery was placed only on Ham’s son, Canaan — whose descendants later occupied Phoenicia and Palestine. They were Caucasians. As for slavery being a “religious good,” this seems an absurd claim in view of the cruel, inhuman treatment shown to the slaves.)

Most blacks accepted the slave brand of Christianity at face value. Moreover, white missionaries persuaded the blacks that life on earth was insignificant because “obedient servants of God could

4 C. Eric Lincoln, “The Development of Black Religion in America,” *Review and Expositor* 70 (Summer 1973):302.

5 *Ibid.*, 303.

6 Millard J. Erickson, *Christian Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1983), 543.

expect a reward in heaven after death.”⁷ The white interpretation of Christianity effectively divested the slaves of any concern they might have had about their freedom in the present.

As more blacks began attending white Christian churches, restrictions in seating, communion services, and property ownership caused many blacks to seek autonomy in their own congregations and ultimately, separate denominations. So, by the mid-1700s, black slaves had begun meeting in private to worship since authentic worship with whites was impossible. There is sufficient historical evidence to conclude that themes later developed by black liberation theologians were present in these early slave meetings in at least a nascent form.

For example, God was interpreted by the slaves as a loving Father who would eventually deliver them from slavery just as He had delivered Israel from Egyptian bondage. Jesus was considered both a Savior and an elder brother who was a fellow sufferer.

Heaven had a dual implication for black slaves. Yes, it referred to the future life, but it also came to refer to a state of liberation in the present. Because of the risk involved in preaching liberation, the slave learned how to sing liberation in the very presence of his master:

“Swing low, sweet chariot (underground railroad - conestoga wagon)

Coming for to carry me home (up North to freedom)

Swing low (come close to where I am),

Sweet chariot Coming for to carry me home.

I looked over Jordan (Ohio River - border between North and South) And what did I see,

Coming for to carry me home

A band of angels (northern emancipators with the underground) coming after me.

Coming for to carry me home.”⁸

7 James H. Cone, *Black Theology and Black Power* (hereafter *Theology*) (New York: Seabury Press, 1969), 121.

8 Emmanuel McCall, “Black Liberation Theology: A Politics of Freedom,” *Review and Expositor* 73 (Summer 1976):330; cf. C. Eric Lincoln and Lawrence H. Mamiya, *The Black Church in the African American Experience* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1990), 352.

THE DEVELOPMENT OF BLACK LIBERATIONIST THOUGHT

It was not long before slave theology gave rise to black activism. There are many important figures who contributed to the cause of black liberation throughout black history. We can only mention a few here.

Nat Turner (1800-1831) was the most notorious slave preacher who ever lived on American soil. Turner's hatred of slavery propelled him to seek freedom by violence. Indeed, Turner killed nearly sixty white people before being captured and hanged in September, 1831. This violent revolt marked the beginning of the black struggle for liberation.

Marcus Garvey (1887-1940) is regarded by many as "the apostle of black theology in the United States of America."⁹ Martin Luther King, Jr., said Garvey "was the first man on a mass scale and level to give millions of Negroes a sense of dignity and destiny, and make the Negro feel he is somebody."¹⁰ Garvey was one of the first to speak of seeing God through black "spectacles."

Howard Thurman, in his book *Jesus and the Disinherited* (1949), saw black life paralleling Jesus' life because His poverty identified Him with the poor masses. Thurman also noted that Jesus was a member of a minority group (the Jews) in the midst of a larger and controlling dominant group (the Romans). Thurman thus drew many applications for the black experience from the life of Jesus.

Martin Luther King, Jr. (1929-1968) was America's most visible civil rights leader from 1955 until his assassination in April, 1968 in Memphis, Tennessee. Though he cannot be called a formal participant in the black theology movement, he nevertheless roused the conscience of black America to passionate commitment to liberation.

King was an advocate of Gandhian nonviolent social change. Through nonviolent suffering, King believed that "blacks would not only liberate themselves from the necessity of bitterness and the feeling of inferiority toward whites, but would also prick the conscience of whites and liberate them from a feeling of superiority."¹¹ To some, King's assassination indicated that nonviolence as a means of liberation had failed and that perhaps a more revolutionary theology was needed.

Albert Cleage was one of the more militant black writers of the 1960s. His claim to fame was *The Black Messiah*, a 1968 collection of sermons in which he set forth his brand of black nationalism.

9 Lindsay A. Arscott, "Black Theology," *Evangelical Review of Theology* 10 (April-June 1986):137.

10 Quoted by Clair Drake, *Foreword to Garveyism as a Religious Movement*, Randall Burkett (Metuchen, NJ: Scarecrow Press, 1978), 15.

