The Formation of Mission Theology for the African American Missionary in the 19th Century

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To understand the formation of the African American Missionary in the 19th-century one must slow down and observe polarizing discontents that affect all Americans in some measure. These observations in no way indicate that these assessments influence each person to the same degree. In the United States of America, the church has chosen – on numerous occasions – to remain complicit and mute regarding the overt and covert bigotry directed to her African American brothers and sisters in Christ.

Africans who entered the American shores did not arrive by their own volition; they were subjugated by the European slave trade. Those arriving from the West Coast of Africa did not have expectations and anticipations as newcomers. Their hopes as well as dreams were not like our forefathers who landed with the possibility of a new and better life. Africans disembarked in chains, terrorized by their captors and in many cases isolated from the family they knew. Husbands were separated from wives, and parents from their children, never having the privilege to say I love you or laying eyes on them again.

The transatlantic slave trade devoured millions of innocent Africans as they traveled over the brutal seas in route to America. Their primary purpose was not for a better life but to build America based on a system of free labor because they were considered less than human. While the exact total of enslaved Africans is not officially documented, some estimate the total between twelve and fifteen million – over the four centuries of this bludgeoning atrocity. It is hard to fathom how one could justify American slavery while believing in the biblical teachings of Christ the Son of God. This rationale was espoused by slaveowners and a segment of religious leaders throughout the United States during the 1800s though. Scripture revealed no evidence neither did it substantiate the authorization to subjugate other humans against their will, yet to some Scripture was the impetus. "From the very beginning of the Atlantic slave trade, conversions of the slaves to Christianity were reviewed by the emerging nations of Western Christendom as a justification for enslavement of Africans" (Raboteau 2004, 96).

With this rationalization promulgated throughout American society, was this the mask that would hide the quilt of enslavement from their hands as they proclaimed Jesus as their Savior. Did they maintain an emerging belief that this was the God-ordained method to reach the African people with a loving message of salvation?

The Black church in America was birthed as a persecuted church. Unfortunately, many American evangelicals do not view this state of American history – past or present – as a sin issue that requires repentance. For one to repent of sin, it must be an acknowledgment of a transgression that has been committed. To many Christians, sin is invisible to them because everything in their culture looks, talks and believes in like manner. When the sin of complicity is exposed, it is often shunned or even ignored as existing decades ago and unlikely not practiced currently.

It is hard to comprehend how Christians could allow and support the enslavement of another individual based solely upon their ethnicity and the color of their skin. Albeit the impetus for the deadliest war that took place on the continental United States was slavery. There were Christians on both sides of the divide that fought, some fought in opposition to the bondage as well as the inhuman treatment of another human. The opposing side fought vehemently to not relinquish their power over their slaves as well as the continuance of free labor. Jemar Tisby, in his work *The Color of Compromise*, makes a compelling statement about the genesis of the Civil War, "two facts about the Civil War are especially pertinent to our examination of race and Christianity in America: that the Civil War was fought over slavery and that countless Christians fought and died to preserve it as an institution" (2019, 71). Why would God-fearing Christians feel so adamant about slavery and its continued implementation? Were they willing to risk their lives to the extent that thousands died because of an unrelenting desire for power, wealth and ultimately the sin that drove them to this demise? How could the church allow this brutality, this savagery, and remain complicit? Was there a different interpretation of the bible that omitted this treatment to others.

The deadliest war on American soil is not only linked to the liberation of the enslaved; it also laid the groundwork for religious liberties granted to individual states. "The Civil War-as a conflict to define the Union, determine the legitimacy of slavery, and specify the limits of states' rights-was also fundamentally a religious battle over how to interpret the Bible and how to promote moral norms in public life" (Noll 2008,14). The majority of abolitionists during this period ascribed to the Christian doctrine, thus giving them freedom to use scripture as their compass in the fight for freedom. They were able to use these established laws to their advantage as they petitioned courts to overturn unconstitutional laws.

The majority of African American missionaries in the 1800s were born before reconstruction yet obtained a systematic strategy to navigate the malfeasance of slavery and discovered a course of action to bring to fruition their missionary vocation. These black men and women were not by any means granted the same rights and privileges as their white co-laborers in theological education, global missions' awareness, nor equal distributions of missions funding.

Regrettably, the contributions and participation of 19th century African American missionaries have been whitewashed. For the most part, their work and limited scholarship is devoid from our intercultural studies, theological and divinity schools. In addition, many books that contain American missions' history were composed without the mention of "George Liele, the first missionary from America in the year 1784" (Smither 2019, 13), or Betsey Stockton, "the first single female appointed by an American missions board" (Moffett and Andrew III 2012, 66). These omissions stem from a deletion in America's history and the historical implications of Christianity prevailing alongside the heinous trans-Atlantic slave trade that engaged in the stealing and auctioning of Black bodies. "Concealed was the verity that the Ethiopian Eunuch, as narrated in the book of Acts, deliberately traveled to Jerusalem to worship God, thus dispelling the misnomer that the African continent was destitute in the context of the knowledge and redemptive plan of Jesus Christ" (Gay 2021, 13).

