Bible First: The Black Church, Biblical Personalism, and the Politics of Human Dignity

Anthony B. Bradley
Distinguish Research Fellow, The Acton Institute
Research Professor, Kuyper College
Kuyper College
2026 Bible First Conference

The historic Black church produced a politics of personalism, not ideology. That thesis is the burden of this paper, and it cuts against the grain of how the Black church tradition has most often been appropriated in recent decades. Both Black liberation theology and contemporary American evangelicalism tend to read the Black church's public engagement as a form of political ideology, the former enlisting it in a revolutionary program of liberation from structural oppression, the latter occasionally invoking its prophetic register while tying biblical authority to a conservative political agenda. What both miss is something fundamental about what the Black church was actually doing when it turned to Scripture to make sense of its situation in the world. The enslaved men and women who sang about Moses were not doing ideology. They were reading the Bible. And what the Bible gave them was not a political program but a moral vision, specifically a vision of the human person as bearing inviolable dignity before God, a dignity that no Pharaoh could revoke and that no political system had the authority to deny. That vision had enormous political consequences. It named slavery as sin. It sustained a community across generations of terror. It supplied the theological vocabulary for a civil rights movement that reordered American public life. But it did none of that by producing a party platform or a theory of social transformation. The political power of the Black church tradition came precisely from its refusal to collapse the Gospel into an ideology, and that refusal was not an accident of history. It was the fruit of reading Scripture plainly and letting it speak on its own terms.

This paper argues that what the historic Black church tradition was doing, from the Exodus spirituals of the antebellum period through the sermons of Martin Luther King Jr., is best understood as personalism: a commitment to human dignity, freedom, and justice grounded in the biblical witness rather than in any prior ideological framework. The term personalism carries technical philosophical freight, much of which is relevant here, and the paper examines it carefully. But the concept at its core is not complicated. It holds that the person is the fundamental unit of moral concern, that every human being possesses worth that is not conferred by the state or the market or the social order but by the God who made them, and that any political arrangement which refuses to honor that worth stands under divine judgment. The Black church arrived at this position through the Book of Exodus, the prophets, and the preaching of Jesus. It was a biblical personalism, and it was more durable and more politically generative than either of the ideological alternatives that came after it.

The contrast with Black liberation theology is instructive and worth taking seriously on its own terms. James Cone's project was motivated by a genuine and legitimate moral outrage, and his diagnosis of the ways White American theology systematically ignored the suffering of Black people was largely correct. But his remedy was to make the Black experience of oppression the authoritative lens through which Scripture itself must be read, which is a hermeneutical move that inverts the structure of the Black church tradition it claimed to represent. For the historic Black church, Scripture judged the experience of oppression and

declared it intolerable on theological grounds. For Cone, the experience of oppression judged Scripture and determined what in it was usable. That difference is not a minor methodological quibble. It is what separates a politics of personalism from a politics of ideology.

Contemporary conservative evangelicalism has made a mirror-image error. Where Black liberation theology subordinated Scripture to a Marxist political framework, much of American evangelicalism has subordinated it to a right-leaning one, reading the Bible through the assumptions of a particular cultural and partisan tradition rather than allowing the Bible to form and challenge those assumptions. The Black church's approach to Scripture cuts against both of these moves. It did not prescribe a comprehensive political system. It shaped a moral imagination and held political arrangements accountable to a vision of human dignity that transcended any particular program.

This paper proceeds through several movements. It opens with the Exodus spirituals, which are the primary text of the Black church's theological political imagination, and traces the way Moses functioned in those songs as a figure of divinely commissioned deliverance rather than ideological resistance. It then turns to Black liberation theology, examining the work of James Cone with attention to the ways his system departs from the biblical hermeneutic of the tradition they claimed to represent. From there, the paper examines the sermons of Martin Luther King Jr. as primary evidence for the historic Black church's approach to Scripture and politics, attending particularly to how King deployed the Exodus narrative in the service of a personalist moral vision rather than a political ideology. It then develops the concept of personalism as the framework that best accounts for what the Black church tradition was doing. The conclusion makes the case that this model is not simply a historical curiosity but a more faithful and finally more useful way of thinking about how the Bible addresses public life than either of its rivals.

Movement I: Moses and the Black Experience

During the entirety of American slavery, from the early 1700s to the end of the Civil War, African American Christianity was mostly an oral tradition. Enslaved men and women were not writing books or sermons to be archived in church history, but we do have a very rich body of biblical and theological content passed down through the generations in music. Unlike the large majority of White Anglo-Saxon Protestantism, Christianity in the Black experience grounds its biblical theology in the Old Testament (and in the book of Exodus and the mighty acts of God in the life of Moses in particular) rather than in the Pauline corpus, which is so central to the individualistic, substitutionary atonement framework of fundamentalism and later evangelicalism. For Christianity in the Black experience, the atonement is understood through the lens of *Christus Victor*: the redemption accomplished and applied through the work and person of Jesus Christ was for an oppressed people group, of whom individuals become members. This Moses-centered way of understanding what Christ accomplished is captured in the Negro spirituals of the 18th-century forward and later in gospel music.

