Recovering The Theology of the Negro Spirituals
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“Shout on, children, you never die. Glory, hallelu!”¹ As jubilant and bold as ever, the voice of the poet resounds, drowning out centuries of physical oppression and subsequent decades of scholarly neglect. Few genres of song have been as significant historically, literarily, musically, and theologically as the “Negro spiritual.” For their original singers, they were songs of praise, lamentation, and resistance. I maintain that the spirituals present a coherent theology, which may be discerned upon a close reading of the songs’ texts.

Anyone hoping to understand the spirituals’ theology must first understand the origins and practice of slave Christianity, including the origins and practice of the spirituals themselves. The Christianization of slaves was no simple process: “From the very beginning of the Atlantic slave trade [in the fifteenth century], conversion of the slaves to Christianity was viewed by the emerging nations of Western Christendom as a justification for the enslavement of Africans.”² However, there were few conversions to Christianity until the great revivals of the eighteenth century.³ By that point, most slaves in the U.S. were “native born,” helping eliminate the language barrier, and ease cultural assimilation in general.⁴ Even then, many slave owners were opposed to exposing their slaves to Christianity, fearing that they might be inspired by the Gospel’s sense of God’s justice and of all men’s equality before him. Likewise, many slaves were reluctant to embrace their master’s religion. Most whites who professed to be Christians thought that their faith was perfectly consistent with the institution of slavery, twisting or truncating the Gospel to manipulate the

⁴Ibid. 60. This was not the case in the Caribbean, where high death-rates and a steady influx of African-born slaves created an environment ripe for syncretism, rather than a fully recontextualized Christianity.
slaves, with constant recourse to “the prominent portions of Scripture which shew [sic] the duties of servants and the rights of masters.”5 While some masters allowed their slaves to accompany their family to worship on Sunday, most slaves did not have access to formal church.6 A few pious Southerners supported “plantation missions,” which sent white preachers from plantation to plantation to minister to the slaves. But these same mission supporters opposed the abolitionist movement, lest plantation owners become hostile to educating their slaves in every form. Slaves also learned a great deal about religion from each other. For a while, Baptists and Methodists licensed black preachers to reach plantations and to serve in a handful of free black congregations.7

The practice of slave Christianity reflects these circumstances. Most masters restricted the times and places of worship. The few permissible occasions of public worship included weddings, funerals, baptisms, and revivals.8 Otherwise, slaves held most of their worship in “secret prayer meetings” either in the slave quarters or in “hush harbors” in the woods.9 Some Sunday meetings in slave quarters could consume an entire day, due to both the intense nature of the prayer and worship, and to time socializing, for Sunday was the only time slaves had free from work. The black preacher held an important role in both public and private worship, for he was a spokesman for God and for the community, renowned for his eloquence despite his lack of education. Although masters attempted to regulate all aspects of slave Christianity, slaves continued to meet in secret and to pray for freedom. “Old time folks always felt they was to be free,” and prayed accordingly.10 Black preachers walked a delicate balancing act of promoting the master’s values publicly while preaching freedom in secret. Even when listening to white preachers, slaves interpreted the message to fit their best understanding of the truth. “What was figurative they interpreted literally,” so that, when a preacher taught about spiritual liberation, slaves understood the Bible’s message about freedom from physical bondage. The most profound ritual setting for worship was baptism, which, in the context of the revival movement, expressed the passage from death into life, from alienation into the family of God, from the wilderness into the Promised Land. Marriage was promoted as a sacred institution, but one without any effectual legal power, for it was superceded by the institution of slavery. A master could permanently separate a husband and wife, selling one or both for his own financial gain. As a result, slaves had to develop their own moral paradigm, emphasizing protection of one another against their common oppressor. Slaves relied on memory and oral tradition to pass on Bible knowledge and core beliefs. They also stressed the importance of direct