11 James H. Cone, "Black Theology in American Religion," *Theology Today* 43 (April 1986):13.

Cleage rejected the Pauline books in the New Testament. He said that — in contrast to the black Messiah — there was a spiritualized Jesus constructed by the apostle Paul who “never knew Jesus and who modified his teaching to conform to the pagan philosophers of the white gentiles. We, as black Christians suffering oppression in a white man’s land, do not need the individualistic and other-worldly doctrines of Paul and the white man.”¹²

THE EMERGENCE OF A FORMAL “BLACK THEOLOGY”

Over one hundred and thirty years after Nat Turner was hanged, black theology emerged as a formal discipline. Beginning with the “black power” movement in 1966, black clergy in many major denominations began to reassess the relationship of the Christian church to the black community. Black caucuses developed in the Catholic, Presbyterian, and Episcopal churches. “The central thrust of these new groups was to redefine the meaning and role of the church and religion in the lives of black people. Out of this reexamination has come what some have called a ‘Black Theology.’”¹³

For the first time in the history of black religious thought, black clergy (primarily educated, middle-class black clergy) and black theologians began to recognize the need for a completely new “starting point” in theology. They insisted that this starting point must be defined by people at the bottom and not the top of the socioeconomic ladder. So, black theologians began to re-read the Bible through the eyes of their slave grandparents and started to speak of God’s solidarity with the oppressed of the earth.

The most prolific and sophisticated writer of this new theological movement has been James Cone. No one has matched him either in terms of sheer volume of writing, or in terms of the challenge posed by his books. For this reason, we shall examine his theology in depth.

James Cone: Theologian of Black Liberation

In assessing the theology of James Cone, it is critical to recognize that he sees black experience as the fundamental starting point for ascertaining theological truth. And his own writings are a reflection of his own “black experience” — that is, the discrimination he suffered while growing up as a child in Bearden, Arkansas.

What was it like in Bearden? “It meant attending ‘separate but equal’ schools, going to the balcony when attending a movie, and drinking water from a ‘colored’ fountain. It meant refusing to retaliate when

¹² Albert B. Cleage, *The Black Messiah* (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1969), 4.

¹³ Charles V. Hamilton, *The Black Preacher in America* (New York: William Morrow, 1972), 140.

called a nigger unless you were prepared to leave town at the precise moment of your rebellion. You had no name except for your first name of 'boy.'"¹⁴ Cone concedes that "my theological reflections are inseparable from the Bearden experience. What I write is urged out of my blood."¹⁵

Cone says that "it is this common experience among black people in America that Black Theology elevates as the supreme test of truth. To put it simply, Black Theology knows no authority more binding than the experience of oppression itself. This alone must be the ultimate authority in religious matters."¹⁶

From the above, one may immediately suspect that Cone has a deficient view of the authority of Scripture. Indeed, his view seems very close to the neo-orthodoxy of Karl Barth, as when Cone writes: "It is true that the Bible is not the revelation of God, only Christ is. But it is an indispensable witness to God's revelation."¹⁷ Moreover, "we should not conclude that the Bible is an infallible witness."¹⁸ Cone believes the meaning of Scripture is not to be found in the words of Scripture as such, but only in its power to point beyond itself to the reality of God's "revelation," which — in America — takes place experientially in God's liberating work among blacks.

Black Theology and Black Power. Based on the preeminence of "black experience," Cone defines theology as "a rational study of the being of God in the world in light of the existential situation of an oppressed community, relating the forces of liberation to the essence of the gospel, which is Jesus Christ."¹⁹ Cone's theology asks (and seeks to answer) the question, "What does the Christian gospel have to say to powerless black men whose existence is threatened daily by the insidious tentacles of white power?"²⁰

In answering this pivotal question, Cone emphasizes that there is a very close relationship between black theology and what has been termed "black power." Cone says that black power is a phrase that represents both black freedom and black self-determination "wherein black people no longer view themselves as without human dignity but as men, human beings with the ability to carve out their own destiny."²¹

14 James H. Cone, *God of the Oppressed* (New York: Seabury Press, 1975), 3.

15 *Ibid.*

16 Cone, *Theology*, 120.

17 James H. Cone, *A Black Theology of Liberation* (hereafter *Liberation*) (Philadelphia: J. P. Lippencott, 1970), 66

18 *Ibid.*, 67.

19 *Ibid.*, 17-18.

20 *Ibid.*, 32.

21 Cone, *Theology*, 6.

Cone says black theology is the religious counterpart of black power. “Black Theology is the theological arm of Black Power, and Black Power is the political arm of Black Theology.”²² And, “while Black Power focuses on the political, social, and economic condition of black people, Black Theology puts black identity in a theological context.”²³

We gain insights about what Cone means by “black theology” and “black power” by understanding what blackness means in his theology. Cone notes two aspects of blackness: the physiological and ontological. In the first sense, “black” indicates a physiological trait. It refers to “a particular black-skinned people in America.”²⁴

In the second sense, “black” and “white” relate not to skin pigmentation but to “one’s attitude and action toward the liberation of the oppressed black people from white racism.”²⁵ Blackness is thus “an ontological symbol for all people who participate in the liberation of man from oppression.”²⁶ Seen in this light, “blackness” can be attributed to people who do not have black skin but who do work for liberation.

By contrast, “whiteness” in Cone’s thought symbolizes the ethnocentric activity of “madmen sick with their own self-concept” and thus blind to that which ails them and oppresses others. Whiteness symbolizes sickness and oppression. White theology is therefore viewed as a theological extension of that sickness and oppression.²⁷

Having established that the black experience is the governing principle in Cone’s interpretation of Scripture, it is important to understand how this governing principle has affected his views of specific doctrines.

