Call and Consequences

A Womanist Reading of Mark

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option, these are the words that transcended his death and compelled me to fight on.

There are so many people I wish to thank for helping me get to this point. First and foremost, I thank *almighty* God. I have seen the faithfulness, provision, and grace of God manifested in my life in unmistakable and amazing ways. I share the testimony of my forebears: God is indeed a way maker, prayer answerer, problem solver, heavy-load lifter, and door opener!

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∞ *introduction*

Discipleship and Suffering

I HAVE COME TO BELIEVE THAT THEOLOGIANS, IN THEIR ATTEMPT TO TALK TO AND ABOUT RELIGIOUS COMMUNITIES, OUGHT TO GIVE READERS SOME SENSE OF THEIR AUTOBIOGRAPHIES. THIS CAN HELP AN AUDIENCE DISCERN WHAT LEADS THE THEOLOGIAN TO DO THE KIND OF THEOLOGY SHE DOES.

—Delores Williams, *Sisters in the Wilderness*[1]

∞ My assignment was youth ministry in an urban context. I was to serve as church-school teacher, preach a few sermons, take the children on several field trips, direct a youth choir, and mentor the young people. I interviewed with the pastor and accepted the placement. I then embarked on what was perhaps the most theologically difficult ministerial experience I have ever had.

The appointment was in a liberal Presbyterian church pastored by a white, liberal, feminist woman.[2] Although the congregation was equally, if not primarily, composed of people of African descent, the church leadership was

overwhelmingly Euro-American. The pastor's stance toward me was as one *sister* to another in the struggle for freedom from oppression. She presumed knowledge of and a kinship with me because we shared the two isms of sexism and classism. The issue of racism, however, was never mentioned in public or private discussions. It was enough to focus on our commonalities and ignore our differences, or so we (I) naively thought. But I would soon come to see how our differences affected our theological perspectives.

One Sunday after the regular worship service, the pastor convened a church meeting. I don't recall whether it was a regular meeting or a special session, nor do I remember the purpose of the meeting. The only thing I remember was the pastor's answer to a random question that had nothing to do with any agenda item. The parishioner, an African American man, commented that several of the hymns he remembered from the church he attended when a youth were not in this church's hymnbook. He then mentioned a few of the missing hymns, among them, "The Old Rugged Cross." "Why don't we have those hymns?" he asked.

The pastor began her response by acknowledging that their hymnbook was simply a collection of hymns that she had photocopied and organized to create their songbook. Consequently, some hymns were not included because she was either unfamiliar with them or did not have access to them at the time the book was being compiled. Some hymns, however, she intentionally omitted. One of them was "The Old Rugged Cross." The pastor informed the parishioner and the entire congregation that she refused to incorporate any songs mentioning "blood" or "the cross" into the hymnal. These songs, she told him, glorified the suffering of Jesus. The congregation would never sing "Power in the Blood" or "The Old Rugged Cross" as long as she was pastor.

Although the rationale for this decision seemed self-evident to her, it was not as apparent to the members of the congregation. Her response raised more questions than it had answered, questions that were mumbled in the fellowship hall after the meeting was over. The fact that male and female, Euro-American and African American parishioners continued to discuss the pastor's comments suggested that the pastor had touched on an issue that cut across gender and racial lines. The parishioner, although silent, sat with a questioning look on his face. He seemed unable to pose the questions needed to

clarify his thoughts. I, too, sat in questioning silence. As I reflected on her comments, I came to realize that cross language was not a part of the music nor any of this congregation's liturgy. That meeting was the only time I recall hearing the cross mentioned during my nine-month tenure.

Yet I understood the pastor's decision. She ministered to people who suffered the shame of nonbeing in modern society—the poor, sick, incarcerated, uneducated, and addicted. She (and I) believed that the gospel affirmed their personhood and value as human beings created in the image of God. In spite of their present conditions, God had not sentenced them to a life of suffering from which they could not escape. She did not want her congregation to believe that God had preordained their current condition. That would lead them to the inevitable belief that their suffering was God's will.[3] Specifically, the pastor did not want to glorify the suffering of Jesus and thereby imply that his suffering should be emulated. For her, any suffering, even the redemptive suffering ascribed to Jesus, was problematic because it debilitated rather than empowered her congregation. Her view is not unique. Anthony Pinn writes, "Redemptive suffering and liberation are diametrically opposed ideas; they suggest ways of being in the world that, in effect, nullify each other."[4]

During my time at the church, I came to see that other concerns about suffering were just as critical for the pastor. She did not want the teenagers to connect, and thereby confuse, the innocent blood spilled by gangbanging and drive-by shootings with the blood Jesus shed on the cross. Perhaps they might think (incorrectly) that God could be working some good out of urban violence in the way that God had brought good out of Jesus' execution. She did not want them to conclude that poverty, addiction, poor education, and the violence often associated with them were crosses they were divinely commanded to bear.

The parishioner's question and the response of the pastor suggested, however, that the cross was not only a problematic symbol; it was also an enduring one. Removing the cross language from the hymnal, liturgy, and sermons did not remove the cross from the religious consciousness of the parishioner. The cross remained a powerful symbol. The removal of the cross songs demonstrated the pastor's recognition of the profound influence of this symbol. It was because she believed the cross to be such a powerfully negative symbol that she removed it.

Like the parishioner, I could not ignore the cross. In fact, I questioned whether one could remove the cross and still maintain the integrity of the gospel message. The issue for me was not whether but *how* we talk about, sing about, and preach about the cross. The cross is a key part of the biblical text. Although the pastor removed the cross songs from the hymnal, she could not remove cross language or the passion narratives from the Bible. In my opinion, she simply removed what instead needed to be reexamined and reinterpreted, especially in light of the congregation's sociocultural context filled with suffering, violence, and blood.

The parishioner's question provided an opportunity for the congregation to wrestle with the faith community's understanding of the cross and suffering as followers of Jesus. It was an opportunity to acknowledge the suffering of Jesus and thereby name and acknowledge the suffering they endured. Given the demographics of the congregation, it seemed to me that the pastor needed to explore, not ignore, the cross and the implications of Jesus' suffering with her parishioners.

I was immediately suspicious of the removal of the songs. My inability to articulate why I felt as I did suggested a level of connectedness to Jesus and the cross that I had not previously recognized. Karen Baker-Fletcher expresses this connection well:

> There is a visceral identity Black Americans have with the cross because of the hangings of thousands of our people on trees. For this reason, I believe African Americans will continue to feel a deep psychic and physical connection to the image of the crucifixion.[5]

The discussion about the cross songs only brought this unconscious link to the forefront of my mind. While the pastor removed a symbol she thought advocated suffering, she also removed a symbol that African Americans have traditionally understood to affirm God's presence with them during times of suffering.

One of the dominant African American understandings of Jesus is that he is the divine cosufferer.[6] African Americans conclude that because Jesus was a "man of sorrows, and acquainted with grief" (Isa 53:3 KJV), he "knows all about [their] struggles."[7] During slavery, the suffering of Jesus on the cross was a mirror of the reality of their lives.[8] African slaves' identification with Jesus' crucifixion was so profound

that Negro spirituals often transcend the boundaries of space and time. The lyrics of the spirituals imply that the slaves were actually with Jesus during the crucifixion:

> Were you there when they crucified my Lord?
> Were you there when they crucified my Lord?
> Oh! Sometimes it causes me to tremble, tremble, tremble;
> Were you there when they crucified my Lord?[9]

In effect, the suffering of the slaves converged with the suffering of Jesus. The slaves became one with Jesus. Most important, they perceived Jesus to be one with them. Jesus' presence with them signified Jesus' willingness to work on their behalf. Jacqueline Grant claims that when African Americans affirm Jesus as their divine cosufferer, they also affirm that he "empowers them in situations of oppression."[10] Jesus is the one who delivers from bondage. Because Jesus rose from the dead, African slaves could affirm, "An' the Lord shall bear my spirit hom'."[11] Cone writes, "Herein lies the meaning of the resurrection. It means that the cross was not the end of God's drama of salvation."[12] It is clear, then, that the cross and the resurrection come together in African American religious consciousness. In other words, the cross not only symbolizes the suffering of Jesus but also confirms the resurrection. For African Americans, the cross and resurrection are intimately linked; there is no resurrection without the cross.