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9 Ibid. 214-220. There was a spectrum of plantation support of or opposition to the practice of slave Christianity.
10 Anonymous. Quoted ibid. 218.
revelation from God, in lieu of relying on written scriptures. Christianity was one of several belief systems present on most plantations. Traditional African beliefs persisted, through which slaves attempted to make sense of and overcome irrational illness and afflictions. Practitioners of traditional African rituals had to compete with preachers for the hearts of their communities. Many slaves accepted their ancestors’ beliefs and Christianity as compatible with one another, creating a loose syncretism. Many slaves were understandably agnostic, preferring to spend their time in pursuit of what little worldly pleasure they could access, confident in the belief that no loving God would allow slavery. Those who did believe found solace in sincere, often desperate expressions of faith.11

The most lasting of these expressions is the Negro spiritual, spontaneous songs most fully experienced at prayer meetings, but equally common at home and in the fields. Theories of their origins abound and no single-source theory will suffice. Stylistically, they incorporated many African elements: “call and response, multiple rhythms, syncopation…., slides from one note to another, repetition, hand-clapping, and body movement.”12 The tune for a given spiritual could conceivably be American, European, or African in origin, not to mention a mix of the three or an entirely novel composition. There is ample possibility for multiple authors spontaneously improvising and adapting one another’s work on a single given song.13

Numerous problems face the researcher of the Negro spirituals. First there is the problem of sources. By 1867, many Negro spirituals were already difficult to find.14 New songs were being sung to correspond with the new life blacks were experiencing after slavery. W. F. Allen and a handful of other researchers compiled over one hundred spirituals, which represented a fraction of the extant material. To compound this problem, some songs were reserved only for slave ears.15 There were occasionally errors either in the transmitting or compiling of particular songs, resulting in the misrendering of some words.16 While most of the songs are straightforward, a few are virtually incomprehensible.17 Finally, because slaves transmitted the spirituals through the oral tradition, no researcher can say precisely who composed a given spiritual, much less when or where. The earliest extant compilation of spirituals dates from shortly after the Civil War and its songs reflect its historical context. Songs of freedom abound, as do songs of war. This may or may not have been

11 Ibid. 209-299.
12 Raboteau. African-American Religion. 56
13 Ibid. 244f.
14 Allen et al. Slave Songs of the United States. xx.
15 Cone. The Spirituals and the Blues. 40.
16 Ibid. ix.
17 Allen et al. Slave Songs of the United States. Two prime examples are “John, John, of the Holy Order” p. 16f and “Rain Fall and Wet Becca Lawton” p. 21f, of which it was said “that the song always ends with a laugh, and appears therefore to be regarded by the negroes as mere nonsense” (Tomlinson on Allen 22).
the case in the earlier decades of the eighteenth century, but there is no way to
know with certainty.

Despite such methodological issues, this much is clear: Negro spirituals
were a primary religious expression of the slave community. Their content is
best defined as “the message of the Christian Gospel… translated… into songs
in terms of [slaves’] own experience.” In addition to their religious nature, the
spirituals had a subversive political aspect. They were often whispered in secret,
lest an antagonistic master overhear and give a beating. On some plantations,
singing was allowed, but prayer meetings were not. Spirituals such as “Steal
Away to Jesus” could provide a signal for a covert meeting. On plantations
where group worship was permitted, spirituals were performed in a “shout,” in
which participants sang and danced in a circle, often acting out the lyrics. The
spirituals’ call-and-response structure lent itself to “an intensely personal and
vividly communal experience,” in which the singers shared each other’s joys
and sorrows. The communal nature and loose structure of the spirituals meant
that their performance was flexible and their meaning was differently interpreted
by different individuals. These multiple meanings were not mutually
exclusive. “Lord” could mean “Yankees” in the minds of some, but “God” in
the minds of others. Singers could sing about the ambiguous “union break of
day,” but mean the “Union break of day.” The slaves adapted the spirituals to
different circumstances to express different ideas and emotions.