God. Cone bases much of his liberationist theology on God’s deliverance of Israel from oppression under the Egyptians. He says that the consistent theme in Israelite prophecy is Yahweh’s concern for “the lack of social, economic, and political justice for those who are poor and unwanted in the society.”²⁸

This same God, Cone argues, is working for the deliverance of oppressed blacks in twentieth-century America. Because God is helping oppressed blacks and has identified with them, God Himself is spoken of as “black.”

22 James H. Cone, “Black Power, Black Theology,” *Theological Education* 6 (Spring 1970):209.

23 James H. Cone, quoted in K. Bediako, “Black Theology,” in *New Dictionary of Theology*, ed. Sinclair B. Ferguson and David F. Wright (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1988), 103.

24 Cone, *Liberation*, 32.

25 Nyameko Pityana, “What Is Black Consciousness?” *Black Theology: The South African Voice*, ed. Basil Moore (London: C. Hurst & Co., 1973), 63.

26 Cone, *Liberation*, 32.

27 *Ibid.*, 29.

28 *Ibid.*, 19.

Black theology's dominant perspective on God is "God in action, delivering the oppressed because of His righteousness. He is to be seen, not in the transcendent way of Greek philosophy, but immanent, among His people."²⁹ God is "immanent" in the sense that He is met in concrete historical situations of liberation.

This is very similar to the idea of the immanence of God in process theology. Indeed, process theologian David Ray Griffin, while recognizing important differences between process and black theology, has suggested that "process philosophy supports liberation theologians in locating the reality of God's presence and creative activity in this world."³⁰

Jesus Christ. Cone's intention is to stand in the Chalcedonian tradition in his understanding of Jesus Christ. The Chalcedonian creed (A.D. 451) affirmed that Christ is "truly God and truly man." Cone agrees with this, but adds that the role of Jesus as God-Incarnate was to liberate the oppressed: Jesus Christ "is God himself coming into the very depths of human existence for the sole purpose of striking off the chains of slavery, thereby freeing man from ungodly principalities and powers that hinder his relationship with God."³¹

One of the more controversial aspects of Cone's Christology is his view that Jesus was (is) black: "The 'raceless' American Christ has a light skin, wavy brown hair, and sometimes — wonder of wonders — blue eyes. For whites to find him with big lips and kinky hair is as offensive as it was for the Pharisees to find him partying with tax-collectors. But whether whites want to hear it or not, Christ is black, baby, with all of the features which are so detestable to white society" (emphasis in original).³²

Cone believes it is very important for black people to view Jesus as black: "It's very important because you've got a lot of white images of Christ. In reality, Christ was not white, not European. That's important to the psychic and to the spiritual consciousness of black people who live in a ghetto and in a white society in which their lord and savior looks just like people who victimize them. God is whatever color God needs to be in order to let people know they're not nobodies, they're somebodies."³³

29 H. Wayne House, "An Investigation of Black Liberation Theology," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 139 (April-June 1982):163.

30 David Ray Griffin, "Values, Evil, and Liberation Theology," in *Process Philosophy and Social Thought*, ed. John B. Cobb (Chicago: Center for the Scientific Study of Religion, 1981), 185. Process theology espouses a finite God that evolves, is subject to change, and is intrinsically related to the world.

31 Cone, *Theology*, 35.

32 J. H. Cone, "The White Church and Black Power," in G. S. Wilmore and J. H. Cone, *Black Theology: A Documentary History, 1966-1979* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1979), 116-17.

33 James H. Cone, interviewed by Barbara Reynolds, *USA Today*, 8 November 1989, 11A.

For Cone, the Resurrection of the black Jesus — a real event — symbolizes universal freedom for all who are bound. It is not just a future-oriented hope in a heavenly compensation for earthly woes. Rather, it is a hope that focuses on the future in such a way that it prevents blacks from tolerating present inequities.³⁴ This is closely related to Cone's understanding of eschatology (more on this shortly).

Sin and Salvation. In Cone's view, sin is "a condition of human existence in which man denies the essence of God's liberating activity as revealed in Jesus Christ."³⁵ In this view, sin is anything that is contrary to the oppressed community or its liberation.

Salvation for Cone primarily has to do with earthly reality, not heavenly hopes. "To see the salvation of God is to see this people [i.e., the blacks] rise up against their oppressors, demanding that justice become a reality now and not tomorrow."³⁶ Hence, though Cone often speaks of Jesus as the Liberator, in practical terms he emphasizes the human work of self-liberation among blacks and downplays divine help.

The Church. Cone believes the black church has played an instrumental role in the religious and social life of black America. He says the black church was the creation of a black people "whose daily existence was an encounter with the overwhelming and brutalizing reality of white power. For the slaves it was the sole source of identity and the sense of community. The black church became the only sphere of black experience that was free of white power."³⁷

Still, Cone believes that — since the days of slavery — the black church has largely capitulated to the demands of a white racist society. He argues that in order to survive, the black churches have given up their freedom and dignity. After the Civil War, black churches became passive in the struggle for civil rights and freedom while currying favors from the white establishment. This condition, Cone says, has persisted up to the present day, rendering the black church "the lifeless pawn of the status quo."³⁸

Only faithfulness to the "pre-Civil War black church tradition" will issue in "an exclusive identification with black power," Cone believes. He says that a continued emphasis on black power is "the only hope of the black church in America."³⁹ (Though "black power" as a movement

34 Cone, *Liberation*, 21.

35 *Ibid.*, 190.