I suggest that African Americans will continue to feel this "psychic and physical connection" to the cross because they connect with Jesus' resurrection through his suffering.[13] The affirmation of Jesus as the divine cosufferer illumines this connection, for it is within the context of suffering that African Americans in general, and African American women in particular, have connected with Jesus. Because African American women carry a profound legacy of suffering, I maintain that it is important that we acknowledge Jesus' suffering as well as our own.

Our suffering includes bodies that were raped, beaten, and broken.[14] It includes minds imprisoned and impoverished through "miseducation" and the lack of education.[15] Our suffering includes spirits tortured by the calumnies of inferiority, inadequacy, and worthlessness, lies that said we were created more in the image of a gorilla than

in the image of God. Because of this history, I contend that African American women want suffering—past and present—acknowledged so as not to be repeated.

This, I believe, was the sentiment expressed by the mother of Emmett Till. During the funeral services for her lynched teenage son, Mamie Till insisted that the casket remain open. She wanted the world to see what they did to her boy.[16] She wasn't glorifying her child's death. She wasn't making him out to be a martyr whose suffering and death ought to be emulated by scores of other young African American males. Instead, she wanted the world to see the manifestation of the injustice that plagued her people and had taken her son's life. She did not want the world to embrace the violence; she wanted them to see it. She wanted them to witness the violence in all its horrific realism so that they would set out to overturn it. It was her belief (and mine) that society would not muster the spiritual and physical resolve to stop the bloodshed unless it was first compelled to face it.

Mrs. Till's response to the viewing of her son's corpse illumined a subtle yet profound distinction between my perspective and that of the pastor during my tenure as youth minister. The pastor's and my own theological views on the cross and suffering were different because our sociocultural contexts were different. The pastor's history was interwoven with the threads of gender and class oppression. Her cultural and theological perspective considered only those two factors. My history, on the other hand, includes the tridimensional oppression of gender, *race*, and class.

African American women have historically suffered the dehumanizing effects of *racialized* sexism that results in classist oppression. Because persons of African descent were presumed to be a species higher than animals but lower than humans and women were presumed to be lower than men, women of African descent were relegated to the lowest rungs of society. At no point in this nation's history were women of European descent ever considered to be subhuman. Euro-American women have had to contend with sexism and its corresponding classism, which asserted they were less than men, but never with the presumption that they were less than human. Therefore, one cannot consider the sociocultural location of African American women without including racism among sexism and classism.

The pastor's decision suggested that she did not acknowledge the racial difference that played a critical role in the history of Euro-American and African American women, a role that made the former complicit in the oppression of the latter. She made a decision for her predominantly African American congregation using her experience as *the* experience for the community. In her efforts to counter their suffering, she exercised a paternalistic form of racism in which she made a decision in *their* best interest because she felt their best interest was identical to hers. My primary contention with her action is that she did not consider the sociocultural context of the majority of her congregation and how it informs their understanding of the cross, the suffering it symbolizes, and its implications for discipleship. Consequently, her solution stripped her congregants of a symbol that is intimately connected to their cultural identity. Moreover, she stripped them of a symbol that they may not have viewed in the completely negative ways she assumed.

I, for one, was not convinced that the symbol of the cross promoted only suffering or a form of suffering discipleship. African Americans' positive emphasis on the cross, which is given expression in the affirmation of Jesus as the divine cosufferer, reveals another perspective from which to explore this issue. Given the profound sociocultural connections between African American experience and the cross of Jesus, I maintain that the most fruitful course of action is not to remove or ignore the cross but to reexamine our understandings of the cross, suffering, and discipleship. Although the pastor's decision was based on some very real and valid concerns, I believe that a discussion that takes as its subject the cross, the suffering it symbolizes, and discipleship offers both problems *and* possibilities. What follows is my attempt to expose this issue and offer a biblical interpretation that shows some of the possibilities of a reexamination of the cross in our context. This reinterpretation necessitates reading the Bible from the perspective of African American women.

Chapter 1 establishes the sociocultural context for this project, its appeal to womanist theology. I begin with an overview of womanist theology and its historical development. This enables me to distinguish womanist theologians from African American women in general and to situate them among their immediate predecessors, black male and feminist theologians. Next, I survey womanist theologians' views on

Jesus, the cross, suffering, and discipleship. This exploration reveals three key issues that shape the sociocultural location of African American women—suffering, shame, and surrogacy—and helps to expose and clarify the ways in which African American women's affirmation of Jesus as the divine cosufferer promotes suffering. In addition, an exploration of womanist theology raises questions that require critical engagement with the biblical text. Specifically, Emilie Townes employs Audre Lorde's distinction between suffering and pain to nuance her discussion on suffering. Lorde defines suffering as "unscrutinized and unmetabolized pain," and pain as "an event, an experience that must be recognized, named and then used in some way in order for the experience to change, to be transformed into something else."[17] Based on these definitions, I am led to ask whether Jesus suffered or experienced pain. What implications does this have for discipleship? These questions not only necessitate an exploration of the biblical text but also highlight the need for a method that takes seriously the sociocultural context from which these questions arise.

Womanists agree that it is to the Synoptic Gospels that African American women need to turn in order to understand the ministry of Jesus Christ. I have therefore chosen the Gospel of Mark as the focus of my investigation. Frank J. Matera summarizes the occasion of Mark's Gospel: "The community has forgotten the centrality of the cross in the life of discipleship. Most importantly, then, Mark writes to remind them of the cross and the true meaning of discipleship."[18] Matera's comments suggest that Mark's community was in a similar situation as my field-education congregation—both communities had forgotten the cross. His comments also highlight that the cross and discipleship are integrally connected. Finally, Matera points to three important themes in the Gospel of Mark: discipleship, the cross, and, implicitly, the agony the cross symbolizes. These are the themes I wish to examine.

In chapter 2, I pose two questions to readers of Mark: (1) What is the relationship between the agony that the cross symbolizes and discipleship in Mark's Gospel? (2) Does the agony of the cross involve suffering or pain? Chapter 2 reveals that Mark 8:31, 34 contain all the critical elements of our discussion—the cross, agony, and discipleship. However, Markan scholars do not fully attend to the womanist concerns raised in chapter 1; my questions are not the questions

that Markan scholars generally are asking. To continue my quest to read Mark's cross language through a womanist lens, I need a methodological approach that pushes beyond the boundaries of most Markan research.

Chapter 3 therefore draws on Brian K. Blount's cultural interpretation model, a sociolinguistic approach to biblical interpretation, as the framework for this project. Sociolinguistics aids biblical interpretation by not only emphasizing the examination of the internal structure of the language, as a linguist does, but also highlighting its social context. Blount expands the sociolinguistic program by considering both the context of the text and the context of the interpreter and/or interpretive community. His method allows me to integrate the sociocultural context of African American women and womanist perspectives into my inquiry, providing a womanist cultural lens through which readers can approach the text.

I do not wish to suggest that the womanist lens I am proposing is the only way of looking at the text from a consciously womanist perspective. I do assert, however, that this lens is true to womanist ideals and can, therefore, be called womanist. Because sociolinguistic theory affirms that a text is "language that is functional,"[19] this method allows me to consider how the language of the text functions in both the biblical context and the sociocultural context of African American women. In short, chapter 3 establishes the context of the interpreter. It discloses the presuppositions, derived from my engagement with womanist theology, that I bring to the text.

Chapter 4 constructs the second context for interpreting Mark's Gospel. Here I connect the issues of suffering, shame, and surrogacy and the negative effect they have on African American women addressed in chapter 1 with similar issues in the cultural background and story world of Mark's Gospel. Building on the work of others, I reconstruct the social context of Mark's Gospel using the cultural values of honor and shame.

