CHAPTER 5

A Womanist Approach to the Black Christ

Laying a Womanist Foundation

While the black Christ of black theology does not signal an appreciation of black women's experience, a womanist understanding of the blackness of Christ begins with the black woman's story of struggle. This portrayal of Christ reflects at least two aspects of that story: the multidimensionality of black women's oppression and their determined efforts to survive and be free from that oppression. Specifically, a womanist portrayal of Christ confronts black women's struggles within the wider society as well as within the black community. It also affirms black women's steadfast faith that God supports them in their fight for survival and freedom. Such an understanding of Christ emerges as womanist theology engages a social-political analysis of wholeness and a religio-cultural analysis.

A Social-Political Analysis of Wholeness

As was discussed earlier, during the 1960s freedom struggles black women were reluctant to assert their rights as women. Many refused to join the contemporary women's movement in its fight against sexism because they believed it would alienate them from black men. They did not want to participate in any movement that had even the potential of creating hostilities and divisions between them and their men. This hesitancy to claim their own unique experience and to advance their own cause for freedom is characteristic of black women's historical struggle.

Black women have traditionally been concerned not just for their welfare, but for the welfare of their entire community and families—sons and daughters, husbands and brothers. Alice Walker points to this aspect of black women's lives when she describes a womanist as one who is "committed to the survival and wholeness of entire people."[1] No person in history better illustrates this womanist commitment than does Harriet Tubman. After her own successful escape to the North from slavery, Tubman returned to rescue her family. She continued to make trips back to the South, at great peril to her own life, to lead other slaves to freedom. Walker points to Tubman's story when, as a part of her womanist definition, she relates the following dialogue: "'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.'"[2]

As a result of their consistent commitment to their families and their community, black women have searched for a "politics" of wholeness as they have evaluated their participation in various freedom movements, such as the contemporary women's movement and the 1960s black freedom struggle. These women needed a political strategy that would assure black people, men and women, rights to live as whole, free, human beings and that would keep the black community whole, unified, in striving for liberation. Reflective of this particular concern, a womanist theology includes a social-political analysis of wholeness.

This analysis is multidimensional and bifocal. That means that it seeks to understand how race, gender, class, and sexual oppression interact in the persecution of black people, especially black women. It may, for instance, be informed by Marxist thought as it endeavors to understand the class issues within the black community. But it also goes beyond Marxist analysis in an effort to comprehend the multidimensionality of black oppression. Moreover, unlike Marxist analysis, a social-political analysis of wholeness takes seriously the particularities of race, gender, and culture that shape the nature of black people's oppression.

As it is bifocal, a social-political analysis of wholeness will confront racism, sexism, classism, and heterosexism not only as they impinge upon the black community but also as they are nurtured within that community. It addresses the ways in which the black community and black institutions—

that is, churches, schools—perpetuate black oppression. It does not seek to prioritize different forms of oppression or to pit women against men/the poor against the rich. It does, however, seek to eliminate anything that prevents black people from being whole, liberated people, and from living and working together as a whole, unified community. For instance, this analysis of wholeness might challenge the "haves" in the black community who maintain their status by supporting structures of oppression. It will confront the alienation that often develops between the black middle class and the black poor.

But perhaps more importantly, a social-political analysis of wholeness challenges womanist scholars to forthrightly confront heterosexism within the black church and community. With the exception of women's full ordination, no issue has caused more discussion in the black church than that of sexuality. With AIDS rising to epidemic proportions in the black community, this discussion has been unavoidable. Some black church ministers routinely preach from their pulpits that AIDS is a "disease visited by God upon homosexuals because of their sinful lifestyle." During a recent workshop I conducted with black ministers, they voiced their hesitancy to minister to those inflicted with AIDS, in spite of the gospel dictum for them to care for the sick (Matthew 25:44f.). Their reluctance was clearly related to their homophobia. They stridently argued that "homosexual" practices (of course they believed that homosexuals were the primary carriers of this disease though this is increasingly not the case in the black community) were unnatural and went "against the way and will of God." They were even more passionate in their claims that gay and lesbian lifestyles were a threat to the stability of the black family.