Go Down, Moses[1]

[1] J. B. T. Marsh, *The Story of the Jubilee Singers; With Their Songs*, rev. ed. (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1876), as reproduced in the Northern Illinois University Gilded Age Digital Collection, "Go Down Moses," Northern Illinois University Digital Library, accessed March 2026, https://digital.lib.niu.edu/islandora/object/niu-gildedage:24269. "African American Spirituals," American Folklife Center, Library of Congress, accessed March

In "Go Down, Moses," the figure of Moses was widely understood to refer to Harriet Tubman, the Moses of her people. Egypt represented the American South; Pharaoh, the slaveholder; and the Israelites, enslaved Black Americans.

> "When Israel was in Egypt's land, / Let my people go! / Oppressed so hard they could not stand, / Let my people go! / Go down, Moses, / Way down in Egypt's land, / Tell old Pharaoh, / Let my people go! / Thus saith the Lord, bold Moses said, / Let my people go! / If not, I'll smite your firstborn dead, / Let my people go! / The Lord told Moses what to do, / Let my people go! / To lead the Hebrew children through, / Let my people go!"

The refrain "Let my people go!" was not a request; it was a proclamation of higher ontological authority, one that no Pharaoh could override and no political arrangement had the power to revoke. The remaining spirituals build upon this foundation, each illuminating a distinct dimension of the biblical vision of deliverance.

Wade in the Water[2]

Similarly, "Wade in the Water" provided a theology of deliverance. While the surface meaning refers to God troubling the waters for healing (John 5 and Exodus), the hidden meaning served as a warning for escaping slaves to use water to mask their scent from bloodhounds.

> "Wade in the water, / Wade in the water, children, / Wade in the water, / God's gonna trouble the water. / Who are those children all dressed in red? / God's gonna trouble the water. / Must be the ones that Moses led, / God's gonna trouble the water."

2026, https://www.loc.gov/item/ihas.200197495/. ("A spiritual that was certainly used as a code for escape to freedom was 'Go down, Moses,' used by Harriet Tubman to identify herself to slaves who might want to flee north.") "Go Down, Moses," *Encyclopedia.com*, accessed March 2026, https://www.encyclopedia.com/arts/educational-magazines/go-down-moses. (Analysis drawn from Horace Clarence Boyer, "The Negro Spiritual," *The American Experience: Jubilee Singers: Sacrifice and Glory*, PBS Online, and James Weldon Johnson and J. Rosamund Johnson, *The Books of American Negro Spirituals*, DaCapo Press, 1969.)

[2] C. Michael Hawn, "History of Hymns: 'Wade in the Water,'" *Discipleship Ministries, The United Methodist Church*, accessed March 2026, https://www.umcdiscipleship.org/resources/history-of-hymns-wade-in-the-water. (Cites Albert Raboteau, *Slave Religion: The "Invisible Institution" in the Antebellum South* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978), and Melva Wilson Costen, "African American Spirituals," *Journal of Religious and Theological Information* 4, no. 3.) Frederick J. Work and John Wesley Work Jr., *New Jubilee Songs as Sung by the Fisk Jubilee Singers* (Nashville: Fisk University, 1901), as referenced and analyzed in Halle Cosgrove, "The Shift to the Concert Stage: 'Wade in the Water' and the American Spiritual," *Song of America*, University of Michigan, August 5, 2021, https://songofamerica.net/essays/the-shift-to-the-concert-stage-wade-in-the-water-and-the-american-spiritual/. Randall Grass, "Behind the Meaning of the Classic Gospel Song 'Wade in the Water,'" *American Songwriter*, February 3, 2023, https://americansongwriter.com/behind-the-meaning-of-the-classic-gospel-song-wade-in-the-water/. (Documents first commercial recording by the Sunset Four Jubilee Singers, Paramount Records, 1925, and the 2023 Grammy Award won by the Fisk Jubilee Singers for *Best Roots Gospel Album*.). "Songs of the Underground Railroad," *Will the Circle Be Unbroken?*, University of Southern California Scalar Digital Humanities Project, accessed March 2026, https://scalar.usc.edu/works/will-the-circle-be-unbroken/songs-of-the-underground-railroad. ("Legend has it that 'Wade In The Water' was used by Harriet Tubman and others to tell fugitive slaves how to evade pursuit and avoid capture. 'Moses' refers to Tubman herself, who led hundreds from slavery into freedom on the Underground Railroad.")