Chapter 5 is a sociolinguistic interpretation of Mark 8:31-38 through a womanist cultural lens. Here I apply the questions raised in chapters 2 and 3 to examine the Markan text: (1) What is the relationship between the agony that the cross symbolizes and discipleship in Mark's Gospel? (2) Does the agony of the cross involve suffering or pain? I maintain that if we read Mark 8:31-38 through a womanist

cultural lens, we can expose aspects of the text that Markan scholars have missed and attend to womanist concerns. Specifically, my reading of Mark 8:31-38 will show pain, rather than suffering, to be the agony of the cross and the consequence of discipleship. It will also provide a corrective to the traditional African American affirmation of Jesus as the divine cosufferer.

chapter one

The View through a Womanist Cultural Lens

WOMANIST THEOLOGY MUST DRAW FROM THE MEANINGS THAT ALREADY EXIST IN BLACK WOMEN'S LIVES. THE LIVED THEOLOGIES OF INDIVIDUAL BLACK WOMEN CANNOT BE DISMISSED AS THE EMPTY ACTIVITIES OF THE IGNORANT. WOMANIST THEOLOGIANS RECOGNIZE THE RICHNESS OF BLACK WOMEN'S COMMUNAL EXPRESSIONS OF THEOLOGY. THESE LIVED THEOLOGIES BECOME PART OF THE WOMANIST THEOLOGICAL TEXT.

—Stephanie Y. Mitchem,
Introducing Womanist Theology[1]

ANY POSITION SHOULD SHOW HOW IT IS ENTANGLED IN PARTICULAR SOCIAL LOCATIONS AND INTELLECTUAL BIASES.

—Mark Kline Taylor, *Remembering Esperanza*[2]

Womanist theology, with its emphasis on the tridimensional oppression of African American women—with respect to gender, race and class—allows me to establish an African American female social context. First, by tracing the development of womanist theology, I distinguish womanists from African American women in general and situate them among their immediate predecessors—black male and feminist theologians. Next, I survey womanist theologians' views on Jesus, the cross, suffering, and discipleship. My goal is to expose and clarify the problems and possibilities associated with African American women's traditional understanding of Jesus as the divine cosufferer.

Womanist Theology

In 1983, Alice Walker prefaced her prose collection, *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens*, with the definition of a word that would revolutionize the theological landscape: "womanist."

> 1. From *womanish*. (Opp. of "girlish," i.e., frivolous, irresponsible not serious.) A black feminist or feminist of color. From the black folk expression of mothers to female children, "You acting womanish," i.e., like a woman. Usually referring to outrageous, audacious, courageous or *willful* behavior. Wanting to know more and in greater depth than is considered "good" for one. Interested in grown-up doings. Acting grown up. Being grown up. Interchangeable with another black folk expression: "You trying to be grown." Responsible. In charge. *Serious*.
>
> 2. *Also:* A woman who loves other women, sexually and/or nonsexually. Appreciates and prefers women's culture, women's emotional flexibility (values tears as natural counterbalance of laughter), and women's strength. Sometimes loves individual men, sexually and/or nonsexually. Committed to the survival and wholeness of entire people, male *and* female. Not a separatist, except periodically, for health. Traditionally universalist, as in: "Mama, why are we brown, pink and yellow and our cousins are white, beige and black?" Ans.: "Well, you know, the colored race is just like a flower garden, with every color represented." Traditionally capable, as in: "Mama, I'm walking to Canada and I'm taking you and a bunch of other slaves with me." Reply: "It wouldn't be the first time."

> 3. Loves music. Loves dance. Loves the moon. *Loves* the Spirit. Loves love and food and roundness. Loves struggle. *Loves* the folk. Loves herself. *Regardless*.
>
> 4. Womanist is to feminist as purple is to lavender.[3]

Although the term bears no explicitly theological or Christian meaning[4] apart from "lov[ing] the Spirit," it aptly describes the reality of African American women. It is important to bear in mind, however, that even though Alice Walker's definition is the touchstone for womanist theology, its usage has not been without debate. In the formative years of womanist theology, Cheryl Sanders questioned whether or not Walker's term had been "misconstrued" to "suit our own [theological] purposes."[5] Despite Sanders's concerns, the nomenclature remained. Walker had constructed a label for and description of the unique social, cultural, historical, and theological experiences and understandings of African American women. The term *womanist* resonated with African American women because it gave them a way "to name themselves and their experiences without having to depend on either the sexist views of men (of all races) or the racist views of white women and white men."[6] *Womanism* provided an opportunity for African American women to "be and write out of who [they] are."[7]

Womanist theology, therefore, originates in the sociocultural spaces that African American women occupy. This becomes evident when one looks at its sources. One of the primary sources of womanist theology is the past and present experiences of African American women. For example, womanist theologians draw upon the nineteenth-century writings by and about African American women who had strong connections to the church and also affected society at large. Womanists acknowledge these women as their foremothers because their lives and writings embody the womanist ideals expressed in Walker's definition. The experiences of these women, as well as the everyday experiences of African American women in general, are sources for womanist theology regardless of whether these women describe themselves as womanists. Womanist theology, then, is consciously developed and articulated within the academies of theology, ethics, and biblical criticism. Their sources, however, can include the experiences of any African American woman.

The coining of the term *womanist* and the publication of full-length texts on womanist theology[8] proved to be a decisive moment

in the development of African American women's self-understanding and theological perspective. Delores Williams identified three major turning points that led African American women to this juncture. First, she notes that womanist thought and theology reach as far back as the nineteenth century. The work of the 1980s was the result of a retrospective outlook in which African American women saw and embraced their connection to foremothers such as Anna Julia Cooper,[9] Maria Stewart,[10] and Ida B. Wells.[11] They saw in them the nascent characteristics of womanism only recently defined. They also saw the potential to work for the rights of women of all races and African Americans of both genders.[12] The second turning point was the civil rights movement of the 1950s and early 1960s. The hallmark of this movement was its communal focus on the racial issues that affected African American life. However, this "communal way of thinking obscured black women's oppression and black male sexism."[13] On the heels of the civil rights movement came the third turning point, the "second wave of feminism" in the late 1960s. Feminism made people aware of the oppression of women.[14] Although each of the above liberation movements included and benefited African American women, they had to deny a part of themselves to participate in them. The civil rights movement sought to liberate African Americans from the racial oppression experienced in a racist society. With the emphasis on race, gender issues were ignored. The liberation of women was not included in the agenda to liberate African Americans. This placed African American women in a "precarious situation" in that they "needed to maintain a partnership with black men in the struggle against white racism . . . [and] also realized . . . black men did not respect them as equals."[15]

The feminist movement, on the other hand, addressed sexism separately from racism, as its constituents were overwhelmingly white women. Although African American and white women were united in their struggle against sexism, racism divided them. White women in the feminist movement failed to see how they had universalized their experience and made it *the* experience of womanhood.[16]

African American women recognized that white women as well as white men racially oppressed them. Although white women fought against patriarchy, they also derived privileges from patriarchal systems and were oppressors of African American women.[17] White feminists'

identification of patriarchy[18] as "the primary cause of all the oppression all women experienced"[19] was too narrow a category to embrace the reality of African American women's lives. Rather than simply dealing with patriarchy, African American women were dealing with "demonarchy," defined as "the demonic governance of black women's lives by white male and white female ruled systems using racism, violence, violation, retardation, and death as instruments of social control."[20]

Given the particular emphases of both the feminist and the civil rights movements, African American women had to choose whether they were first African Americans or women. Instead, they chose to create for themselves the opportunity to be both black and female and to work toward the liberation of all African Americans. Thus, "womanist theology arose out of the feminist movement and the Black Power/black liberation movement."[21] Alice Walker's nomenclature furnished them with the language and framework to be who they are and pursue liberation from sexist, racist, and classist oppression.

African American women's insistence that their experience was just as valid as the experience of white women also necessitated the creation of their own theological voice. M. Shawn Copeland states, "Womanist theology claims the experiences of Black women as proper and serious data for theological reflection."[22] By reflecting on their experiences, African American women needed to and could "affirm different cultural foundations for identical assertions made by both feminists and black women."[23] Womanist theology, then, expanded Walker's definition in order to create a space in which Christian theology and the experiences of African American women could connect. As Stephanie Mitchem puts it, "Womanist theology is an opportunity to state the meanings of God in the real time of black women's lives."[24]

The "real time" of African American women's lives occurs at the nexus of gender, race, and class. Womanist theology, then, engages each of these facets of African American female life simultaneously. To neglect any area of oppression that affects their lives is to "deny the holistic and integrated reality of Black womanhood."[25] Therefore, "womanist symbolizes black women's resistance to their multidimensional oppression."[26]

Renita Weems asserts that it has only been within the context of the African American female interpretative community that African American women have been allowed to "hold in tandem all

components of [their] identity."[27] This interpretative community includes the church and the academy, as well as civic organizations. Womanist theology creates another opportunity for African American women to occupy their particular gender, racial, and economic spaces and be wholly human.