36 *Ibid.*, 227.

37 James H. Cone, "Black Theology and Black Liberation," in *Black Theology: The South African Voice*, ed. Basil Moore (London: C. Hurst & Co., 1973), 92, 96.

38 Cone, *Liberation*, 236-37.

39 Cone, *Theology*, 109.

faded after the 1960s, the primary emphasis of the movement — the dignity, freedom, and self-determination of black people — has continued in Cone’s theological writings. It is this emphasis that Cone says has been missing in many black churches.)

Eschatology. Cone rejects what he terms the “white lie” that Christianity is primarily concerned with life in the next world: “If eschatology means that one believes that God is totally uninvolved in the suffering of man because he is preparing them for another world, then black theology is not eschatological. Black theology has hope for this life.”⁴⁰

Cone asks what good there is in golden crowns, slippers, and white robes “if it means that we have to turn our backs on the pain and suffering of our own children? Unless the future can become present, thereby forcing us to make changes in this world, what significance could eschatology have for black people who believe that their self-determination must become a reality now?”⁴¹

Revolution and Violence. I would be remiss to close this discussion of James Cone without noting his views on revolution and violence. Cone defines liberation as the “emancipation of black people from white oppression by whatever means black people deem necessary.”⁴² This definition would seem to allow for the use of violence.

Cone does not advocate armed revolution against white society. But some violence, he says, seems unavoidable. He points out that “the Christian does not decide between violence and nonviolence, evil and good. He decides between the lesser and the greater evil. He must ponder whether revolutionary violence is less or more deplorable than the violence perpetuated by the system.”⁴³ Injustice, slave labor, hunger, and exploitation are all violent forms that must be considered against the cost of revolutionary violence.

LIBERATION THEOLOGY AND THE BLACK CHURCH

We have seen that James Cone has developed a full theology based on a reading of Scripture through the eyeglasses of “blackness.” The question is, How influential has black liberation theology been in the life of the black church in America?

C. Eric Lincoln and Lawrence H. Mamiya have recently completed a ten-year statistical study of the black church in America. They’ve

40 *Ibid.*, 123.

41 Cone, *Liberation*, 241-42.

42 Cone, *Theology*, 6.

43 *Ibid.*, 143.

published their findings in a hefty volume entitled, *The Black Church in the African American Experience* (1990). Part of the Lincoln/Mamiya study dealt with black liberation theology: “In our urban questionnaire we asked the pastors of 1,531 urban churches, ‘Have you been influenced by any of the authors and thinkers of black liberation theology?’”⁴⁴

Responses to the urban questionnaire were quite revealing. Only 34.9 percent of urban black clergy said they had been influenced by black liberation theologians as opposed to 65.1 percent who said they had not. Little more than one-third of the black pastors interviewed claimed any influence from this movement!

Lincoln and Mamiya discerned that age and education were among the most significant variables in determining clergy responses:

Clergy who are forty and under claimed to be more strongly influenced by black liberation theology than those who are older. Education was also very strongly associated with knowledge of black liberation theology. Pastors with a high school and less educational background said that they were minimally influenced by liberation theology, while those with a college education have the most positive views of the movement. The majority of the less educated pastors have neither heard of the movement nor of the names of theologians associated with it. Among educated clergy familiar with the movement, James Cone has the highest name recognition.⁴⁵

These differences are not that surprising, Lincoln and Mamiya say, since black liberation theology is a relatively recent intellectual movement “occurring largely among the educated elite of the black clergy.”⁴⁶

Another significant variable was found to be denominational affiliation. According to Lincoln and Mamiya, the black denominations with higher educational levels among their clergy — such as the African Methodist Episcopal Church — are the major proponents of liberation theology. “The fact that the Pentecostal ministers of the Church of God in Christ, which has the largest sector of lower-class members among the seven [major black] denominations, have been scarcely influenced by this theological perspective suggests some of the class limitations of this movement.”⁴⁷ This would seem to indicate that the formulators of black liberation

44 Lincoln and Mamiya, 178-79.

45 *Ibid.*, 179.

46 *Ibid.*

47 *Ibid.*, 180.

theology have not been able to move beyond their middle-class origins, even though black liberationists have sought to do theology from the “bottom up” — that is, from the perspective of the oppressed in American society.⁴⁸

Based on their nationwide field experience, Lincoln and Mamiya have observed that the majority of black clergy are educated as apprentices — learning “on the job” under the direction of senior clergy. What little academic education they receive is usually at the local Bible school level. Moreover, most of their reading is denominationally oriented. “It is this local level of clergy education,” Lincoln and Mamiya suggest, “that the new black liberation theology has thus far failed to penetrate.”⁴⁹

Lincoln and Mamiya close with this warning: “Unless the movement of black liberation theology reaches beyond its present location in an intellectual elite and gives more attention to a mass education of clergy and laity in the churches, the movement will continue to have minimal influence among its key constituencies.”⁵⁰

Lincoln and Mamiya are probably correct. However, the problems of black liberation theology go much deeper than a simple failure to reach the masses. This I shall make clear in what follows.