Didn’t Old Pharaoh Get Lost[3]

The spiritual "Didn’t Old Pharaoh Get Lost" highlights the ultimate doom of the oppressor, grounding identity in the triumph of the Red Sea rather than a partisan theory of social transformation.

> "Moses an infant cast away / By Pharaoh’s daughter found / Didn’t old Pharaoh get los’, get los’, get los’ / Didn’t old Pharaoh get los’ / In the Red Sea... / The Lord said unto Moses / “Go unto Pharaoh now / For I have hardened Pharaoh’s heart / To me he will not bow” / Den Moses an’ Aaron / To Pharaoh did go / “Thus says de God of Israel / Let my people go”"

"Turn Back Pharaoh's Army"[4]

Finally, the military dimension of this biblical personalism is captured in "Turn Back Pharaoh's Army." Here, the request for "valiant soldiers" to "turn back" the oppressor’s military force is a direct appeal to the God of the Exodus as the supreme commander of justice.

"Goin’ to write to massa Jesus / To send some valiant soldiers / To turn back Pharaoh’s army / Hallelujah! / To turn back Pharaoh’s army / Hallelu! / To turn back Pharaoh’s army / Hallelujah! / To turn back Pharaoh’s army / Hallelu! / If you want your souls converted / You’d better be a-praying / To turn back Pharaoh’s army / Hallelujah! / To turn back Pharaoh’s army / Hallelu! /

---

[3] M. Macoomer, "Did n't Old Pharaoh Get Lost?" in *A Collection of Revival Hymns and Plantation Melodies* (Cincinnati: n.p., 1883), no. 12, as catalogued in *Hymnary.org*, Calvin Institute of Christian Worship, accessed March 2026, https://hymnary.org/text/isaac_a_ransom_while_he_lay. (Scripture reference: Exodus 14:28; establishes the earliest known print publication of the full lyric text including the Red Sea chorus.). "Didn't Old Pharaoh Get Lost," *NegrospiritualS.com*, Official Site of Negro Spirituals & Antique Gospel Music, accessed March 2026, https://www.negrospirituals.com/songs/didn_t_old_pharaoh_get_lost.htm. (Preserves traditional full lyric text with stanzas covering Moses' infancy, Joseph, the plagues, Pharaoh's defeat in the Red Sea, and the wilderness wandering.). "Didn't Old Pharaoh Get Lost," *HymnLyrics.org*, Old Christian Spirituals, accessed March 2026, https://www.hymnlyrics.org/hymns_spirituals/didnt_old_pharaoh_get_lost.php. (Compiled in acknowledgment of *NegrospiritualS.com* and *History of Spirituals*; preserves public-domain lyric variant.). "Songs of Slavery, Survival and Freedom," *FolkWorks*, April 28, 2024, https://folkworks.org/article/songs-of-slavery-survival-freedom/. (Places the spiritual within the broader tradition of Exodus-coded slave songs; discusses how Pharaoh figures in the spirituals as a direct symbol for the slaveholder, and God's defeat of Pharaoh in the Red Sea as a theological promise of liberation for enslaved Black Americans.)

[4] "Turn Back Pharaoh's Army," in *Plantation Melodies and Spiritual Songs*, no. 138 (1913); *Rodeheaver's Plantation Melodies*, no. 25 (1918); and *Sixty Two Southland Spirituals*, no. 33 (1946), as catalogued in *Hymnary.org*, Calvin Institute of Christian Worship, accessed March 2026, https://hymnary.org/text/gwine_to_write_to_massa_jesus. (First line: "Gwine to write to Massa Jesus"; refrain: "To turn back Pharaoh's army"; public domain. Documents earliest verified print publications with page scan facsimiles.) "Turn Back Pharaoh's Army," *NegrospiritualS.com*, Official Site of Negro Spirituals & Antique Gospel Music, accessed March 2026, https://www.negrospirituals.com/songs/turn_back_pharahon_s_army.htm. (Attributes lyric collection to William Stickles, *Spirituals*, 1948; preserves full traditional text in the antebellum spiritual tradition.). "Turn Back Pharaoh's Army," *HymnLyrics.org*, Old Christian Spirituals, accessed March 2026, https://www.hymnlyrics.org/hymns_spirituals/turn_back_pharaohs_army.php. (Preserves public-domain lyric variant; compiled in acknowledgment of *NegrospiritualS.com* and *History of Spirituals*.)