One of the most divisive and explosive issues in womanist theology courses I have taught has been sexuality. I have often been surprised to discover that black women, in spite of their own sense of marginalization due to gender and race, have been most strident in their antagonism toward gay and lesbian people. They have frequently shown the same intense homophobia displayed by the black ministers described above.

Unfortunately, womanist theologians and other womanist religious scholars have been slow to engage the sexuality issue. Many of us, when utilizing Walker's womanist definition, have ignored Walker's reference to a womanist as "a woman who loves other women, sexually and/or

nonsexually."[3] One who did not ignore this reference was ethicist Cheryl Sanders.

In a 1989 roundtable discussion in the *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion*, Sanders objected to black female religious scholars adopting the womanist concept. She argued that given the "context, criteria and claims" of Walker's definition, it is incompatible with Christian theological and ethical principles. Sanders's primary objection was Walker's apparent affirmation of the lesbian lifestyle. Sanders forthrightly states:

> In my view there is a discrepancy between the womanist criteria that would affirm and/or advocate homosexual practice, and the ethical norms the black church might employ to promote the survival and wholeness of black families. It is problematic for those of us who claim connectedness to and concern for the black family and church to engage these criteria authoritatively and/or uncritically in the formulation of theological-ethical discourse for those two institutions. If black women's ethics is to be pertinent to the needs of our community, then at least some of us must be in a position to offer intellectual guidance to the church as the principal (and perhaps only remaining) advocate for marriage and family in the black community. There is a great need for the black churches to promote a positive sexual ethics within the black community as one means of responding to the growing normalization of the single-parent family, and the attendant increases in poverty, welfare dependency, and a host of other problems. Moreover, it is indisputably in the best interest of black children for the church not only to strengthen and support existing families, but also to educate them ethically for marriage and parenthood. The womanist nomenclature, however, conveys a sexual ethics that is ambivalent at best with respect to the value of heterosexual monogamy within the black community.[4]

Though Sanders's statement shows clear disdain for gay/lesbian lifestyles, and though it posits homosexuality as a major threat to the black "family" structure, the womanist respondents to her article did not directly confront these issues. They challenged Sanders's interpretation of the womanist nomenclature, but they did not dispute the homophobic implications of her statements. Womanist religious scholars missed a

perfect opportunity to denounce heterosexism as a part of "an interlocking system of race, gender, class and sexual oppression."[5]

Sociologist Patricia Hill Collins has acknowledged black women's, particularly black feminists' such as womanists', silence on heterosexism. She makes two poignant observations in this regard. First, she recognizes black women's desire to hold on to their heterosexual privilege. She argues: "In the same way that white feminists identify with their victimization as women yet ignore the privilege that racism grants them, and that Black men decry racism yet see sexism as less objectionable, African-American women may perceive their own race and gender oppression, yet victimize someone else by invoking the benefits of heterosexual privilege."[6] Second, Collins points out that silence concerning homosexuality shields black women from becoming a part of the "ultimate other" in relation to the heterosexual, white, male norm. She pointedly says: "Another reason Black women have been silenced about Black lesbian relationships concerns the traditional treatment in Eurocentric thought of the lesbian as the ultimate other."[7]

A social-political analysis of wholeness compels womanist theologians to break the silence. It requires us to "audaciously" denounce heterosexism as it is present in the black church and black community, as well as in womanist religious scholarship. Womanist scholars are constrained to confront our tendency to enjoy "heterosexual privilege." We must make clear that homophobia in any form is unacceptable and that heterosexism must be eradicated as it is a part of the same interlocking system of race, gender, and class oppression. If womanist theologians continue to maintain silence concerning the oppression of our lesbian sisters, not only do we perpetuate their oppression, but we fall far short of our own vision for wholeness.

A social-political analysis of wholeness also challenges the black community to move toward "wholeness" not only as a community but also in relationship to other oppressed communities, especially people of color around the world. This analysis will prompt black people to confront the history that divides them from other oppressed people as well as to recognize the history that links them.