The Mission Theology of these early African American missionaries during the 1800s is a discipline that has garnered limited contemplation. At the same time, there are identifiable causes that explain why the formation of Mission Theology – that shaped these missionaries – is extremely important. Furthermore, there is a historical narrative that necessitates discovery. "Early African American Christian theology was birthed and grew up in the context of American chattel slavery and the colonial experience" (Anyabwile 2009, 17). This period in a historical framework of America was met with slavery, war, and political tension. The unrelenting institution of dehumanizing the Black body and the establishment of colonialization inhibited the slave from invaluable theological enlightenment. While such opposing authorities were unrelenting, these early missionaries were able to confront and overcome extreme adversity as they propagated the gospel into uncharted areas.

Before one can explore this Theology, an applicative definition must be determined. "Mission theology is foundational to the processes of promoting, integrating, and contextualizing the elements of Christian mission through encounter, proclamation, communion, dialogue, and social transformation" (New Catholic

Encyclopedia April 13, 2021). This statement of meaning is uncomplicated and simplistic yet yields foundational actions as a response. The early African American missionary merged both the sacred text and lived experience to establish a theology of mission. This intersection fathered a new consciousness for this infant theological development from the lens of African American Christians.

There was a rather large swath of African slaves in the 19th century that did not embrace the religion of their master based on his premise. "Since many of the enslaved questioned the sincerity of the slaveholders' religious commitments, it is not surprising these enslaved disregarded any biblical teaching that proceeded from people whose ethical practices were considered suspect" (Powery and Sadler 2016, 156). While the forced life of obedience and submission did not relegate the slave to practice and embrace Christian principles by their own volition, it did provide an environment of assessment to this new religion to the masses. "In the hands of white slave owners, the Bible was a tool of oppression" (McCaulley 2020,138). This book became an agency to justify their enslavement while advocating that the White race remains free and authoritative. During Christian worship gatherings, slaves listen to sermons that emboldened this narrative as God's divine purpose for their lives. Some laws were enforced that forbad any enslaved person to receive formal education. Consequently, slave owners summarized it would be in their best interest to maintain an uneducated person who would not challenge them legally or spiritually. However, "some planters, ignoring the law or customs prohibiting slave literacy, did not hinder their slaves' efforts to learn" (Raboteau 2004, 240). This was an anomaly on many plantations in America, yet a fraction of planters did permit their slaves to obtain biblical literacy.

There were some faithful believers who somehow concocted the notion that slavery brought the Christian message to the unlearned and in some cases soulless people. History has a way of shedding light on the truth. It was not the Europeans of that day – who thought they were the catalyst for introducing Christianity to the Africans – Christ and his message were there centuries earlier. The author of *The Color of Compromise* has a riveting explanation, "Christian luminaries like Augustine, Tertullian, and Athanasius helped develop Trinitarian theology and defend the deity of Christ long before Western Europeans presumed to 'take' Christianity to Africans" (Tisby 2019, 37). The gospel had already reached the shores of the continent of Africa, and subsequently, there were people who embraced this message.

There were slaves who discovered attending religious services was an opportunity to learn to read. This was accomplished by listening to their master's

sermon and committing to memory what was being quoted from the Bible. "Slaves mimicked what they heard from white preachers and readers, and in repeating what they heard they often improvised on it" (Callahan 2008, 11). Later upon returning to their slave communities, they would discuss among themselves what was asserted by the preacher. Some were gifted with this innate phenomenon of recall, while some learned through iteration. "Slaves were distrustful of the white folks' interpretation of the Scriptures and wanted to be able to search for themselves" (Raboteau 2004, 239). The behavior of their master and the message that was conveyed from scripture was scrutinized with judgment. Observation was another method adopted and implemented in pursuit of divine truth. This approach was actualized in the life of their white Christian slave owner and family.