A CRITIQUE

It is difficult for a white person such as myself to critique black theology. As I write, I am mindful of James Cone’s conviction that any criticism of black theology by a white theologian will be influenced by white racism and is thus invalid.⁵¹ To help disarm this objection, I will draw support for each of my points from one or more black theologians.

I want to begin by affirming that black theology has made some important contributions. I will mention only four here. First, black theology has reminded us that theology — if it is going to meet the needs of twentieth century (and beyond) Christians — must find practical expression in society. Second, black theology has reminded us that God is involved with His people in real-life situations. Third, black theology has focused our attention on the need to reach out to others in the body of Christ who are suffering. And fourth, black theology serves as an indictment against the racist views that have been all-too-often (but not always) present among white people. These contributions are important and extremely relevant.

48 Ibid.

49 Ibid.

50 Ibid., 181.

51 Cone, “Black Power, Black Theology,” 214.

Despite these contributions, however, there are some serious problems that must be addressed. As a preface to my criticisms, I want to draw attention to Part One of this series in which I criticized the hermeneutic of Latin American liberation theology. In that article, I pointed out that Latin American theologians have approached Scripture with a preunderstanding that has led them to interpret Scripture with a bias toward the poor. I emphasized that if we are to understand the biblical author's intended meaning, it is imperative that preunderstandings be in harmony with Scripture and subject to correction by it. This same point must be made with reference to black theology. However, since I will not repeat any material from Part One, I urge the reader to review my comments on preunderstandings in that article.

“Blackness” and Scripture

In my critique of black liberation theology, I will focus my attention on the particular preunderstanding which interprets Scripture through the eyeglasses of “blackness.” More specifically, I shall address the question: Is it legitimate to make the black experience the fundamental criterion for interpreting Scripture?

Certainly I do not wish to minimize the importance of the black experience. Nor do I want to come across as unsympathetic to the plight of African Americans in a white-dominated society. There can be little doubt that black liberation theologians have a legitimate gripe regarding the treatment of their people throughout American history. But imposing the black experience (or any other experience — including feminist, gay, anti-supernaturalist, New Age, mystic, etc.) onto Scripture robs Scripture of its intrinsic authority and distorts its intended meaning.

Theologians who make black experience all-determinative have, in a way, made the same mistake some white racists did during the days of slavery — only in reverse. Just as some whites imposed their “experience” as slavemasters onto Scripture in order to justify slavery, so some blacks have imposed the “black experience” onto Scripture to justify their radical views on liberation. Both positions have erred. For blacks to use such an experience-oriented methodology is to condone the very kind of method used by those who enslaved them. In my thinking, this is self-defeating at best.

Black theologian Anthony Evans directly challenges Cone's methodology by arguing that the black experience must be seen as “real but not revelatory, important but not inspired.”⁵² Black writer Tom Skinner agrees and argues that “like any theology,

52 Evans, 8.

black theology must have a frame of reference. There are some black theologians who seek to make their frame of reference purely the black experience, but this assumes the black experience is absolutely moral and absolutely just, and that is not the case. There must be a moral frame of reference through which the black experience can be judged.⁵³ That frame of reference must be Scripture.

To produce a biblical liberation theology, Scripture — not the “black experience” — must be the supreme authority in matters of faith and practice. By following this approach, a strong biblical case can be constructed against racism — something I would think should be at the very heart of a biblical black theology.

The unity of the human race, for example, is a consistent emphasis in Scripture — in terms of creation (Gen. 1:28), the sin problem (Rom. 3:23), God’s love for all men (John 3:16), and the scope of salvation (Matt. 28:19). The apostle Paul emphasized mankind’s unity in his sermon to the Athenians: “From one man he made every nation of men, that they should inhabit the whole earth; and he determined the times set for them and the exact places where they should live” (Acts 17:26). Moreover, Revelation 5:9 tells us that God’s redeemed will be from “every tribe and tongue and people and nation.” Because of the unity of humanity, there is no place for racial discrimination — white, black, or otherwise — for all men are equal in God’s sight.

Transcending Culture

In Part One, I criticized the hermeneutic of Latin American liberation theology for its inability to develop a culture-transcending theology. Black theology’s hermeneutic — with its emphasis on the “black experience” — is open to the same criticism.

A passage relevant to this is John 4 where we find Jesus confronting a Samaritan woman. Here Jesus deals with the relationship between truth and culture.

The Jews considered the Samaritans an “unclean” mixed breed — with Israelite and Assyrian ancestry. Because of this, the Jews were harshly prejudiced against the Samaritans and discriminated against them. This cultural hostility led the Samaritan woman to ask Jesus: “You are a Jew and I am a Samaritan woman. How can you ask me for a drink?” (For Jews do not associate with Samaritans)” (John 4:9).

During the ensuing discussion, the woman asked Jesus about which cultural place of worship was valid: Mt. Gerizim where the

⁵³ Tom Skinner, *If Christ is the Answer, What are the Questions?* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1975), 112-13.