To turn back Pharaoh's army / Hallelujah! / To turn back Pharaoh's army / Hallelu! / Wen the children were in bondage / They cried unto the Lord / To turn back Pharaoh's army / Hallelujah! / To turn back Pharaoh's army / Hallelu! / To turn back Pharaoh's army / Hallelujah!"

These four spirituals reveal the theological bedrock of the Black church's engagement with oppression: a vision of divine justice grounded in the biblical witness rather than in any partisan program. God is the supreme commander of deliverance, Pharaoh stands under divine judgment, and the enslaved people are bearers of an inviolable dignity that no human authority may revoke. It is precisely this biblical foundation that Black liberation theology, the subject of the next movement, would claim to represent, even as it departed from it in fundamental ways.

Movement II: Black Liberation Theology

The transition from this biblical personalism to a politics of ideology began with the formalization of Black liberation theology in the late 1960s. A clear definition was first articulated in 1969 by the National Committee of Black Church Men, describing Black theology as a theology of Black liberation seeking to "plumb the black condition in the light of God's revelation... so that the black community can see that the gospel is commensurate with the achievements of black humanity."[5]

Black theology was forged at the height of the Civil Rights movement, when the Black church began to focus its attention beyond helping Blacks cope with national racial discrimination, to applying theology to address the unique issues facing Blacks, particularly in urban areas. James Cone, in his book *A Black Theology of Liberation,* develops Black theology as a system, beginning by articulating liberation as the starting point and content of theology.[6] Many of these initial formulations serve as the background for later developments of Black theology as a theological system.[7] According to Cone, Christian theology is a theology of liberation, *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*.[8] The authoritative existential situation described in the study of the being of God is the Black experience in America. Black consciousness and the Black experience of oppression orient Cone's system around the principle of the self-sufficient inwardness of the human consciousness in general and the Black consciousness in particular, that is, one of victimization from oppression.[9]

Cone grounds the liberation motif in the biblical story of redemption by noting that: (1) God chose Israel because they were being oppressed; (2) the rise of Old Testament prophecy is due primarily to the lack of social justice as God is revealed as the God of liberation for the oppressed; and (3) Jesus reaffirms the preeminence of God as liberator because Jesus locates his ministry among the poor and the oppressed (Luke 4:18-19).[10] Theology, then, is the study of

---

[5] James H. Cone and Gayraud S. Wilmore, eds, *Black Theology: A Documentary History, Volume I: 1966-1979* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1979), 101.
[6] James Cone, *A Black Theology of Liberation* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1990).
[7] See James H. Evans, Jr., *We Have Been Believers: An African American Systematic Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1992).
[8] Cone, *A Black Theology of Liberation*, 1.
[9] See Cornelius Van Til, "Black Theology and Black Power," CD-ROM.
[10] Cone, *A Black Theology of Liberation*, 2-3.

God's liberating activity on behalf of those who are oppressed. Assisting the oppressed, in Cone's view, is the sole reason for the existence of theology as a discipline.

Cone's anthropology begins and ends with the experience of the human person in relation to other persons, not as a creature created by a Triune God. The entire corpus of James Cone's writing focuses on oppression and White racism. Therefore, his anthropological perspective deals primarily with reflection as related to social injustice, racism, and oppression.
Cone explains his anthropology in terms of redeeming persons who were once used by oppressors to dehumanize Africans and African Americans, in particular. In addition, other minorities, women, and practicing homosexuals were dehumanized by oppressors as well. While Cone does have a sense of the moral limitations of the human person, he tends to deal with those limitations systemically and structurally rather than focusing on them individually or personally. In terms of anthropology, Cone's perspective coheres nicely with the victimologist vision.
The normative oppression of Blacks within the context of United States history, for both Cone and others, makes anthropological issues of paramount importance. Because of the devaluation of the humanity of non-Anglo races by Whites, Black liberation theologians have spent considerable energy applying the *imago dei* to African Americans. As Cone notes, "The extermination of Amerindians, the persecution of the Jews, the oppressions of Mexican-Americans, and every other conceivable inhumanity done in the name of God and country can be analyzed in terms of the White American inability to recognize humanity in people of color."[11] Affirming Black identity, as well as the identities of all people of color, is the focus of Black theology. What people of color need, in the end, is liberation from White dehumanization.

The *imago dei* is not neglected in Cone's view of anthropology. While Cone appreciates some aspects of the traditional understanding of this concept, he argues that the traditional view is too limited. Although Cone acknowledges that freedom is central to comprehending what it means to be made in God's image, this understanding fails to "place due emphasis on the role of liberation in an oppressive society."[12] Instead, Cone maintains, "The biblical concept of image means that human beings are created in such a way that they cannot obey oppressive laws and still be human."[13] To be human is to be made in the image of God, "revolting against everything that is opposed to humanity."[14] As God is centrally interested in liberation, his image bearers will bear the same burden as well. In Cone's view, the image of God implies that the human person will work against the oppression of others. Simply stated, in a world of oppression, "the image is human nature in rebellion against the structures of oppression."[15] The *imago dei* is the image of the human person should be protected from oppression.