Contrary to some theories, these meanings were both this-worldly and
other-worldly. The meaning of the spirituals was not simply a “secular,”
political message couched in religious metaphor and code, for “African life was
not partitioned. All of it was religious.” It is appropriate to apply systematic
theological categories to the spirituals, provided that this is done with care. The
spirituals are theological expressions, not theological treatises. Their theology is
coherent and consistent, making it possible to speak of the theology of the Negro
spiritual, rather than of a multiplicity of theologies. Although the spirituals were
created in individual locations, they spread regionally and were preserved in the
oral tradition of the antebellum slave community. Because of this, present day
scholars have every reason to approach the Negro spirituals as normative, albeit
diverse, expressions of the slaves’ faith. Most spirituals, like most hymns, have
an implicit practical application. The systematic theology of the spirituals is

19 Ibid. 213-214.
Institution” in the Antebellum South.* 245.
21 Ibid. 246.
22 Ibid. 247.
23 Higginson on Ibid. 248.
ironic statement, since Fisher is a major proponent of the theory that the spirituals’ meaning is a
secular one. He states confidently that “Negroes did not clearly understand otherworldliness even as
late as the Civil War.” 156.
inseparable from their practical theology, as is evident in examining the theological contents of the spirituals.

An initial study of God in the spirituals presents few surprises. He was the almighty, the heavenly father of believers. But what is remarkable is that slaves adored him as such. They could lament on one hand, “sometimes I feel like a motherless child,” separated from their parents as many of them were; but they could still look to God as a loving father. God kept his promises. He “is perwide.” He took away sin. He was worthy of praise.

Jesus in the spirituals was the suffering servant, savior, teacher, and dearest friend of the slaves. He had “no where to lay his head.” He was the crucified Lord of all, but especially of the slaves. “Were you there when they crucified my Lord?” asked one spiritual, taking personally Jesus’ death. But “he will lead us into glory.” He was the victor over sin and over death, “a mighty man,” King Emmanuel. Freeing believers from physical and spiritual bondage, he called them home. His power was not limited to the next life, for he was a healer and miracle worker who empowered the lowly. He was a teacher too. He “taught me how to pray” and set an example of how to live and how to die: “with a free good will.” In a profound way, Jesus was “an ever-present and intimate friend,” with whom slaves identified themselves. Jesus provided the spiritual singers’ central paradigm for strength in weakness and hope in the midst of suffering.

The fall was a past reality with implications for the present. “O what a trying time!” exclaimed one spiritual about Adam and Eve’s expulsion from Eden, the only extant song to deal with the fall from grace as a past event. However, numerous spirituals dealt with its present consequences: suffering, temptation, sin, and the ongoing work of Satan. Suffering was a fact of life. Everyone had ups and downs, trouble in the body and “trouble in de mind.” Slaves had to endure “peck o’ corn,… pint o’ salt,… hundred lash,… [and] mistress’ call.” By including such realities in the spirituals, slaves could

27 i.e., “will provide.” Allen. *Slave Songs of the United States*. 2.
28 Ibid. 14.
34 “Steal Away to Jesus,” Dixon 81 and “Come Along Home to Jesus,” Allen 75.
40 Ibid. 57.
41 Ibid. 30f.
42 Ibid. 48.
affirm the purpose of these afflictions. Being soaked with rain, burnt by the sun, and suffering much "parting" and "backbiting" might have been part of this world, but would not be part of the next. Not only was suffering temporary, but it was compatible with the goodness of God. Singings could ask, "My father, how long poor sinner suffer here?" One spiritual unflinchingly juxtaposed Jesus’ homelessness with God’s provision: "The Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head. The Lord will provide." The slaves knew that they could endure with the Lord’s help, as they prayed, "help me bear de cross."

It was not an easy cross to bear. Temptation lurked at every turn. The spirituals were conscious of "backsliders" and had a moralistic bent. The spirituals consistently called sinners to repent. "Wait not for tomorrow’s sun. Turn, sinner, turn O!" But the singers heeded Jesus’ warning against hypocrisy. "Beam in my sister’s eye… beam in mine," and others lament their "sin-sick soul." The Christian slaves knew that they were sinners and saints all at once.