The attention given to gender issues is evident in womanist theology, but womanists do not stop there. They are committed to the "wholeness of entire people":

> Womanists are particularly concerned with the 'isms' that oppress African American women. Our work unmasks, disentangles, and debunks religious language, symbols, doctrines, and socio-political structures that perpetuate the oppression of African American women in particular, but also African American men, children, humanity in general, and nature.[28]

The struggle of womanist theologians against oppression has to go beyond the survival, liberation, and well-being of women.[29] Gender, race, and class intersect and reinforce each other in the lives of African American women. Therefore, womanist theology does not limit itself to sexism and an "analysis of white racism," but also includes issues of class.[30]

Classism can be defined as "the systemic tendency of ruling classes to reinforce the distance between themselves and ruled classes by preventing the dispersal of power through a restructuring of wealth, privilege and access to resources and technology."[31] In her article "Racism and Economics: The Perspective of Oliver Cox," Katie Cannon explores the connection between racism and classism. Cannon's work builds upon the thought of Oliver Cox, who argued that capitalistic expansion requires the "core system to breed universal contempt for those exploited by the system," especially people of color and, specifically, people of African descent. Racism becomes the means by which contempt for African Americans is bred.[32] Lies of inferiority and media portrayals that cast people of color as "uncivilized" infer that "capitalists have the right to hold people of color in subjection until they are 'civilized.'"[33] Because "civilization" equals "White power" in this schema, people of color must permanently be held in subjection. Cannon concludes, "Racism supports the belief, conscientiously held, that

poverty and ignorance sustained by force and fraud are desirable for people of color and that White power and prestige must remain at any cost."[34]

Therefore, the social, economic, political, and spiritual location of African American women necessitates a theological perspective that seriously considers gender, race, and class and the interplay among them. Consequently, womanists intentionally try to "produce a theology whose construction, vocabulary and issues [take] seriously the everyday experiences, language and spirituality of women."[35]

Womanist theology is predicated on the "experience of being black and female in the United States."[36] Coupled with experience is the appeal to scripture. Weems claims that although the Bible has been used to subjugate African Americans, it is "still extremely influential in the African American religious life."[37] One reason for the Bible's continued influence is that for African American women "the Bible still has some power of its own."[38] In other words, African American women view the Bible as authoritative for their lives.[39] Moreover, African American women have accessed meaning in the text that contradicts the racist, sexist, and classist interpretations of their oppressors. Weems writes, "Outlook plays an important role in how one reads the Bible."[40] Womanists bring a different lens to the theological and biblical enterprise by beginning with the uniqueness of their experience. This need to start from the foundation of African American women's experience was the catalyst for developing a womanist theology.[41]

Because womanist theology uses the experiences of African American women as primary sources for theological reflection, Mitchem defines womanist theology as the "systematic, faith-based exploration of the many facets of African American women's religiosity."[42] Womanist theology, however, is not merely a descriptive but also a constructive theological endeavor. By "critically draw[ing] from the many meanings of faith in the lives of black women," womanist theology can examine the "doctrinal and ecclesial constructions" for the purpose of reconstructing them in a way that is both meaningful and empowering to African American women.[43]

Rethinking Traditional African American Piety

Womanist theologians have shown that traditional African American interpretations of Jesus as the divine cosufferer can reinforce rather than alleviate the suffering of African American women. In this section, I examine several "doctrinal and ecclesial constructions"[44]—Jesus, the cross, suffering, and discipleship—maintaining that the suffering of African American women is reinforced when we limit our identification with Jesus to suffering or make suffering a necessary point of identification.

Jesus Christ

Central to the theology of African American women is the person of Jesus Christ. Because Jesus is an intrinsic part of African American women's spirituality, he is also central to womanist theology. Womanists identify two primary reasons for Jesus' critical role in the theological understanding of African American women. First, womanists contend that Jesus makes God real to African American women. Second, womanists assert that the interpretations of Jesus that African American women accept will also be the interpretations they accept about their own lives and selves.

Kelly Brown articulates well the first reason for Jesus' centrality: "Jesus of Nazareth makes God real, brings God down to earth, for black women."[45] Neither Jesus' maleness nor the fact that he has been historically depicted as a white man rather than a man of color nullifies his ability to make God real for African American women. Brown asserts that African American women identify with what Jesus has done in their lives, not with how he looks.[46] Jesus is the one whom African American women refer to as healer and provider.[47]

Brown's theological analysis, while helpful in exposing African American women's connection to Jesus' ministry, overlooks a critical point. African American women believe Jesus to be a healer or provider based upon their understanding of the Bible and the meaning it gives to their lives. African American women describe Jesus as a healer and a provider because this is how the Bible portrays him. If Jesus of Nazareth makes God real to African American women, then it is the Bible that makes Jesus real. I therefore contend that a womanist Christology must be grounded in biblical exegesis.

Elaine Crawford voices the second reason for Jesus' centrality in the theology of African American women. She writes:

> For black women, the hermeneutical key or "interpretive reality" is the life of Jesus Christ. One's interpretation of Jesus bears a direct relationship to one's understanding of self. And one's understanding of self is directly related to one's understanding of Jesus.[48]

The relationship between African American women's perception of Jesus and their perception of themselves is a critical issue since Jesus as the divine cosufferer is one of their dominant understandings of Jesus. By espousing an understanding that makes suffering a sole or necessary point of identification with Jesus, African American women cast themselves into the role of perpetual sufferers. Should they escape from the context of their tridimensional suffering, they would risk disconnecting themselves from a dominant cultural understanding of Jesus. Rather than ignore the biblical testimony of Jesus' suffering, I would assert that African American women would benefit by following the lead of womanist theologians in broadening their understanding of and identification with Jesus so that their primary connection to Jesus is not based on suffering.

Womanists affirm that the "foundation [of their theology] is Jesus Christ who is inclusive, relational, particular and, yet, universal."[49] Jesus is particular in that he recognizes and affirms the particularities of who they are and what they have endured. The particularity of Jesus, I would argue, is seen in African American women's identification with him as their cosufferer. Jesus is particular in that he is familiar with the suffering of African Americans as stated in the Negro spirituals:

> Nobody knows the trouble I see
> Nobody knows but Jesus
> Nobody knows the trouble I see
> Glory, Hallelujah![50]

and

> Sometimes I hangs my head an' cries
> But Jesus goin' to wipe my weepin' eyes[51]

According to womanists, Jesus is also universal. His significance and availability are not limited, but have meaning for and are open to all. This affirmation allows us to expand African American women's identification with Jesus beyond the context of suffering. Suffering does not have to delimit the boundaries of one's relationship to Jesus. In other words, there are other ways of identifying with Jesus in addition to suffering. One's context of suffering may be a particularity of one's existence that coincides with the life of Jesus. However, suffering is not a necessary particularity for relationship or identification with Jesus. While it is a fact that African American women identify with Jesus' suffering, his suffering does not have to be the primary or sole basis for identification. Kelly Brown's work has already shown that there is also a strong cultural connection with Jesus' life and ministry. She notes that the testimonies of African American women are founded on what Jesus did during his earthly ministry: Jesus healed the sick and helped the poor and oppressed. They therefore affirm Jesus' presence in their lives to do the same for them.[52] By so doing, African American women connect with Jesus' life and ministry, not his death. Womanist interpretations of Jesus bear four basic principles in mind. First, womanist theological explorations "look beyond the static absolutism of classical Christology to discern and celebrate the presence of Jesus in the lives of the abused and the oppressed."[53] The meaning of Jesus for African American women cannot be merely theoretical postulations, but concrete affirmations grounded in the everyday experiences of their lives. This involves discovering the "presence and participation of Jesus in [their] own particular existential reality."[54]

Second, womanist Christology must dismantle interpretations of Jesus Christ that "aid and abet the oppression of black women."[55] Womanist Christology examines the ways in which traditional Christian doctrines of Jesus Christ have affected African American women in negative ways. For example, Brown notes that because they connect the significance of Jesus to maleness, many male preachers refuse to ordain women.[56] In addition, biblical texts that are held to advocate the subordination and silence of women must also be challenged by womanist scholars.[57] To meet this challenge, womanists will not only need to continue their work in theology but also need to enter the arena of biblical scholarship.