Cone departs from the Black church tradition and adopts an ideological lens through which to view the Black religious experience. Cone believed that Marxism best addresses remedies to the condition of Blacks as victims of White oppression. Cone explains that "the Christian faith does not possess in its nature the means for analyzing the structure of capitalism. Marxism as a tool of social analysis can disclose the gap between appearance and reality, and thereby help Christians to see how things really are."[16] Cone believes that Marx's chief contribution is "his disclosure of the ideological character of bourgeois thought, indicating the

---

[11] Cone, *A Black Theology of Liberation*, 7.
[12] Ibid., 93.
[13] Ibid.
[14] Ibid.
[15] Ibid., 94.
[16] James H. Cone*, For My People: Black Theology and the Black Church* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Press, 1984), 187.

connections between the 'ruling *material* force of society' and the 'ruling *intellectual'* force."[17] In this framework, intellectual ideas emerge out of a definitive context and a socially constructed point of view. Cone praises Marx for noting that truth is a question "not only of what is but of what ought to be."[18] The definition of reality, writes Cone, is determined by the "existing societal relations of material production, with the ruling class controlling the means of production as well as the intellectual forces which justify the present political arrangements."[19] In Marxism, the "oughts" of human community are defined by what can be accomplished through the "revolutionary praxis of the proletarian class, overthrowing unjust societal conditions."[20] Marx's thought is useful and attractive to Cone because it allows Black theologians to critique racism in America on the basis of power and revolution.[21]

Marxists believe that the ruling class's promotion of religion reveals a conspiracy to sanction materialism and jade the proletariat, leaving them content with humiliation, suffering, and their own victimization. With this in mind, Cone raises several important questions that theologians must ask in light of Marx's truth. For example, "What is the connection between dominant material relations and the ruling theological ideas in a given society?"[22] Taking Marx seriously, remarks Cone, will make theologians "confess their limitations, their inability to say anything about God which is not at the same time a statement about the social context of their own existence."[23]

Cone seeks to go beyond Marx, noting that while Marx is helpful, the problem of oppression is "much more complex" than he envisioned.[24] Cone firmly believes that an analysis that "fails to deal with racism, that demon embedded in White folks' being, is inadequate."[25] Black theology exists as a correction to "*theologians of the Christian church* [who] *have not interpreted Christian ethics as an act for the liberation of the oppressed because their views of divine revelation were defined by philosophy and other cultural values rather than by the biblical theme of God as liberator of the oppressed*."[26] American theologians would have written differently, Cone asserts, if Scripture had been interpreted through the eyes of the victimized oppressed rather than through the eyes of White privilege.

Cone's departure from the biblical hermeneutic of the black church biblical theological tradition he claimed to represent raises a pointed question: what was that tradition actually doing? The answer is most clearly visible not in systematic theology but in a body of preaching. The sermons of Martin Luther King Jr. offer the an example of the historic Black church's approach to Scripture, public life, and politics, an approach that, as the next movement shows, was fundamentally personalist rather than ideological.

---

[17] James H. Cone, *God of the Oppressed* (San Francisco: Harper Collins, 1975), 41. Italics his.
[18] Ibid., 42.
[19] Ibid.
[20] Ibid.
[21] African liberation theologians also find Marxism to be a useful tool in evaluation the history of racism and colonialism. See Itumeleng J. Mosala and Buti Tlahagle, eds., *The Unquestionable Right to Be Free: Black Theology in South Africa* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1986), 29.
[22] Cone, *God of the Oppressed*, 42.
[23] Ibid., 43.
[24] Ibid., 156.
[25] Ibid.
[26] Ibid., 200. Italics his.

Movement III: Martin Luther King Jr. and the Personalist Synthesis

The sermons of Martin Luther King Jr., and other civil-rights era speeched provide the primary evidence for the historic Black church's approach to Scripture. King deployed the Exodus narrative in the service of a personalist moral vision that transcended both the Marxist focus on class and the Liberationist focus on subjective experience.