The enslaved would grapple and engage critically with scripture that was learned from retentiveness. Created out of systematic oppression emerged a sanctuary of disimprisonment for the slave without hesitation to engage scripture. "The formerly enslaved were critical interpreters of the biblical text, not because they questioned the literal interpretation of a passage, but because they challenged the dominant cultural (and popular) paradigm of possessor with interpretive tradition of a biblical reading" (Powery and Sadler 2016, 21). This theological thought for the enslaved – void of academic training – provoked a fascinating inquiry of interpretation. In their examination was raised the contextualization of scripture and thus application. The Black Christian did not bring into question the validity or the authority of Holy Scripture; what was scrutinized was the interpretative lens that was imposed upon it. Rightly dividing God's word was not at the nucleus of their motivation; it was a continuance of subjugation by implementing unsubstantiated scripture. "Biblical justification of slavery was increasingly popular as the mainstay of the South's proslavery argument" (Boles 1988, 106). This ideology galvanized many slave owners to perpetuate this message of Black enslavement through religious propagation. The enslaved believer rejected this philosophy and applied their own hermeneutic. "But those who chose to accept and develop a Christian faith cultivated a hermeneutical strategy that allowed them to manage the biblical stories, interpret them, and integrate them in meaningful ways that contributed value to their identity" (Powery and Sadler 2016, 168). With this technique, the slave contextualized the message of scripture as not to bring marginalization, yet they could see themselves in the Bible. It was amidst these settings that a space of freedom emerged so the slave could intersect their blackness and theology, which produced an exegesis of scripture; a realization that God who talked through the Book was a God of freedom and liberation to all His creation.

The early African American missionary's emergent mission theology crystallized through those processes. They were not insulated from the trauma and dehumanization of the 19th century, yet through God's providence, their missionary exploits were launched. This article provides a snapshot into a theology that was the agency for their missiological participation.

George Liele was the first American to travel outside the continental United States of America with the message of Christ. "It is interesting to note that just as the spread of the Gospel in New Testament times was due, in part, to persecution (Acts 8:1), so Liele left the country of his birth for fear of being persecuted through re-enslavement" (Cornelius 2002, 49). Liele, a former enslaved Black who obtained his freedom was cognizant to the probability of being re enslaved, and he responded in like manner like the terrorized Christians in Jerusalem who fled into Judea and Samaria. He boarded a ship as an indentured servant and began his missionary undertakings in Kingston, Jamaica. George's conversion experience reveals the development of his theology of mission. He lamented,

> [I] saw my condemnation in my own heart, and I found no way wherein I could escape the damnation of hell, only through the merits of my dying Lord and Savior Jesus Christ; which caused me to make intercession with Christ, for the salvation of my poor immortal soul; and I full well recollect, I request of my Lord and Master to give me a work, I did not care how mean it was, only to try and see how good I would do it (Rippon 1790-1793, 333).

This spiritual reckoning and conversion were the commencement of the new Christian life and the inward call that would ultimately lead to global missions. His spiritual awakening prompted a prayer of supplication to be used by God. Henry Sharpe, George's master, and the Reverend Matthew Moore were instrumental in his spiritual formation, theologically and practically. "Liele's conversion awakened an urgency within him to reach the lost with the Gospel, especially slaves and those of African heritage" (Saunders 2020, 64). This moment in history formed a simultaneous spiritual transformation and explicit imploration to trumpet the message of Jesus to those with whom he identified, the enslaved alongside those of the African diaspora. Liele contends, "desiring to prove the sense I had of my obligations to God, I endeavored to instruct" the people of "my color in the word of God: the white brethren seeing my endeavors, and that the word of the Lord seemed to be blessed, gave me a call at a quarterly meeting to preach before the congregation" (Sernett 1999, 46). The mission motif that Liele utilized is found in the scriptural text, Acts 1:8. Christ challenged and

charged his disciples to proselytize those without His message commencing first with the Jerusalem nonbelievers, then expanding to Judaea, Samaria, then concluding globally. His affinity was directly linked to the enslaved as he understood the gravity of their plight in bondage. This was the theology that fueled his undertakings in America and Jamacia with an applied Christology intersecting with Missiology.

"The Christianity practiced by Liele was not limited to one nation, colony, or ethnic group but was formed and spread through interaction with colonist and national leaders in the Americas and England" (Shannon, White, and Bingham 2013, 23). Liele's exposure to a broad perspective of Christianity and theology was unprecedented for this period while he endured slavery, and as a free person. George's cross-cultural interaction began in his early spiritual formation with the watchful eye of his pastor. "Convinced of his ministerial gifts and seeing how his work had already been blessed among his brethren, the church unanimously licensed him to preach" (Liele, Cooke, Marshall, Clarke, and Swigle 1916, 69-92). Reverend Moore's church was comprised of white members who held all leadership offices and slaves of local planters. This introduction to cultural inclusion would prove invaluable to his theology of mission in future years. "At the same time, Liele was encouraged to preach on many of the plantations in the area, as well as to the predominantly white congregations around them" (Morrison 2015, 19-20). For certain, this platform was a practicum providing an agency to hone his spiritual gifts in environments that included both Black and White members.