Third, womanist Christology "must also affirm black women's faith that Jesus has supported them in their struggles to survive and be free."[58] This affirmation is essential. If Jesus does not support African American women's struggles, then they are forced to either give Jesus up or fight against, rather than in solidarity with, him. Womanists, therefore, affirm his support. They affirm his support based upon a particular understanding of traditional African American women's affirmation of Jesus as the divine cosufferer.

The affirmation of Jesus as the divine cosufferer declares that Jesus is the one who is present with them and "empowers them in situations of oppression."[59] However, it is important to note with JoAnne Terrell that the divine cosufferer motif is in no way to function as a legitimization of anyone's suffering or oppression.[60] In other words, African American women are not to pursue or embrace suffering in order to be Jesus' cosufferer. Instead, they affirm that Jesus is their cosufferer. He knows their suffering and does not abandon them but rather empowers them in their struggle for freedom.

Finally, womanist interpretations of Jesus "must always make it clear that [Jesus'] ultimate significance is predicated upon . . . his sustaining and liberating activity."[61] Although African American women have a tradition of acknowledging Jesus as the divine cosufferer, womanists emphasize that his significance for them is not found in his suffering. For womanists, Jesus' significance is found in his ministry. In other words, womanists acknowledge that there are definite points of connection between Jesus' suffering and that of African American women. They recognize that African American women point to these similarities as proof that Jesus knows about and can identify with their suffering, so they can conclude that God has not abandoned them. However, womanists affirm that similarity does not automatically translate into significance. Just because African American women identify with Jesus in his suffering does not make suffering the significant aspect of who Jesus is or what Jesus did.

Delores Williams identifies the Synoptic Gospels as sources for reconstructing understandings of Jesus and the atonement that "[speak] meaningfully to black women."[62] Specifically, she points to Luke 4 as proof that "the spirit of God in Jesus came to show humans life."[63] She points to the parables, healings, exorcisms, and prayer life of Jesus as proof that "humankind is, then, redeemed through Jesus' ministerial

vision of life and not through his death." Therefore, Jesus' significance is not found in his death, but his significance is found in a life that showed humanity a "ministerial vision of life in relation."[64]

Karen Baker-Fletcher also locates Jesus' significance in his life. However, she presents a more egalitarian view than Delores Williams. Baker-Fletcher posits a "diunital approach to the problem of Christology [because] it gives attention to both the life and death of Jesus Christ."[65] Rather than focusing on Jesus' life as Williams does or his death as traditional Christian understandings do, Baker-Fletcher advocates a "both/and approach."[66] She, too, recognizes the Synoptic Gospels as fruitful sources for womanist interpretations. Both womanists and African American women in general "identify Jesus by his work in the synoptic Gospels."[67] Although she believes that African Americans will always have a deep connection to the cross, Baker-Fletcher maintains that it is ultimately the lives of those who have been "crucified, lynched or bullet-ridden" that we should not forget.[68] With regard to Jesus, it is his life, not his crucifixion, that must remain foremost in our memories.

Baker-Fletcher advocates a theological stance that is based on Jesus' life. By refusing to forget Jesus' life, one operates from an ethic of risk rather than an ethic of sacrifice. An ethic of sacrifice glorifies Jesus' death on the cross. An ethic of risk recognizes that following "Jesus' ministry of resistance against evil . . . involve[s] the real risks of political persecution, character assassination and even death."[69] Baker-Fletcher's diunital approach and ethic of risk allow one to see the causal relationship between Jesus' ministry and suffering by not prioritizing his suffering. Jesus' life becomes the key to understanding his suffering and his death.

Womanist theologians use African American women's experience to produce an experiential lens that challenges both traditional African American and Eurocentric assertions about Jesus Christ. These challenges could be better waged, however, if they were grounded in the biblical text. Both Williams and Baker-Fletcher point to the Synoptic Gospels as fruitful areas for developing womanist Christology. Yet neither they nor the other womanists I reviewed capitalize on this authority for African American female life. None of the womanists produce conclusions based upon a sustained exegesis of the texts to which they refer.

The Cross

Although womanists acknowledge problems with interpretations of Jesus that emphasize his suffering and death, they still contend with the historical reality of the cross and its implications for African American women's faith.[70] In short, womanists recognize the centrality of the cross in African American Christianity, a centrality based upon African Americans' identification with Jesus and his suffering. JoAnne Terrell writes:

> Historical Christianity's focus on the cross, the experience of chattel slavery and unabated experiences of suffering and delimitation illustrate in principle the major reason cited by black theologians as to why the symbolism of the cross became and remains central in African American Christianity.[71]

As we shall see, there are womanists who reject the notion that suffering is the will of God. Consequently, they will reject any interpretation of Jesus' death on the cross as God's will. Those working from this perspective must reinterpret the cross so that the suffering of African American women and the suffering of Jesus are not sacralized. The issue for many womanists is not the inclusion of the cross in womanist theology. Williams writes, "As Christians, black women cannot forget the cross."[72] The issue is how the cross is interpreted: "The problem is not preaching 'Christ crucified,'" states Baker-Fletcher; "the problem is *how* we preach Christ crucified."[73]

I believe that there are two potential problems inherent in how we preach Jesus crucified. First, it is problematic to draw parallels between the characteristics of Jesus' and African American women's suffering without determining if there are parallels between the causes of their suffering. By ignoring the cause(s) of Jesus' suffering, we disconnect his suffering from his life and ministry. Jesus' cross, viewed in isolation from factors that caused it, degenerates into a symbol for all suffering. Therefore, when African American women suffer, they can mistakenly conclude that they are bearing the cross.

The second potential problem is in making Jesus' suffering the sole or required point of identification for African American women. This is critical given African American women's historical role as surrogates and Christian atonement theories that depict Jesus as the

divine surrogate who takes the place of humanity on the cross. Delores Williams claims, "Surrogacy . . . gives black women's oppression its unique character."[74] Surrogacy is characterized by being either forced or coerced to perform roles that normally belong to others. The surrogacy of African American women has primarily involved "social role exploitation"[75] in which African American women were "pressured into some surrogacy roles" such as domestic workers, heads of households, even surrogate mothers.[76]

Williams identifies two forms of surrogacy: coerced surrogacy and voluntary surrogacy. Coerced surrogacy existed during the pre–Civil War era when African American women lived in a "forced condition in which people and systems more powerful than black women and black people forced black women to function in roles that ordinarily would have been filled by someone else."[77] Voluntary surrogacy refers to the postbellum period when African American women "could exercise the choice of refusing the surrogate role."[78] This choice, however, was often hampered by the poverty black women and families faced. In other words, African American women could resist functioning in surrogate roles circumscribed by white employers but only at the risk of further economic hardship.

These surrogacy roles and the theological justification they are given further complicate African American women's struggle for liberation. The dominant theories of atonement depict Jesus as the "ultimate surrogate figure standing in the place of someone else, sinful humankind."[79] William's concern is that African American women will compare their surrogacy roles with that of Jesus in an attempt to render their oppression sacred and thus tolerable. The acceptance of surrogacy roles is encouraged by what Emilie Townes calls the "moral valuing of loss, denial and sacrifice." These are values that Emilie Townes asserts require reexamination in light of African American women's experience.[80] I would add that this reexamination requires not only consideration of African American women's sociocultural location but also an interpretation of biblical passages that refer to these values from a womanist perspective.