Temptation had its source. Satan was still depicted as a deceiver, but appeared “more [as] a malevolent trickster than [as] a fearful demon.” He knew how to have a good time and his ultimate goal is to divert the saints. “Satan full me full of music and tell me not to pray." He shouted words of discouragement and taunts, while Jesus whispered words of uplifting truth in the singer’s heart in "I an’ Satan had a Race." He was ultimately powerless. “Old Satan tremble[s] when he sees the weakest saints upon their knees." Even the supernatural enemy of God was weak before human slaves with faith.

The eschatology of the spirituals emphasized heaven. Roughly forty percent of the compiled spirituals dealt with heaven as a primary theme. Heaven was a place of eternal praise and Sabbath rest, free from suffering and slavery. “We’ll soon be free,” one song unashamedly proclaimed. Many cases could be interpreted as meaning both liberation from death and liberation from slavery. For example, “I am bound for the land of Canaan” could mean heaven for some, but clearly meant the North for Fredrick Douglass. Heaven was the

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43 Ibid. 46.  
44 Ibid. 93.  
45 Ibid. 2.  
46 Ibid. 45.  
48 Ibid. 36.  
49 Ibid. 17.  
50 Ibid. 49.  
51 Raboteau. Slave Religion. 257.  
52 Allen et al. Slave Songs of the United States. 43.  
53 Ibid. 40.  
54 Ibid. 106.  
55 My own calculation after surveying Allen’s collection to discern which songs included at least one verse or refrain regarding heaven.  
56 Allen et al. Slave Songs of the United States. 93.  
goal of life, the “other shore” at the end of their arduous voyage. The sea was “the border between the two worlds” of the living and of the spirits in traditional African belief. Perhaps merged with memories of the Transatlantic crossing, this concept merged with that of the Jordan on the border of the Promised Land. Believing slaves embraced heaven as their true home. Heaven was a place of reunion for all those separated by slavery. “We’ll meet forever more.” They would lay down their cross, pick up a robe, wings, harps, and shoes, and have enough for “all o’ God’s chillun.” Heaven was a place where all their physical, emotional, and spiritual needs would finally be met.

While it is a much less common theme, hell played a part in the spirituals. The spirituals affirmed that God would pay back all wrongs and that hell was a danger for everyone who either did not believe or did not live right. “Judgment Day is coming…. Some folks say they never prayed a prayer; they sho’ will pray that day.” Even when hell was not explicitly mentioned, visions of the apocalypse and of God’s impending judgment abounded. Unlike many other genres of Christian song, the Negro spirituals did not hesitate to mention the day “when the stars begin to fall” and “the moon will turn to blood.” This awareness of the apocalypse came with an exhortation to stay vigilant and to be ready. “Keep your lamp trimmin’ and a-burnin’…. Dis world [al]most done.”

The implicit theology of scripture in the spirituals is one of personal proximity and of communal relevance. Spirituals approached Bible stories with a sense of “sacred time,” in which past events were understood to be in the present. Biblical figures were exhorted as if they were in the present, as in “Lit’le David, pay on yo’ harp” and “Go down, Moses….” Spirituals also projected themselves into the past. Singers could ask, in all earnestness, “Were you there when they crucified my Lord?” and imply that they were there, for “sometimes it causes me to tremble.” Elijah was the only one in scripture ever taken to heaven by a chariot. Nonetheless, slaves sang, “Swing low, sweet chariot, comin’ for to carry me home,” commanding the chariot to do for them

63 Dixon. *Negro Spirituals: from Bible to Folksong.* 104.
67 Ibid. 53.
68 Higginson. “Slave Songs and Spirituals.” 117.
70 Dixon. *Negro Spirituals: from Bible to Folksong.* 1, 22.
71 Ibid. 69.
72 2 Kings 2.
what it had done for the prophet. Bible stories were not merely given present application, they were recontextualized in the present.