Samaritans built their temple, or Jerusalem where the Jews built theirs. Anthony Evans alerts us to the significance of Jesus' response: "Jesus does not hesitate to let her know that once you bring God into the picture, the issue is no longer culture, but truth. He informs her that the question is not Mt. Gerizim or Jerusalem, that it is not according to Samaritan tradition or Jewish tradition (v. 21). In fact, He denounces her cultural heritage in relation to worship, for he told her, 'Ye worship ye know not what' (v. 22). When she began to impose her culture on sacred things, Christ invaded her cultural world to tell her she was spiritually ignorant."⁵⁴

Jesus transcended the whole issue of culture in discussing spiritual issues with the woman. When it came to her relationship with God, the issue moved from her cultural heritage to her heart and the criteria for that relationship was truth. Jesus acknowledged cultural distinctions, but disallowed them when they interfered in any way with truth about God. A principle we can derive from this is: Culture must always take back seat to the truth of God as revealed in Scripture.

What does this passage say to the relationship of Scripture to the black experience? Evans answers: "It says that we as black people cannot base our relationship with God, or our understanding of God, on our cultural heritage. Jesus is not asking blacks to become white or whites to become Jews, but he insists that all reflect God's truth as given in Scripture. Where culture does not infringe upon the Word of God, we are free to be what God created us to be, with all the uniqueness that accompanies our cultural heritage. However, the truth from Scripture places limits on our cultural experience."⁵⁵

Reconciliation: The Better Way

A biblical theology of liberation must include an emphasis on reconciliation among men, without which the theology ceases to be Christian (Eph. 2:14ff.). Black liberation theologian DeOtis Roberts (b. 1927), though committed to liberation, agrees with this and insists that black theology must speak of "reconciliation that brings black men together and of reconciliation that brings black and white men together."⁵⁶ Roberts says "it is my belief that true freedom overcomes estrangement and heals the brokenness between peoples."⁵⁷ However, Roberts argues, "reconciliation can take place only between equals. It cannot coexist with a situation of Whites over Blacks."⁵⁸

54 Evans, 13.

55 *Ibid.*, 13-14.

56 DeOtis Roberts, *Liberation and Reconciliation: A Black Theology* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1971), 152.

57 DeOtis Roberts, "Black Theology in the Making," *Review and Expositor* 70 (Summer 1973):328.

58 *Ibid.*, 327.

Roberts's point is well taken. Reconciliation and racism are birds of a different feather; they never fly together. Genuine reconciliation can come only if people — both black and white — commit to a scriptural view of their brothers of a different color, seeing all people as created in the image of God (Gen. 1:26) and of infinite value to God (1 Cor. 6:20; 1 Pet. 1:18).

There is much more that needs to be said on this important issue, but space forbids. As the theological dialogue continues in coming years, I would like to suggest the following goal: Let us all — both black and white — seek to build a body of unified believers who are so committed to the Scriptures and to Christ that the name Christian becomes truly descriptive of who they are, and not the color of their skin.

An article from the Christian Research Journal, Spring 1991, page 27.

Note: With permission from Dr. Ron Rhodes.

BOOK REVIEW: DECISION POINTS

*by George W. Bush; Crown Publishers, New York; 14 Chapters,
497 Pages; \$35; Reviewed by: Dr. Robert L. Sumner*

Every president writes his memoirs or forfeits big bucks. Bush did his in different style than most, however, when he determined, instead of chronologically covering his eight years in office, he decided to focus on what he considered the major decisions he faced in his presidency. After an introductory chapter on quitting drinking (which could be the key to all the other decisions) we learn he started every day reading from the Word of God. He is also not embarrassed to pray — and talk about it. That is one reason why the media hated him so.

One thing we learned about Bush is that he is a *reader*. By way of example, he read 14 Lincoln biographies during his tenure in the White House and other books too many to report. He also had all the daily reports and other matters demanding careful reading.

After the opening chapter about his alcohol problem, the decisions he deals with are his decision to run for office; selecting his running mate and staff; the battle over stem cell research; decisions relating to the day we know as 9/11; the day they found traces of botulinum toxin in the White House; the anthrax scare; and other early problems during the war years; the entrance into Afghanistan against Al Qaeda terrorist camps; the decision to start Operation Iraqi Freedom; how he led in decisions like launching “No Child Left Behind;” his decision to add prescription drugs to Medicare; his second presidential campaign (against John Kerry); the horrible national disaster of Katrina and how Governor Blanco and Mayor Nagin refused to cooperate with the federal government until it was too late and the subsequent blame Bush got for what wasn’t his fault; what he called “the Lazarus Effect” (his efforts to help Africa in the AIDS battle); the much disputed surge and other events in Iraq such as the first democratic elections; what he called the “Freedom Agenda” but became to be known as “the Bush Doctrine;” problems with North Korea; the issue with Russia over Georgia and Ukraine, and other matters; plus the final chapter, “Financial Crisis.”

It is the latter that, while we disagreed with some of his other policies, held our biggest objections. In short, he paved the way for Obama’s financial meltdown during his administration. For example, even though he opposed Carter’s bailout of Chrysler in 1979, he started “saving” the Big Three automakers because, as we heard so

often about so many, “they were too big to fail.” It will forever remain a blight on our national history and Bush’s tenure.