In his **"The Death of Evil upon the Seashore,"**[27] sermon delivered at the Cathedral of St. John the Divine, this sermon compares the Israelites' captivity with the plight of African Americans. King's focus was not a partisan platform but a metaphysical claim about the nature of reality. King said,

> "'"And Israel saw the Egyptians dead upon the seashore." (Exodus 14:30)... A graphic example of this truth is found in an incident in the early history of the Hebrew people. You will remember that at a very early stage in her history the children of Israel were reduced to the bondage of physical slavery under the gripping yoke of Egyptian rule. Egypt was the symbol of evil in the form of humiliating oppression, ungodly exploitation and crushing domination... Finally, however, these Israelites, through the providence of God, were able to cross the Red Sea, and thereby get out of the hands of Egyptian rule. The Egyptians, in a desperate attempt to prevent the Israelites from escaping, had their armies to go in the Red Sea behind them. But as soon as the Egyptians got into the Red Sea the parted waves swept back upon them, and the rushing waters of the sea soon drowned all of them. As the Israelites looked back all they could see was here and there a poor drowned body beaten upon the seashore."

For King, the drowning of the Egyptians was a graphic symbol of the ultimate doom of evil. His personalism is evident in his refusal to rejoice at the defeat of persons. "No one can rejoice at the death or the defeat of a human person. This story, at bottom, symbolizes the death of evil." King's conviction was that "all reality hinges on moral foundations and that the whole cosmic universe has spiritual control." This is a personalist metaphysics: the universe is on the side of justice because the God who governs it is the source of the person's dignity.

In his sermon, **"The Birth of a New Nation,"**[28] preached after returning from Ghana, King shared his impressions at Dexter Avenue Baptist Church, using Exodus to frame the battle against colonialism.

---

[27] Martin Luther King, Jr., "The Death of Evil upon the Seashore," sermon delivered at the Cathedral of St. John the Divine, New York, N.Y., May 17, 1956, in *The Papers of Martin Luther King, Jr.*, vol. 3, *Birth of a New Age, December 1955–December 1956*, ed. Clayborne Carson, Stewart Burns, Susan Carson, Peter Holloran, and Dana L. H. Powell (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), 256–262. Available online through the Martin Luther King, Jr. Research and Education Institute, Stanford University, https://kinginstitute.stanford.edu/king-papers/documents/death-evil-upon-seashore-sermon-delivered-service-prayer-and-thanksgiving.

[28] [2] Martin Luther King, Jr., "The Birth of a New Nation," sermon delivered at Dexter Avenue Baptist Church, Montgomery, Ala., April 7, 1957, in *The Papers of Martin Luther King, Jr.*, vol. 4, *Symbol of the Movement, January 1957–December 1958*, ed. Clayborne Carson, Susan Carson, Adrienne Clay, Virginia Shadron, and Kieran Taylor (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000), 155–167. Available online through the Martin Luther King,

> "I want to preach this morning from the subject: “The Birth of a New Nation.” And I would like to use as a basis for our thinking together, a story that has long since been stenciled on the mental sheets of succeeding generations. It is the story of the Exodus, the story of the flight of the Hebrew people from the bondage of Egypt, through the wilderness and finally, to the Promised Land... The struggle of Moses, the struggle of his devoted followers as they sought to get out of Egypt. And they finally moved on to the wilderness and toward the Promised Land. This is something of the story of every people struggling for freedom."

King’s analysis was rooted in the personalist understanding that exploitation is a violation of the "dignity and worth of all human personality." He argued that "freedom is something basic. To rob a man of his freedom is to take from him the essential basis of his manhood... to rob him of something of God’s image." He warned that the "oppressor never voluntarily gives freedom to the oppressed. You have to work for it."

> "There is something in the soul that cries out for freedom. There is something deep down within the very soul of man that reaches out for Canaan. Men cannot be satisfied with Egypt. They tried to adjust to it for a while. Many men have vested interests in Egypt, and they are slow to leave... And eventually they rise up and begin to cry out for Canaan’s land."

King’s goal was not to defeat the oppressor, but to win their friendship and help them realize their own humanity. He argued that "the aftermath of nonviolence is the creation of the beloved community. The aftermath of nonviolence is redemption... the aftermath of violence are emptiness and bitterness." This distinguishes King from the revolutionary praxis of later liberationists.

In addition to King, civil rights activist Fannie Lou Hamer, in her speech **"We're on Our Way"**[29] The testimony of Fannie Lou Hamer further illustrates the personalist core of the Black church tradition. In her 1964 speech in Indianola, she recounted her arrest and the brutal beatings she suffered in Winona, Mississippi. Her response was not an ideological call to class warfare, but a biblical appeal to the humanity of both the oppressed and the oppressor. Hamer famously noted that "righteousness exalts a nation, but sin is a reproach to any people." She challenged the "brainwashed education" of those who ignored the suffering of the poor. Yet, her most profound rhetorical move was her use of the Moses narrative to describe the Civil Rights organizers.