The spirituals also developed a well-rounded theology of personal life, emphasizing the themes of identity, conversion, sanctification, fellowship, and prayer. Through the spirituals slaves affirmed that they were God’s children. “I want to be my Fader’s chil’en.” Like Jacob, slaves actively wrestled with God, hoping to be blessed. They followed in Christ’s footsteps, hoping to live and die righteously. “I want to die like-a Jesus die… wid a free good will.” The spirituals’ singers knew that they were on their way home to heaven. “All is gladness in de kingdom. I want to go home.” Slaves embraced that heavenly identity in the conversion process, which began in a period of intense repentance known as “lonesome valley.” Slaves in this stage reflected on their sin and attempted to draw close to God. They did not change clothes or wash until the day of their baptism, the culmination of the conversion process. Baptism was accompanied by such songs as “Roll Jordan, Roll,” “De Livin’ Waters,” and “Lord I’se Comin’ Home.” The water of baptism clearly represented both the water of rebirth and the water bordering the promised land. Salvation was seen as crossing over Jordan. The journey into freedom was the “archetypal symbol for the progress of the Christian life” and baptism was but one manifestation of it. The spirituals’ singers were aware that they needed to be constantly cleansed of sin. Therefore, they asked God, “sanctify me.” They also exhorted each other, “You must be pure and holy.” Holy living was expressed in terms of obedience both in action and in heart. “Can’t plow straight an’ keep a-lookin’ back.” The spirituals are replete with calls to repent, as in “Turn Sinner.”

More often than chastising each other about sin, the singers welcomed each other. One spiritual announced cheerfully, “There’s a meeting here tonight.” There were morning songs as well, such as “Jine ‘em.” Another song bid members farewell at the end of a meeting: “Goodbye, my brudder.” The greeting and farewell songs often include names of specific members. The

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75 Ibid. 4.
76 Ibid. 12.
77 Ibid. 46.
81 Ibid. 251.
82 Ibid.
84 Ibid. 107.
88 Ibid. 21.
89 Ibid. 52.
significance of this is two-fold. First, even the beginning and end of the meeting were of special significance and could be expressed through worship. Second, each member of the meeting mattered enough to sing to them by name, including them in the religious context of the song. Relationships were sacred. Prayer was another critical aspect of Christian life, as expressed by the spirituals. “And when ‘twas night I thought ‘twas day. I thought I’d pray my soul away.” Slaves could lose themselves in prayer and encouraged each other to do so: “pray on, pray on,” one spiritual urged. The personal lives of the spirituals’ singers were characterized by a strong sense of belonging to God through Christ, both as individuals and as a community, and of yearning to live accordingly, in holy obedience and in prayer.

Beyond their explicit lyrical contents, the spirituals’ form itself belies an unconventional theology of worship. Composed spontaneously, improvised, and embellished, the spirituals demonstrate that worship should flow from the heart and must be relevant to the moment in which the worshipper finds himself. Believing slaves knew that they could turn to God in the midst of work and toil, or in the midst of rest and communal celebration. Moreover, the spirituals’ informal tone conveys the attitude that all times and all places were appropriate for worship. The participants in the process of the spirituals’ composition were both individuals and groups. Therefore, we find no individualistic pietism in the spirituals, but rather a vivid sense of community utterly foreign to much of the Western Church tradition. The spirituals’ orality, particularly the fluidity of their contents, displays the slave community’s radical openness to the reappropriation of a given song.