In womanist theology, two seemingly opposite and yet complementary interpretations of the cross are found. On the one hand, the cross exemplifies the sin of humanity, and on the other hand, it demonstrates the love of God. Baker-Fletcher asserts that the cross is "a

symbol of our capacity to sin."[81] In a similar manner, Williams writes, "The image of Jesus on the cross is the image of human sin in its most desecrated form."[82] The cross, then, is an indictment of human violence, abuse, injustice, and oppression. The cross becomes the clearest example of these sins as the one who was crucified suffered because of these sins in action.[83] Since human beings have demonstrated, in the crucifixion of Jesus, an enormous capacity to sin, the cross is also a warning. It stands to remind people of the possible consequences of fighting oppression:

> Jesus' ministry of resistance against evil and the empowerment of others involved the real risks of political persecution, character assassination and even death. The cross must not be forgotten because such persecution is a possible consequence of standing up for what is morally right.[84]

Even though womanists contend that the cross symbolizes human sinfulness, they also assert, paradoxically, that it reveals the love of God. When referring to the Negro spirituals, M. Shawn Copeland insists that the music emphasized the cross because it showed God's commitment to them. She notes, "The enslaved Africans sang [of the cross] because they saw on the rugged wooden planks One who had endured what was their daily portion. The cross was treasured because it enthroned the One who went all the way with them and for them."[85]

In a world that denied their humanity and the existence of their souls, the enslaved Africans maintained their belief in God's love and commitment to them. They believed that what Jesus endured, he endured for them, which proved that they were valued in the sight of God. JoAnne Terrell argues in similar manner.

However, Williams raises a dissenting voice. To Williams, the cross only symbolizes sin. The cross represents both "the evil of humankind trying to kill the ministerial vision of life and relation that Jesus brought to humanity"[86] and "an image of defilement, a gross manifestation of collective human sin."[87] In her desire to avoid the sacralization of African American women's suffering, Williams eliminates any reason to glorify this symbol. Consequently, she seeks to nullify cross bearing for African American women—"There are quite enough black women bearing the cross by rearing children alone, struggling

on welfare, suffering through poverty, experiencing inadequate healthcare, domestic violence and various forms of sexism and racism."[88]

In her article "A Crucifixion Double-Cross?" Williams describes the cross as a "reminder of what can happen to reformers who successfully challenge the status quo."[89] Yet she uses single parenting, addiction, and inadequate healthcare as examples of black women's crosses. In similar fashion, JoAnne Terrell refers to systemic racism, sexism, and heterosexism as crosses African Americans bear.[90] Both Williams's examples and those of Terrell are examples not so much of those who challenge the status quo as of those who suffer the effects of it. At this point, womanist interpretations of the cross suffer from a lack of engagement with the biblical text. Specifically, a biblical interpretation from a womanist perspective could assist them in clarifying a womanist view of the cross and defining cross bearing. I assert that just as the cross cannot be forgotten because it is part of the biblical text, neither can the command to take up the cross (Mark 8:34) be forgotten or ignored. What is needed is a womanist interpretation of cross-bearing texts, particularly ones like Mark 8:34: "And calling the crowd with his disciples, he said to them, 'Whoever desires to follow behind me, let him/her deny him-/herself, take up his/her cross and follow me'" (my translation).

Both Williams and Terrell want to desacralize the suffering of African American women. Williams's aim is to show that "God does not intend black women's surrogacy."[91] Therefore, she attempts to clearly distinguish between God's will and sinful human action. According to Williams, Jesus' life and ministry represent God's will. His death is a "gross manifestation of collective human sin."[92] The cross is solely a reflection of human sinfulness. Because Williams views the cross as a symbol of sin, she concludes, "There is nothing divine in the blood of the cross."[93] On this point, Terrell takes issue. She asserts that there is "something of God in the blood of the cross."[94]

Terrell can only agree with Williams's statement "if she means that there is nothing of God's sanction in violence."[95] Like Williams, Terrell does not believe that God purposed Jesus' death. However, she does want to affirm the presence of God in Jesus' and, therefore, human suffering. Consequently, Terrell's statement maintains the affirmation of Jesus as the divine cosufferer. If one removes God's presence from the cross, one cannot affirm God's presence with African American women in the midst of their suffering. This would negate the third interpretive

principle that governs womanists' understandings of Jesus, that Jesus empowers us in situations of struggle. Moreover, it would suggest that when the cross became inevitable, God abandoned Jesus. Anyone who engages in transformative ministry that results in persecution and/or execution, as Williams has described the outcome of Jesus' ministry, would incur abandonment from God. In this sense, Terrell joins with Jacquelyn Grant and Copeland in affirming the cross as a symbol of God's love. The cross does not sanction the violence committed against African American women; it is the "supreme reminder of God's with-us-ness."[96]

Womanists, such as Copeland and Terrell, therefore, continue to work within the traditional African American interpretive tradition that sees positive value in the symbol of the cross. They see no contradiction between the cross as a symbol of both human sin and God's love. The cross demonstrates God's commitment to them and a love that endures despite the sinfulness of humans. Delores Williams, on the other hand, makes us acutely aware of the potential problems of traditional interpretations of the cross. Given the opposite yet complementary womanist interpretations of the cross, one question remains: How do womanists understand suffering? Our next section will explore this question.

Suffering

A womanist theology of suffering begins with African American women's experience. It is "rooted in and draws on Black women's accounts of pain and anguish, of their individual and collective struggle to grasp and manage, rather than be managed by their suffering."[97] Copeland defines suffering as "the disturbance of our inner tranquility caused by physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual forces that we grasp as jeopardizing our lives, our very existence."[98]

She defines evil as the "negation and deprivation of good." Therefore, suffering and evil are inseparable but not identical.[99] Within this framework, the multidimensional oppression of racism, sexism, and classism that affects African American women is evil because it deprives them of good. The resulting deprivation and/or negation disturbs their inner tranquility, thereby causing their suffering.

Jamie Phelps describes African Americans' suffering as both existential and physical. Existential suffering occurs when African

Americans "question their value and worth within the society."[100] Physical suffering can be caused by "hunger, hopelessness, unemployment, ill health, drug abuse, and so forth."[101] Like Copeland, Phelps points to evil as the cause of suffering.[102] Specifically, she refers to socially constructed evil: "Socially constructed evil involves patterns of relationships that are directed toward the denial of the human dignity and value of some human beings for the benefit of other human beings."[103] The sins of sexism, racism, classism, and heterosexism are the results of socially constructed evil. These isms yield the existential and physical suffering Phelps describes.

Rather than distinguishing between evil and suffering, Emilie Townes appeals to Audre Lorde's distinction between pain and suffering. Lorde defines pain as "an event, an experience that must be recognized, named and then used in some way in order for the experience to change, to be transformed into something else."[104] Pain, then, is a "dynamic process."[105] Pain leads to transformation because by definition, it is recognized and named. Therefore, pain "promotes self-knowledge, which is a tool for liberation and wholeness."[106] Individuals who experience pain are aware of themselves and their situation and can fight against that which causes the pain.[107]

Suffering, on the other hand, is "unscrutinized and unmetabolized pain."[108] It is "reliving pain over and over again when it is triggered by events or people."[109] Consequently, suffering is a static process because it does not lead to transformation but oppression.[110] Suffering, then, can be used as a tool of oppression rather than one of liberation. It keeps people in a state of misery without reflecting on the causes of their condition or developing any plan of action to alleviate it. In effect, they are left without the "right or ability to say 'no' to their oppressors."[111] Whereas pain puts African American women in a position to actively engage and challenge the world around them, suffering leaves them always reacting to the dehumanizing and degrading onslaught of racism, sexism, and classism. Consequently, Townes advocates for the "inevitability and desirability of suffering [to be] challenged."[112]

The goal, then, is to move from suffering to pain.[113] This movement is necessary not simply because it liberates African Americans but because suffering is sinful. Townes contends that suffering is sinful for two reasons. First, "the gospel message calls for transformation."[114]

Suffering is not transformative. Second, suffering prohibits individuals from "act[ing] through [their] finite freedom on behalf of [their] liberation from sin to justice."[115] Rather than evoking the desire to fight against injustice, suffering produces a malaise in which injustice is tolerated and accepted.

Interestingly enough, Townes's discussion does not take into consideration Jesus' suffering but only his resurrection: "God has taken suffering out of the world through the resurrection of Jesus."[116] Neither does she ground her discussion in Scripture. Her distinction between pain and suffering, however, introduces the question of whether Jesus' crucifixion was an experience of suffering or of pain. The answer necessitates an examination of the biblical text to determine why Jesus was crucified. It is also necessary to explore whether his crucifixion was a named and recognized experience or one of unscrutinized, unmetabolized pain.