> "God made it so plain He sent Moses down in Egypt-land to tell Pharaoh to let my people go. And He made it so plain here in Mississippi the man that heads the project is named Moses, Bob Moses. And He sent Bob Moses down in Mississippi, to tell all of these hate groups to let his people go."

Jr. Research and Education Institute, Stanford University, https://kinginstitute.stanford.edu/king-papers/documents/birth-new-nation-sermon-delivered-dexter-avenue-baptist-church.

[29] Fannie Lou Hamer, "We're On Our Way," speech before a mass meeting at the Negro Baptist School, Indianola, Miss., September 1964, in *The Speeches of Fannie Lou Hamer: To Tell It Like It Is*, ed. Maegan Parker Brooks and Davis W. Houck (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2011), 44–57.

Hamer's theology was grounded in the belief that "God care and we care," and that the "meek shall inherit the earth." Even after being beaten by two Negro prisoners on the orders of white patrolmen, she prayed for her captors.

> "We are not fighting against these people because we hate them, but we are fighting these people because we love them and we're the only thing can save them now. We are fighting to save these people from their hate and from all the things that would be so bad against them. We want them to see the right way. Every night of my life that I lay down before I go to sleep, I pray for these people that despitefully use me."

This is the "politics of love" that defines biblical personalism, a recognition that the oppressor is also a victim of their own hate and in need of redemption. Hamer's personalism was a "lived" theology that saw the person's value as intrinsic, given by God, and beyond the reach of the state's violence.

The witness of King and Hamer demonstrates that what the Black church tradition was practicing had a precise conceptual identity, even when that identity was not formally named. The commitment to the irreducible worth of every human person, the refusal to treat either oppressor or oppressed as a mere instrument of a political program, the insistence that human dignity is given by God and therefore beyond the reach of any ideology: these are not incidental features of the tradition. They are its theological core. The next movement identifies this core by its proper name: personalism.

Movement IV: Black Church Personalism

As a theory, personalism emerged after World War I. "A body of thought began to emerge from a Paris group" that recognized ideological tribalism is more about discerning which tribe "wins" rather than determining what is best for people. There was a crisis in France because there was no way to referee competing ideas about addressing issues like poverty in the modern era. The principal exponent was a Frenchman named Emmanuel Mounier, a devout Roman Catholic. Thomas Rourke explains,

> "The personalist movement arose to challenge what it saw as the root causes of the crisis of modernity, at the center of which was the profound dehumanization, or better, depersonalization, which was taking place. The social order was dominated by economic and political megaprocesses and megastructures based on ways of thinking which abstracted from the person."[30] Intellectual abstractions and closed philosophical systems were getting policy makers nowhere fast. For Mounier, a person was a living center of creative activity, communication, and commitment who comes to know himself across the bridge of his action. Free, creative, and acting persons were to unite with others to create a society in which the structures, customs, and institutions are rooted in and revolved around the person as center."

[30] Thomas R. Rourke and Rosita A. Chazarreta Rourke, *A Theory of Personalism* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2005), 7.

Following WWI, there emerged variations on the theme of personalism. There was a more secularized version developed at Boston University which served as the hub for personalism for much of the 20th-century. While studying at Boston University, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. re-inserted personalism into his Christian thinking about social justice that would change America forever.[31] Personalism played a determinative role in the structure of Dr. King's Civil-Rights Movement.

According to Warren E. Steinkraus, of the "second-generation" of Personalists, P. A. Bertocci, L. H. DeWolf, and W. G. Muelder are perhaps the most prominent, King studied with all of them.[32] All have seen the social and economic implications of Personalism but only Muelder has been unyielding in his devotion to non-violence and radical social and economic justice. Accordingly, King's wedding of Personalism and nonviolence in both theory and practice is virtually original in the development of American Personalism, and it seems a natural union, not a marriage of convenience. The fundamental teaching of Personalism which seems to imply non-violence as its ethic is the principle that persons are ultimate intrinsic values. King repudiates a materialistic view of man and says "souls are of infinite metaphysical value." This means that there is no higher principle than the person. All other values are subordinate. Abstract laws, the state, property, and other institutions are all to be judged in the light of their effect on persons. This is, of course, the moral base of democracy, often lost sight of. King was especially vigorous in his criticism of those who place property and profit above persons. A life is sacred. Property is intended to serve life, and no matter how one surrounds it with rights and respect, it has no personal being. For King, "Abstract laws, the state, property, and other institutions are all to be judged in the light of their effect on persons. This is, of course, the moral base of democracy, often lost sight of. King was especially vig- orous in criticism of those who place property and profit above per- sons."[33] Elsewhere he writes: "Man is not a thing. He must not be dealt with as an animated in himself." King notes, "For the evils of racism, poverty, and militarism to die, a new set of values must be born. Our economy must become more **person-centered** than property and profit centered.[34] Our government must depend more on its moral power than on its military power." King recognized the rightful role of property-in the development of the person but he wanted it always to be subordinate. The Marxist too wants to rearrange property for the sake of human welfare but ends by having no more real interest in the person than capitalists or militarists because he believes that some persons are mere instruments for others. Killing is allowed in Marxist theory. King was critical of communism as well: "Communism reduces men to a cog in the wheel of the state" even if in theory the state is only an interim affair.