This communal theology of worship underlies the slaves’ truly communal theology of the Church. European-American churches, no matter how community-conscious in theory, have always tended to emphasize the individual. This is abundantly clear in hymnals, in which the author of the lyrics and the composers of the melodies and harmonies are listed separately for each hymn. However, in the Christian slave community, everyone was an equal owner of the material of worship. William Francis Allen and his team of researchers expressed bafflement at experiencing slave worship from the outside: “no singing in parts,… yet no two appear to be singing the same thing…. [Yet, the slaves sing] with the most perfect time, and rarely with any discord.” Anyone in the slave community could sing and be a poet. What is

90 Ibid. 71.
91 Ibid. 97.
92 The last verse of “Praise, Member,” which deals with moving to the left or moving to the right, was adapted variously to refer to vacillating in faith, to God’s hand in salvation, and to dance movements. Allen et al. Slave Songs of the United States. 4.
93 Liturgical traditions have tended to do this with their emphasis on individuals’ participation in liturgy, baptistic traditions have done this with their emphasis on individuals’ choice in conversion, and Presbyterians and others have done this with their emphasis on individuals’ intellectual understanding of God. Evangelicals now do this with their emphasis on individuals’ experience of God, perhaps best characterized by the question: “Have you (singular) had your ‘quiet time’ today?”
94 Allen et al. Slave Songs of the United States. v.
more, everyone was encouraged to sing and to act together as poets. The singers always gave freely to those down the chain of the oral tradition, for they were passing on the precious gift of hope to those who were part of their same family of faith and suffering.

Black slaves sang spirituals with “a full heart and a troubled spirit.” They approached God with joy and sorrow, trusting and embracing him as their father. They looked to Christ as friend, whose suffering mirrored their own; and as liberator, who would free them from sin, from death, and from slavery. They saw the fruit of the fall in slavery and in their own sin. They knew that their true enemy was Satan, a deceitful manipulator who was ultimately powerless before prayerful believers and their Lord. They looked forward to the joys of home in heaven, all the while conscious of the torments of hell. They bridged the distance between the Bible’s time and their own, projecting the Bible’s stories into the present. They saw themselves as God’s children, washed clean by Christ’s blood, embracing holiness, embracing each other, and seeking the Lord in prayer.

The theology of the spirituals can only be fully understood in the context of slavery. God’s fatherhood came starkly to the foreground for those who were essentially fatherless. Christ’s suffering was vivid for those who had also suffered so much. Indeed, the consequences of the fall were daily realities for the slaves, for whom the promise of heaven shone all the brighter. Likewise, God’s coming judgment was all the sweeter for those who had been so heinously wronged. It should be no surprise that freedom was such a prevalent theme for the captives, nor that identity was such an important issue for those robbed of their earthly families and homes.

An appropriate test of the accuracy of the theology extrapolated from the Negro spirituals is its correspondence with the later theology of the nineteenth-century African-American community. “The touchstones of the personal religious experience of Black Christians in nineteenth-century America,… [were] forgiveness, awe and ecstasy, then self-respect, ethical earnestness and hope.” In the spirituals, we see forgiveness embraced through the cross of Christ, awe expressed toward God the Father, ecstasy in light of salvation, self-respect because of slaves’ new identity in the family of God, ethical earnestness in light of God’s coming judgment, and hope in light of eternal life in heaven.

The Negro spirituals had a coherent theological content, but they did not make mere theoretical assertions. They each had practical applications, both implicit and explicit. Because God was their father, Christian slaves could rest content that He would provide. Because Christ’s suffering had meaning, they knew that their suffering was not in vain. Because of the reality of the fall, they

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95 Ibid. xxiii.
knew that their trials were not their fault and that they had a supernatural enemy. Because of the hope of heaven, they knew that they were bound for a true, lasting, peaceful home. Because of the necessities of holy living, they knew that they must struggle against their own desires in order to please God. Slaves found both great consolation and impetus for action in the spirituals. Full of joy and sorrow, the Negro spirituals were sermons in song.

Although the subject demands more in-depth research and analysis than anyone has heretofore undertaken, this brief study has been a small attempt to counter decades of misunderstanding and neglect. The spirituals and their creators deserve a central place in Church history. “Preponderantly the histories have been written by the winners,” Alex Haley reminds us.98 The spirituals remind us that, spiritually and politically, no earthly master determines who might be the winners in the end.

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