More particularly, a social-political analysis of wholeness encourages womanist theologians to continue their dialogue with Third World women of color. This dialogue currently takes place primarily within the context of the Ecumenical Association of Third World Theologians (EATWOT). Initially, the relationship between the womanist theologians (at the time the only women who were a part of the U.S. minority delegation) and the other EATWOT women was strained. The most clear instance of this occurred at the EATWOT's 1986 second general assembly held in Oaxtepec, Mexico. A week prior to this assembly, women from Asia, Africa, and Latin America met in order to share experiences, to express their mutual concern for the elimination of gender oppression, and to plan for a meeting with North American feminist theologians.[8] Black American women were not invited to be a part of this week-long meeting. Black American women's exclusion appeared to be, in part, an outgrowth of the long EATWOT struggle to understand the role of First World minorities in a Third World organization. The EATWOT women of the Third World had accepted an organizational procedure for their preconference, which, perhaps unwittingly, resulted in the marginalization and oppression of some of their womanist sisters.

During the meeting of the second general assembly, an overture was made to U.S. black women. It was made, however, as a step toward meeting with white feminist theologians of the First World. The women of Asia, Africa, and Latin America had already accepted an invitation to dialogue with North American feminists. They reasoned that it would be beneficial to meet with black American women first, since it was we who had the most experience of and interaction with these feminists. At this point in our time together I began to wonder if the women from Asia, Africa, and Latin America were more interested in those who had contributed to their oppression than in getting to know their sisters in oppression.

A social-political analysis of wholeness makes clear that if Third World women are going to move toward a world community where gender oppression is eliminated, we cannot accept, for whatever reasons, the kinds of structures and systems that keep us separated from one another. If we are truly committed to the struggles of our sisters, we must forge links with one another whether we are Third World women living in Third World countries or Third World women trapped in the First World. It is only together that we

will be able to free our churches and society from the evils of race, class, gender, and sexual oppression that keep our sisters in bondage. A social-political analysis of wholeness consistently challenges various divisive and alienating structures of oppression, whether they are part of church, society, or the organizations in which women are a part. Sojourner Truth put it best when she said:

> If the first woman God ever made was strong enough to turn the world upside down all alone, these women together ought to be able to turn it back, and get it right side up again.[9]

It is *together* that Third World women will be able to turn the world right side up again.

Fortunately, by week's end of the second general assembly, EATWOT women from the Third and First World were united in the desire to get to know more about one another. The dialogue with First World feminists was postponed until after Asian, African, Latin American, and U.S. minority women could dialogue. This conversation took place at a week-long conference held in 1988 at the Interdenominational Theological Center (Atlanta, Georgia). At this conference we explored our commonalities and differences. We forthrightly confronted the divisions between us, and committed ourselves to strengthening the links that bind us. We agreed that it was only in concert that we could make a difference in the lives of our oppressed sisters around the world. Today, our solidarity continues as we now prepare as one for a dialogue with First World feminists.

A social-political analysis of wholeness urges womanist scholars to remain in solidarity with their oppressed sisters around the world. It seeks a world where all women, indeed all humanity, live together in relationships of mutuality. It is grounded in the dictum that "No woman is free, if all—that is, men and women—are not free."

Finally, and perhaps most fundamentally, a social-political analysis of wholeness recognizes the importance of wholeness for the individual as well as the community. This analysis urges black people, but especially black women, to confront the ways in which societal oppression has left them less than whole beings—spiritually, emotionally, psychologically, and so forth. The underlying assumption is that only individuals who are at least moving toward wholeness can nurture wholeness within the community.

A Religio-Cultural Analysis

A womanist understanding of the black Christ also begins with a religio-cultural analysis. This analysis lifts up those aspects of black life—that is, of black religion and culture—that are sustaining and liberating for black people. It also disavows those aspects of black life that do not nurture survival and liberation. A religio-cultural analysis recognizes that not everything "black" necessarily benefits the black community. For instance, in twenty-five years the black community has come full circle in terms of its need to affirm blackness. What was once labeled "black consciousness" can now be seen in the call for Afrocentrism. The Afrocentric concern attempts to trace the roots, especially African roots, of African American culture in an effort to nurture self-esteem and cultural pride in African Americans. A religio-cultural analysis would challenge those involved with the Afrocentric project to critically evaluate what they unearth, to recognize that just because something is African or black does not signify that it has value for black people as they move toward wholeness. A more specific example may illustrate the point.