Although Copeland does not employ Townes's distinction between suffering and pain, she does assert that any womanist theology of suffering must be both redemptive and resistant. It is redemptive in that "black women invite God to partner with them in the redemption of black people."[117] Citing narratives of African American women under chattel slavery, Copeland notes that they endured suffering to ensure freedom for their children. In this way, they "[made] meaning of their suffering."[118] In other words, they did not suffer for the sake of suffering, but suffered as the inevitable result of pursuing a better life within a society that annihilates such endeavors by African Americans. By "managing the suffering," African American women can fight against oppression that causes the suffering, thereby making redemption possible.

Terrell agrees with Copeland's assessment of African American women's need to "ascribe meaning to their suffering and to affirm divine assistance to gain victory over it."[119] Contrary to Copeland, however, she does not believe that suffering is redemptive but that suffering can be overcome by not surrendering to it. Terrell explains, "Not that 'violence, victimization and undeserved suffering' are redemptive, but that suffering and merit are unrelated, just as love and merit are, and that we who suffer can be redeemed."[120] Terrell emphasizes that suffering does not deny one's redemption, but neither does it ensure it. With reference to the women under chattel slavery, Terrell could assert

that their suffering did not ensure their children's liberation, but chattel slavery could not prevent their liberation either. They could endure the suffering by ascribing meaning or a greater purpose to it, but their suffering was no magic formula for deliverance.

Copeland, on the other hand, sees suffering as possibly containing redemptive qualities when it brings about freedom for African Americans. In similar fashion, Black theology distinguishes between suffering and redemptive suffering. In other words, suffering is the basic experiential reality of African Americans in the United States. One only needs to be black in America to suffer. However, to suffer in an effort to alleviate the suffering caused by racism, sexism, and classism is redemptive suffering. One's suffering for the cause of freedom is efficacious. Suffering affords liberation.

James Cone sees suffering in this way. According to Cone, suffering is both positive and negative. Negative suffering is that which is inflicted upon the oppressed.[121] Negative suffering includes "white people's insults," which are not to be "passively endured but fought against."[122] However, Cone sees suffering as positive when one suffers in his or her struggle against suffering.[123]

This type of approach to suffering employs what Theophus Smith calls homeopathic practices. Smith explains that homeopathic practices are those that treat illnesses by prescribing a modified dosage of the disease to cure it. The goal is to mimic the disease enough to cause the body to rally its natural defenses and destroy the disease.[124] Suffering, then, becomes a necessary ingredient for deliverance. Womanists like Phelps, Townes, and Terrell, however, consistently link suffering with evil, not redemption. Therefore, suffering is no longer required to alleviate the multidimensional oppression of African American women. Instead, self-knowledge is the tool of choice.

As seen above, there is no single definition of suffering purported by womanist theologians. What is clear, however, is that womanists agree that suffering is not to have control of their lives. To use Copeland's terminology, they are not to be "managed by their suffering." Although Copeland contends that suffering can "coax real freedom and growth,"[125] suffering is never viewed as good or positive in womanist theology. Townes puts it succinctly: "Womanist ethical reflection rejects suffering as God's will."[126]

Discipleship

I noted above that womanists locate the significance of Jesus in his life and ministry. Baker-Fletcher described Jesus' ministry as resisting evil. Williams described his ministry as one that presented humanity with a perfect vision of how to live in relationship. In the discussion of the cross, I showed that according to womanists, the cross represents both human sinfulness and God's love. The cross depicts human sin because it represents humanity's sinful attempt to stop the work of God through Jesus Christ. Consequently, the cross is the result of Jesus' ministry, not the preordained will of God. Because discipleship is based on the ministry of Jesus, the discipleship of African American women, as advanced by womanist theologians, is implicitly related to this understanding of Jesus' ministry and the cross.

According to Jamie Phelps, "Christian discipleship demands that we be willing to confront death in our struggle to transform these sinful patterns which are embodied in sinful social structures of our church and society."[127] This suggests that African American women's discipleship be characterized by resisting their multidimensional oppression. As Baker-Fletcher's ethic of risk signifies, discipleship is a dangerous endeavor.

Jacquelyn Grant notes another danger of discipleship. She contends that the very language of servanthood, which is used to describe discipleship, maintains rather than challenges "sinful social structures." Given the legacy of African American women as servants who have experienced coerced and/or voluntary surrogacy, servanthood language maintains and supports these roles. Servanthood in an African American female context equals suffering. Therefore, discipleship that is understood as servanthood degenerates into spiritually sanctioned suffering.

Consequently, Grant argues for a change of terminology when speaking about "the life-work of Christians," noting, "Servanthood language has, in effect, been one of subordination."[128] She deems this change necessary because "Black people's and Black women's lives demonstrate to us that some people are more servants than others."[129] Due to African American people's subordination within larger society, Grant believes that our language must challenge, not support, this reality. She argues that "for liberation to happen the psychological, political, and social conditions must be created to nurture the processes.

Servant language does not do this."[130] Grant, therefore, proposes three areas of consideration for reformulating theological affirmations.

First, we should refrain from using language that "camouflages oppressive reality, rather than eliminating [it]."[131] By using servanthood language as a way of talking about the lifework of Christians, we inadvertently equate having a servant's status with having Christian virtue. In so doing, we camouflage the reality that African Americans have been continuously cast in servant roles such as domestic workers, janitors, and Pullman porters. The denial of opportunities had nothing to do with the pursuit of a higher Christian goal. Instead, its roots are found in practices that arise from the "socio-political interests of proponents of the status quo and their attempts to undergird their intended goal through psychological conditioning that arises partially with the institutionalization of oppressive language, even theological language."[132] By extolling the "goodness" of being a servant, we make it "bad" to move beyond menial work positions.

Next, we must "resist the tendency of relegating some to the lower rung of society."[133] Grant asserts a more egalitarian version of discipleship in which certain people do not bear the burden of service while others simply receive. She notes that within many Christian churches, women shoulder the brunt of service. In this way, some people are more servants than others.

Finally, we must "resist the tendency of devaluing the lives of people by virtue of who they are."[134] Relegating people to the status of servant often relegates them to a position that others perceive as less than human.[135] On the contrary, Grant argues that we must affirm humanity. Structures within the church and society that perpetuate this type of inequality can no longer be tolerated.[136] She writes, "The church does not need servants, as oppressively conceived of and experienced by many; the church needs followers of Christ—disciples."[137]

Discipleship, according to Grant, equals following Jesus. However, she does not explicate how one is to follow Jesus. Nor do the other womanist scholars. Consequently, womanist theology would benefit from a biblically based description of discipleship that considers the particularities of African American women's experience in relationship to the biblical mandate to follow Jesus that womanists have brought to light.

Conclusion

Womanist analyses of Jesus, the cross, suffering, and discipleship reveal how traditional African American interpretations of Jesus as the divine cosufferer can reinforce rather than alleviate the suffering of African American women. This reinforcement occurs when African American women sacralize their suffering and surrogacy by connecting it to Jesus' crucifixion. I contend that the problem occurs when African American women make this connection based on a *particular understanding* of his suffering.

The affirmation of Jesus as the divine cosufferer becomes problematic when African American women assume that Jesus' suffering was the will of God rather than a consequence of his ministry. When suffering is viewed as the divine purpose or intention of God, the individuals and institutions that promote suffering become instruments of God. To fight against the causes of one's suffering is to fight against God. In this way, all moral responsibility for suffering is removed from human beings.

This affirmation is also problematic when African American women perceive Jesus' experience to be what Townes describes as the static condition of unmetabolized and unscrutinized pain, known as suffering. This identification with Jesus casts African American women in the perpetual role of sufferers. Moreover, it renders their existential suffering as sacred and requires that they remain in a suffering condition to be Christians. The result is an understanding of discipleship that requires suffering in order to be genuine. The same conclusion is reached when African American women identify with Jesus solely on the basis of suffering. Even if one distinguishes between suffering and pain, the issue remains. In either case, their identification rests completely on a condition that womanists insist derives from evil.