Personalism as a metaphysic has characteristically taught that personality is the key to reality. Now King was deeply concerned with injustice done to persons. He was a foe of oppression of all types. But he could not see that the fact that a majority was oppressing a minority, even violently, somehow justified the minority's oppressing the majority by violence in turn. Nor could he see that an oppressive minority should be suppressed by a violent majority. He was no utilitarian. He did not justify violent action against one group of persons in behalf of

---

[31] *God and Human Dignity: The Personalism, Theology, and Ethics of Martin Luther King, Jr*. April 15, 2006 by Rufus Burrow Jr.

[32] Warren E. Steinkraus, "Martin Luther King's Personalism and Non-Violence," *Journal of the History of Ideas* 34, no. 1 (January–March 1973): 97–111,

[33] Ibid., 103.

[34] Ibid., 104.

another because greater good would somehow accrue to the greater number of people. He was interested in the common good even though he happened to carry the banner of the minority. His opposition to segregation was based primarily on the grounds that it treated persons as things and hindered personal freedom and development. It is a paradigm case of oppression of persons.

Conclusion: The Enduring Claim of Biblical Personalism

The four movements traced in this chapter tell a single story. Enslaved men and women sang about Moses not because they had been taught a theory of social transformation but because the Bible had given them something more durable than any theory: a vision of the human person as bearing inviolable worth before a God who acts in history to vindicate the oppressed. That vision sustained communities across generations of terror, supplied the vocabulary for a civil rights movement that reordered American public life, and found its most articulate institutional expression in the sermons and public witness of Martin Luther King Jr. and others. It was, in the precise sense developed in this paper, a biblical personalism; and it was this, not a political ideology, that gave the Black church tradition its extraordinary moral authority.

The departure represented by Black liberation theology was not a radicalization of the tradition but a departure from it. James Cone's project imported a hermeneutical framework from outside Scripture and then pressed Scripture into its service. The result was a theology that named real evils but could not adequately ground the dignity of persons, because it anchored human worth in the experience of victimization rather than in the creative act of a God who declares every human being inviolable. The historic Black church had done something far more subversive than Cone's system allowed: it had submitted the entire social order, oppressor and oppressed alike, to the judgment of a Word that stood above every ideology. The focus of the black church has always been more about how public policies impact persons. Cone's revision sacrificed that transcendence for the sake of relevance and in doing so narrowed the tradition it claimed to represent.

King's personalism, by contrast, operated from the inside out, from the person up. Because the person possesses worth that is metaphysically prior to every social arrangement, no political victory that comes at the cost of the oppressor's humanity can be considered genuine justice. The beloved community is not a rearrangement of power; it is the social expression of a moral universe in which every person's dignity is honored. This is why King could not be co-opted by either side of the ideological spectrum. His commitment was not to a program but to a person, to every person, and the Scripture that declared each one made in the image of God. Fannie Lou Hamer embodied the same conviction at ground level: praying for the men who beat her, fighting to save the oppressor from his own hatred, because her theology left no category for a human being whose redemption was not worth seeking.

The relevance of this argument extends well beyond the historical questions it addresses. American public life today is increasingly structured by the same problem the Black church tradition navigated with such remarkable clarity: the tendency of political actors across the spectrum to subordinate persons to systems, to treat human beings as instruments of an ideological project rather than as ends in their own right. What the historic Black church offers is not a third ideology to set alongside the others but a prior commitment that exposes the inadequacy of all of them. When Scripture is read plainly, the person emerges as the fundamental unit of moral concern, and every political arrangement is subject to judgment on that basis alone.

The enslaved community that sang “Let my people go” understood this intuitively. They were not issuing a partisan demand; they were announcing a fact about the structure of reality. Pharaoh’s authority was not sovereign because no human authority is sovereign over the person whom God has made. That insight did not require a philosophy seminar or a revolutionary manifesto. It required only a Bible read in the fear of God and a faith that the God of the Exodus was still on the throne. The Black church carried that faith across two centuries of American history and, in doing so, preserved something the rest of the culture kept losing: the recognition that persons are ultimate, that their dignity cannot be revoked, and that any politics which forgets this has already lost its way.