Black culture has recently given birth to "rap" music. While a religio-cultural analysis will affirm rap music as an important cultural expression, especially for young black people, it will disavow those forms of rap music that perpetuate abuse of women and other destructive behaviors or images. These kinds of negative images create division, not wholeness, in the black community.

In regard to black religion, a religio-cultural analysis challenges any aspects of black faith that perpetuate the discrimination of particular segments of the black community. For instance, the ways in which the black church uses the Bible in the oppression of women, gays, and lesbians will be confronted.

While a religio-cultural analysis recognizes that there are enslaving and divisive aspects of black religion and culture that must be repudiated, it also recognizes that there are sustaining and liberating aspects that must be confirmed.

A religio-cultural analysis attempts to highlight that which has allowed black women to transcend the negative, dehumanizing images that society has maintained of them. It lifts up that which has undergirded their fight,

against all odds, to save their children from the tyrannies of a society that seeks to destroy black life. It affirms that which black women, who have traditionally been the purveyors of culture and religion in the black community, have handed down to their children in order to facilitate their survival. Essentially, a religio-cultural analysis assumes the presence of a "spirituality of resistance," which black women have nurtured and passed on to their sons and daughters.[10]

There are at least two aspects of this spirituality of resistance. It provides a sense of heritage, and it nurtures a connectedness to God. The words of nineteenth-century black female freedom fighter Maria Stewart often illustrate the characteristic features of a spirituality of resistance. During one of her exhortations she reminded her black audience about their rich African heritage:

> History informs us that we sprung from one of the most learned nations of the whole earth, from the seat, if not the parent, of science. Yes, poor despised Africa was once the resort of sages and legislators of other nations, was esteemed the school for learning, and the most illustrious men in Greece flocked thither for instruction.[11]

She also frequently reminded her audiences that though the world considered them inferior, God did not. She told them that they were children of God, made in God's own image. She put it this way:

> Many think, because your skins are tinged with a sable hue, that you are an inferior race of beings, but God does not consider you as such. He [*sic*] hath formed and fashioned you in his [*sic*] own glorious image, and hath bestowed upon you reason and strong powers of intellect.[12]

A spirituality of resistance implies, as Stewart apparently understood, that if oppressed people have pride in their own culture and historical heritage, as well as the knowledge that they are children of God, then they will not be as vulnerable to the oppressive structures, systems, and ideologies that attempt to convince them that they are nobody and that their lives are not worth living. An essential task of a religio-cultural analysis is to accent those aspects of black religion and culture that contribute to this spirituality of resistance.

Something More *about the Blackness of Christ*

So what does all of this mean for the black Christ? Given the significance of a social-political analysis of wholeness and a religio-cultural analysis for a womanist approach to understanding Christ's relevance for the black community, what can we say about the meaning of Christ for black women and men?

Christ Is Black

It first must be understood that the primary concern in a womanist approach to Christ is not the fact of Christ's blackness. In this regard, womanist theology affirms that for the black community, Christ is black. That is to say, Christ has black skin and features and is committed to the black community's struggle for life and wholeness. To assert the blackness of Christ reflects black women's unwavering commitment to their families and community, as maintained by a social-political analysis of wholeness. Such an assertion also continues to affirm the need for black people to be able to see themselves in the image of Christ. It is, however, at the point of establishing more than the color of Christ that womanist theology goes beyond what has previously been said by black theologians.

The Womanist Black Christ: More Than an Endorsement of the Black Community

Reflecting the need for the black community to be free from internal oppression as well as oppression visited upon it by the wider society, the womanist black Christ does more than endorse black people in their struggle against white racism. The womanist Christ is seen not just as sustainer and liberator—as presented in black theology—but also as a prophet. A womanist approach to the black Christ brings together, for instance, the images of Christ present in slave Christianity with those perpetuated by Martin King Jr. That is, Christ is understood as carrying forth the work of Moses and Amos.[13] Christ is present in the black community working to sustain as well as to deliver it from the multidimensional oppression that besets it. Christ is also present as a

prophet, challenging the black community to rid itself of anything that divides it against itself and to renounce any way in which it oppresses others.