George Liele was acclaimed for his oratorical and persuasive sermons when he exhorted the lost to repent of their sins. "Even when he preached very orthodox sermons that never overtly encouraged disruptive behavior or insurrection, he constantly expressed his strong desire that his listeners be freed from sin and its consequences" (Pugh 2003, 27). He was able to traverse laws legalizing slavery while introducing an ideology of spiritual liberation. He was acquainted with the imposed regulations in Jamacia and constructed sermons that would not incite a revolt against the establishment. The significancy of his declamation inspired hope in the immediacy to a new life in Christ. "He promoted cultural diversity in the body of Christ while emphasizing orthodoxy" (Raven 2019, 104). The uniqueness of his church included slaves, free Negroes, Jamaican, British and Americans. As Liele's ministry multiplied in ethnic inclusiveness he was riveted to the customs and traditions of scripture. The Acts paradigm became a continuation in Liele's leadership and theology of mission as a reenactment that transpired eighteen hundred years earlier during Pentecost. Liele composed a letter describing the numerical growth of the mission in Jamaica, on one

occasion he reported, "I have baptized four hundred in Jamaica" (Liele, et al. 1916, 69-92). These numbers present an exact calculation to the conversion on this Island directly linked to Liele's ministry actions. Emphasizing baptisms unveils that their might remain additional members who were not baptized. The exponential growth of the Christian message was expansive throughout the country of Jamaica as evident in a written correspondence. "We have, together with well-wishers and followers, in different parts of the country, about fifteen hundred people" (Liele, et al. 1916, 72). This biblical multiplication framework had its genesis in the scriptures he loved.

"Through the suffering of Jesus Christ, he makes humans understand that God is wherever humans experience oppression, humiliation, and suffering" (Cone, Paris, and Douglas 2020, 63-64). Liele inarguably devoted his life to making Jesus known while applying Christ's identifiable distinctions as he assimilated with humanity. The subjugated enslaved aligned with Christ's narrative on earth concluding with an emancipation from sin and human misfortune.

Unfortunately, early African American missionaries, who were model members in good standing in their mainline church denomination and possessed outstanding abilities, did not receive an invitation to serve in senior global missions' leadership positions or outposts throughout the Caribbean along with the nations of Africa. Absent from their board tables and conference rooms were the voices and revelations of gifted African American missionaries. This neglectfulness prevented a keen insightfulness on vital social interactions, family structures, and religious practice, as well as a contextual understanding of the people groups that these African Americans possessed.

"These constructs of exclusion – which remained entrenched during the 1800s – failed to immobilize the dedicated missionaries in their unrelenting pursuit to fulfill a God-ordained call as missionaries" (Watson and Stevens 2009, 26). They persevered, traveling throughout the Caribbean nations of North America and Western Africa, proselytizing these distant relatives. From these exploits, Christianity's expansion morphed into establishing educational structures, the construction of church buildings, and a tangible understanding of God.

As we move through 2021, there are some perceptible advancements to the critical engagement of African Americans to global missions. The term "woke" is spoken among many African Americans referring to the enlightenment of social engagement, issues, and awareness that affect them directly. Another term that one might understand is being consciously aware of what is taking place in their community and throughout America. In Ephesians 5:14 there is a call for the church to wake up and

become keenly conscious of the now. This leads to an assessment of the Church in America when it comes to these concerns. The Church has undoubtedly made evidential and tangible strides to bring healing, and a concerted endeavor to address grievances that impact marginalized people. While the eras of slavery, the antebellum south, and Jim Crow are in our rearview mirrors, the question remains, has the church traveled an upward trajectory from her ill-fated past?

There are mainline denominations that have made public statements repenting of their sins for their contributions to as well as silence regarding these incidents. These acts are appreciated and gratefully received, but that is not the end of the narrative. As the voice of the prophetic church seeks to keep her focus on the Great Commission, she must also persevere to remain woke, she cannot afford to fall asleep.

While the percentage of career African American missionaries remains inadequate, there is an optimism and concerted effort in many spaces to transform this quandary. Moreover, we collectively affirm and participate in this plan of action. The intentional implementations of past EMS president, Dr. Edward Smither, and current president, Dr. Robin Harris, in conjunction with their leadership teams are manifested in the creation of Missiology and the Black Experience track of this year's conference. While the creation of this platform is unprecedented, this could not be executed without the competent and qualified leadership of Dr. Michelle Raven and Dr. Linda P. Saunders. These missiological sessions are structured to foster and showcase the African American experience in global missions, past and present. As a catalyst for future interest, infrastructures like missions' conferences and societal gatherings that highlight African American missionaries and their involvements toward global initiatives will aid in awareness that will lead to participation. In addition, a concerted commitment from the academy, such as a willingness to employ African American missiologists and a curriculum that will incorporate their scholarship and expertise will shine a much-needed light on this topic.

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