What does Bush consider “one of the most irresponsible acts” he witnessed during his eight years in Washington? Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid’s declaration, “This war is lost, the surge is not accomplishing anything,” a statement before even all the troops had arrived in Iraq — telling our troops and their families they were battling for a lost cause. *We agree with that assessment concerning Reid!*

Remember Cindy Sheehan, the anti-war activist? He had her and her then-husband Patrick present when he honored their son Casey, who heroically gave his life trying to rescue his comrades. The next day she was quoted in her hometown newspaper, “I now know he’s sincere about wanting freedom for the Iraqis ... I know he’s sorry and feels some pain for our loss. And I know he’s a man of faith.”

Yet it wasn’t long before she became his number one civilian enemy fighting his Iraqi policies, camping out in front of his Crawford (TX) little White House and calling press conferences to berate him personally and his policies. What did he say about her in his book? “I feel sympathy for Cindy Sheehan. She is a mother who clearly loved her son. The grief caused by his loss was so profound that it consumed her life.”

He was just as kind about other civilians who had lost sons and disagreed with him, even the mother whom he tried to comfort but who lashed out, “You are as big a terrorist as Osama bin Laden.” He said of her, “She had lost her son; she had the right to speak her mind to the man who had sent him into battle. I was sorry her grief had created such bitterness. If expressing her anger helped ease her pain, that was fine with me.”

On the other hand, he said of politicians, “My favorite Bible verse for politicians is Matthew 7:3 — “Why do you see the speck that is in your brother’s eye, but do not notice the log that is in your own eye?”

In discussing Iraq he said, “Many of those who demonstrated against military action in Iraq were devoted advocates of human rights. Yet they condemned me for using force to remove the man who had gassed the Kurds, mowed down the Shia by helicopter gunship, massacred the Marsh Arabs, and sent tens of thousands to mass graves. I understood why people might disagree on the threat Saddam Hussein posed to the United States. But I didn’t see how anyone could deny that liberating Iraq advanced the cause of human rights.”

A humorous incident took place when Bush was entertaining Crown Prince Abdullah from Saudi Arabia at his Crawford ranch about tensions with Israel. His team notified him that the Saudis were getting ready to walk out and go home, so upset they were not even staying for lunch. In desperation he offered to show the prince his ranch.

When the prince agreed they climbed into Bush's Ford F-250 pickup and started out. He didn't seem much impressed until at a remote part of the property a turkey hen strolled out into the middle of the road. Bush stopped and so did the turkey. They eyed each other. Abdullah inquired, "What's that?" Informed it was a turkey and that Ben Franklin had wanted to make it America's national bird, the prince suddenly grabbed Bush's arm and said, "My brother, it is a sign from Allah. This is a good omen."

They returned to the house, had lunch, finished their negotiations, and the Saudi party left happily. While he never understood the significance of the turkey, he said, "I had never seen a hen turkey on that part the property before, and I haven't seen one since." Obviously, it was God at work.

And speaking of God at work, he had an interesting tale about Evangelist Billy Graham. We had heard many times of the spiritual help the latter gave Bush and we wanted to hear it from the source. While it was not as good as the reports I had heard, the most interesting part was the day before when Bush senior asked Graham, "Billy, some people say you have to have a born-again experience to go to heaven. Mother [she was present] here is the most religious, kind person I know, yet she has had no born-again experience. Will she go to heaven?" Believe it or not, this was Billy's answer:

"George, some of us require a born-again experience to understand God, and some of us are born Christians. It sounds as if your mom was just born a Christian."

That is one of the most pathetic statements an evangelical preacher ever uttered.

Oh, yes, one other thing. There is no taking the Lord's name in vain, no obscenities — you know, like the stuff in many politicians' books — but he uses several words for which kids used to get their mouths washed out with soap and water. On the other hand, he honors the Lord better than most politicians who tell their story in a book.

Bush ended his tome:

Decades from now, I hope people will view me as a president who recognized the central challenge of our time and kept my vow to keep the country safe; who pursued my convictions without wavering but changed course when necessary; who trusted individuals to make choices in their lives; and who used America's influence to advance freedom. And I hope they will conclude that I upheld the honor and dignity of the office I was so privileged to hold.

Whatever the verdict on my presidency, I'm comfortable with the fact that I won't be around to hear it. That's a decision point only history will reach.

Our conclusion: a very interesting read. Worth the time.

* * * * *

Dr. Robert L. Sumner, Editor

THE BIBLICAL EVANGELIST

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WHEN THEY COME TO YOUR DOOR

By Rev. Steve Lagoon

From time to time, cultists like Jehovah's Witnesses or Mormons come to our door and want to talk. I want to invite them into our home so that I can have discussions with them, and perhaps help them to receive Christ. I have studied their teachings and have a good handle on Christian beliefs.

However, my wife is not comfortable with this and our pastor told her that we should not invite them in because of what it says in 2 John 10-11. Can you give us your opinion on this question?

Let's begin answering this good question by reading the passage:

“If anyone comes to you and does not bring this teaching, do not take them into your house or welcome them. Anyone who welcomes them shares in their wicked work” (2 John 10-11).