The affirmation of Jesus as the divine cosufferer is empowering to African American women when it assures black women that they are not alone during times of suffering. This connection to Jesus certifies that because Jesus' suffering was real, so too is theirs. In a modern context, this affirmation insists that the negative effects of racism, sexism, and classism that the majority society often wishes to ignore still abound and need to be remedied. Therefore, the potential exists for this affirmation to motivate African American women to challenge the causes of their suffering. If Jesus experienced pain, then one cannot

identify one's suffering with Jesus, only one's pain. In other words, for Jesus to be one's divine cosufferer, one cannot simply link his or her general context of suffering to Jesus. Jesus is not a cosufferer until one moves from suffering to named, recognized pain. Consequently, womanists need to answer an essential question: Did Jesus suffer (understood as passive) or experience pain (understood as transformative)? The answer requires an examination of the biblical text.

Womanist theology affirms two primary sources: African American women's experience and the Bible. Womanists affirm African American women's experience because they seek to do theological reflection from their sociocultural context. The Bible is central to the womanist theological enterprise because it is central to many African American women. On the one hand, the Bible informs African American women's experience and their understanding of the Christian faith. On the other hand, African American women's experience also affects how they read the text. In no way do I wish to suggest that this interaction between experience and text is peculiar to African American women. What I do contend, however, is that this interaction between the text and African American women in particular represents another vantage point from which to view the Bible. This interaction is not maximized in womanist theological circles.

Granted, womanist theologians are just that, theologians. Because their work is primarily theological, however, they miss opportunities to utilize one of their primary sources—the Bible. In the review of womanist perspectives on Jesus, the cross, suffering, and discipleship, I identified areas where insights could be gained and the harmful effects of traditional African American interpretations could be challenged by critical study of the biblical text. If the womanist theological enterprise is to speak to the real time of African American women's experience, key areas of investigation such as the biblical commands to take up the cross and to deny oneself must be addressed by means of biblical interpretation.

Additionally, there is no exegetically formulated description of discipleship from an African American woman's perspective that considers these commands or the relationship between agony and discipleship. Stephanie Mitchem is correct: "Exploring black women's unique interpretations or hermeneutics of scripture will most likely lead to new expressions of womanist theologies. The area of womanist biblical scholarship has great promise."[138]

Before we engage the biblical text, two areas of womanist theology require attention. First, I will clarify womanist terminology as it relates to suffering. Second, I will use the categories of moral evil and natural evil as a means of sharpening Karen Baker-Fletcher's diunital approach.

The first task in clarifying womanists' use of suffering language is to distinguish between suffering that is the byproduct of one's oppression, on the one hand, and suffering that is the result of challenging the sources of one's oppression, on the other. Womanist scholars have articulated the tridimensional oppression that causes the suffering of African American women, as well as their unique history of surrogacy. This suffering occurs regardless of her faith commitment—whether she is a Christian or not. In addition, womanists are aware that by fighting oppression, suffering will inevitably occur. Either way, she will suffer. Yet those two experiences of suffering are qualitatively different. Suffering that arises from oppressive systems and conditions results in a static condition that will not change until its sources are confronted. Suffering that is a result of challenging the causes of one's oppression has the possibility of being eliminated. This distinction needs to be made evident.

Womanist theologians' definitions of suffering vary considerably. Copeland provides a general definition of suffering. Townes, using Lorde's distinction between pain and suffering, proposes a different understanding of suffering. Moreover, Townes's and Lorde's distinctions between pain and suffering are not clear. For example, pain is named and recognized in their view. Yet suffering is unmetabolized, unscrutinized pain. How can suffering be unscrutinized pain when pain is both named and recognized? In an effort to clarify my use of these terms and to oppose the notion of redemptive suffering, that is, suffering purported to be efficacious in and of itself, I will use Copeland's, Lorde's, Townes's, and Phelps's work to redefine the terms *suffering* and *pain*.

From this point on, I will employ three terms: *agony*, *suffering*, and *pain*. My understanding of agony is roughly equivalent to Copeland's definition of suffering as "the disturbance of our inner tranquility caused by physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual forces that we grasp as jeopardizing our lives, our very existence."[139] I use the term *agony* in the sense of Copeland's definition, with one important

addition. Given Jamie Phelps's emphasis on socially constructed evil, our definition should also list social forces among those that jeopardize our lives. Therefore, my definition of agony becomes: the disturbance of our inner tranquility caused by physical, mental, emotional, social, and spiritual forces that we grasp as jeopardizing our lives, our very existence. *Agony*, therefore, will be the general term I use to describe any distress that fits the above description.

For my purposes, *suffering* and *pain* represent two types of agony. Drawing upon the work of Lorde and Townes, I define suffering as unmetabolized, unscrutinized agony. Because suffering is unmetabolized, unscrutinized agony, I maintain with Lorde and Townes that suffering is a static condition that enables one's continued oppression. I believe that the term *suffering* adequately expresses this type of agony since suffering connotes that which is endured and suggests a perpetual condition.

Pain, then, is named, recognized agony that can be transformed into something else. Pain is not static; it is dynamic. I believe that pain aptly describes this type of agony because pain connotes a temporary condition. This is not to minimize the experience of pain but to maintain the integrity of its definition. Because pain, understood in this way, is named and recognized, it is not a perpetual condition. Unlike suffering, pain is a transitioning experience because it can be transformed into something else. Just as labor pains can be transformed into the joy of childbirth and as Townes's work suggests that Jesus' crucifixion was transformed into a resurrection, pain is a process that must sometimes be experienced for the accomplishment of something else. In short, I will only use *pain* to refer to named and recognized agony that comes as a temporary result of life-affirming behavior. As seen in the discussion on suffering, womanists identify evil as the cause of suffering. Whereas Townes rejected suffering as the will of God, I reject agony as the will of God and contend that agony is not "the considered and deliberate divine purpose, intention, or determination."[140] I maintain that evil is the cause of agony and, therefore, the cause of both suffering and pain.

Theologians distinguish between two types of evil: natural and moral. Natural evil "refers to injury and suffering caused by diseases, accidents, earthquakes, fire and floods."[141] In other words, there are some forms of suffering to which we are susceptible simply because we

are finite, mortal creatures. Daniel Migliore is careful to note, however, that it would be a mistake to "view vulnerability, finitude and mortality as [inherently] evil"; they represent the "shadow side" of life.[142] Douglas John Hall writes, "Challenge, struggle and *some* forms of suffering belong to the very structure of life. To insist that believers should be immune from *every* form of struggle and *every* form of suffering would be to wish not to have been created at all."[143] In short, a creaturely existence includes the possibility, and even the inevitability, of agony due to natural evil.

Moral evil, on the other hand, "refers to acts (sins) of creatures that are contrary to God's holy character and law."[144] It is the negation and deprivation of good inflicted upon human beings by other human beings. Moral evil includes both individual and corporate acts. For Jamie Phelps, "socially constructed evil" manifests itself in racist, sexist, and classist structures, behaviors, and policies.[145] Consequently, socially constructed evil is an example of moral evil that involves social groups rather than individuals. When human beings suffer or experience pain at the hands of their fellow human beings, moral evil is at work.

In neither construction of evil is God the "culprit."[146] Natural evil finds its cause in the finitude, mortality, and vulnerability of creation. Moral evil finds its root in the sinful acts of human beings who behave contrary to God's benevolent purposes. Consequently, there is a causal relationship between the moral evil inflicted by *humans* and human suffering and pain.

I believe that the category of moral evil is especially helpful in crafting a womanist lens since womanists reject suffering as the will of God and see it as a consequence of racist, sexist, and classist oppression or moral evil. Sexism, racism, and classism, then, are not divinely preordained; they are the manifestations of human sinfulness that cause the existential suffering of African American women and inflict pain on those who fight against these forces. This perspective represents how Baker-Fletcher and Williams view the life and death of Jesus. Moreover, the category of moral evil sharpens Baker-Fletcher's diunital approach. It enables one to see the relationship between Jesus' ministry and the agony of his death. The theological category of moral evil provides a way of understanding Jesus' death without asserting that his death was God's will. In other words, Jesus' life and ministry represent

the will of God. His suffering and death are the results of moral evil, that is, the sinful reaction of human beings. And Jesus' resurrection is God's divine counteraction.

There are therefore two primary questions that womanist theology cannot answer on its own: (1) What is the relationship between the agony that the cross symbolizes and discipleship? (2) Is the agony of the cross suffering (passive) or pain (transformative)? I now turn to biblical scholarship, posing these questions to Markan scholars.