We need to understand what the apostle John meant in this passage. It's helpful to understand the historical background of John's letter. *Hard Sayings of the Bible* explains it well:

Therefore what 2 John is referring to is the need to recognize that not every traveling Christian is to be received with such warmth. If in fact it was discovered that the visitor was carrying the serious Christological heresy that John describes, the person was not to be greeted as a brother or sister in Christ . . . Nor should the person be received into the house church and allowed to spread false teaching there. Otherwise the whole “cell” might become infected with the distorted ideas, and they might later spread them to other house churches, making the whole city church sick . . . This verse, then, is not intended to apply to individual Christians greeting people at the doors of their homes, but to churches and house groups.¹

Renowned cult expert Walter Martin agreed:

Now in context, this passage is a sentence in a letter to the Elect Lady, in whose home a Christian Church quite obviously met . . . In this connection . . . John warns her not to allow anyone . . . to preach in church meetings or teach doctrines which

¹ *Hard Sayings of the Bible*, Walter C. Kaiser Jr., Peter H. Davids, F.F. Bruce & Manfred T. Brauch Editors, Downers Grove IL (InterVarsity Press, 1996) 749.

do not honor Christ in every aspect of His Person, Nature, and Work. It is clear that he is referring to false teachers being given a voice in the church, not to a cultist sitting in your living room! . . . Many pastors have instructed their flocks on the basis of this passage and other out-of-context quotations, to close the doors in the faces of cultists rather than to invite them in and, in the tradition of Christian evangelism, confront them with the claims of Christ. There is no authority in the Word of God for neglecting one's responsibility as an ambassador of Christ . . . We must strive to keep foremost in our minds that cultists are precious souls for whom Jesus Christ offered himself . . . This challenge is cult evangelism, the mission field on your doorstep.²

It is our opinion, then, that 2 John 10-11 is not addressing the specific question about whether Christians should invite cult members into their homes for the purpose of evangelizing them. We agree with the sentiments of Walter Martin about the need to reach cultists with the truth of the gospel, and that 2 John 10-11 does not prohibit Christians from inviting cultists into their homes for this purpose.

This, however, is not an easy ministry and not one to enter into lightly. One needs to be well grounded in the Scriptures and Christian beliefs before attempting such ministry. One engaged in ministry to cultists should be covered by prayer and have the support of others.

Further, it is important to be straightforward and honest in such discussions. It is tempting to feign either interest in the group in order to get the cultists to agree to meet or to feign ignorance of the group's doctrines in order not to scare cultists away before having a chance to witness to them.

Such tactics, though with good intentions, are not the way of the Christian. The apostle Paul said, "We do not use deception, nor do we distort the Word of God. On the contrary, by setting forth the truth plainly we commend ourselves to every man's conscience in the sight of God" (2 Corinthians 4:2). It is better to be up front and offer to discuss both their beliefs and yours in the light of God's Word.

Another important thing to remember is that though cultists are indeed enemies of the cross, they are objects of our mission. As such, we are to be "speaking the truth with love" (Ephesians 4:15). In the heat of the battle, we must constantly remember that we are to "love our enemies" (Matthew 5:44) and not let our emotions get away from us. This is important to remember because evangelistic efforts to cultists seldom go as smooth as they sound in books on the subject.

² Walter Martin, *The Kingdom of the Cults*, Minneapolis MN (Bethany House Publishers, 1985) 392, 399.

A final note of caution: try to keep the group involved in the discussion as small as possible (perhaps two to four people). The danger of larger groups is that it is hard to keep the discussion on track. Further, some may become emotional and the whole discussion can devolve into a public battle of wills with personal pride on the line. How much better to build respect and rapport with cultists since the goal is not to win a debate, but to help win a soul to Christ.

Rev. Steve Lagoon

QUIZ: Religion and Sports

1. The Olympics began in ancient
 a. Rome
 b. Athens
 c. Jerusalem
 d. Ephesus

2. Early ministerial students at Harvard and Yale probably engaged in which sport?
 a. Polo
 b. Ice-hockey
 c. Boxing
 d. Rowing

3. Which activity did Paul use as an illustration of the Christian life?
 a. Hiking
 b. Climbing
 c. Running
 d. Sledding

4. The outstanding Christian quarterback of the Denver Broncos is
 a. Drew Brees
 b. Tom Brady
 c. Peyton Manning
 d. Tim Tebow

5. Modern Olympics began in
 a. 1896
 b. 1904
 c. 1912
 d. 1936

6. The secret to Samson's strength was
 a. His obedience to a religious rite
 b. His unusual diet of locusts and wild honey
 c. His strong moral convictions
 d. His rigorous exercise regimen

7. What boxer paid the funeral expenses for Joe Louis?
___ a. Jack Dempsey
___ b. Max Schmeling
___ c. Tony Galento
___ d. Rocky Marciano
8. The use of tobacco and drugs is generally forbidden for athletes.
Why?
___ a. Too expensive
___ b. Too odoriferous
___ c. Too debilitating
___ d. Danger of fire
9. Re: youth entertainment activity, sports is in second place after
___ a. Traveling
___ b. Movies
___ c. Gambling
___ d. Music
10. The athlete proficient in many sports is the best candidate for the
___ a. Decathlon
___ b. Marathon
___ c. Pentathlon
___ d. Heptathlon

Answers:

1. (b); 2. (d); 3. (c); 4. (d); 5. (a); 6. (a); 7. (b); 8. (c); 9. (c); 10. (a)

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