The Womanist Black Christ: A Black Woman?

How do we point to this liberating and prophetic presence within the black community? What does Christ look like? What symbols and icons can we use to capture the significance of Christ for black men and women as they fight for dignity and freedom?

It is important to understand that symbols and icons are essential tools for pointing to the reality of Christ, and for helping people to see themselves in Christ and Christ in themselves.[14] Yet, it should also be understood that no *one* symbol or icon can capture the presence or meaning of Christ. Symbols and icons also need to change as the community changes and attempts to discern Christ's involvement in their changing life situations. How is it that womanist theology can portray this sustaining, liberating, and prophetic black Christ which eludes simple, static depiction?

A womanist portrayal of the black Christ avails itself of a diversity of symbols and icons. These symbols and icons are living symbols and icons as Christ is a living Christ. That is, womanist portrayals of the black Christ endeavor to lift up those persons, especially black women, who are a part of the black past and present, who have worked to move the black community toward wholeness. These portrayals of Christ suggest, for instance, that Christ can be seen in the face of a Sojourner Truth, a Harriet Tubman, or a Fannie Lou Hamer, as each one struggled to help the entire black community survive and become whole. Seeing Christ in the faces of those who were and are actively committed to the "wholeness" of the black community suggests several things.

First, it says that the black Christ is present in the black community wherever people are engaged in a struggle for that community's "wholeness." Second, it challenges black people to participate in activities that advance the unity and freedom of their community. It allows them to know that Christ is with them and in them anytime they promote life and wholeness for black men and women. Third, to portray Christ in the face of black heroines and heroes signals that it was not who Jesus was, particularly

as a male, that made him Christ, but what he did. Essentially, Christ's biological characteristics have little significance to discerning Christ's sustaining, liberating, and prophetic presence.

In addition to highlighting the presence of Christ in those who work toward black wholeness, a womanist black Christ will consistently lift up the presence of Christ in the faces of the poorest black women. These women, as an icon of Christ, are important reminders of accountability. Any theology of "survival and liberation/wholeness" that emerges from the black community must be accountable to the least of these in that community. It is only in a commitment to ensure the life and wholeness for the "least of these" that we can grasp the radicality of who the black Christ is for all black people.

To suggest that Christ can be seen in the faces of black women is not entirely new. Womanist theologian Jacquelyn Grant has put forth a similar understanding of Christ.[15] Taking her lead from black women's faith, Grant emphasizes the importance of the biblical witness to Christ as well as black women's own witness of Christ in their lives as the primary sources for discerning Christ's power and significance. In so doing, Grant too disavows the centrality of Jesus's maleness in determining what it meant for him to be Christ. She says that the important factors were his humanity and his liberating actions on behalf of the oppressed. Informed by Jarena Lee's confession that Jesus is a savior of both men and women, and by Sojourner Truth's faith that women had the power to save the world, Grant concludes that today "Christ, found in the experience of Black women, is a Black woman."[16]

The difference, however, between Grant's understanding of Christ as a black woman and the version presented in this text begins with the analyses that help to shape them. Grant stresses the importance of a tridimensional analysis that encompasses race, gender, and class oppression. For her, a liberating Christ must be one who stands against this tridimensional tyranny. My christological perspective is not limited to a tridimensional analysis. Instead, it stresses the need for a multidimensional and bifocal analysis that confronts all that oppresses the black community as it impinges upon the community or is harbored within. This means that Christ

is a sustainer, liberator, and prophet in the face of such evils as racism, sexism, classism, and heterosexism.

Moreover, while Grant affirms that Christ found in black women's experience is a black woman, I affirm that Christ is found where black people, men as well as women, are struggling to bring the entire black community to wholeness. While my womanist perspective highlights the significance of Christ found in the faces of black women in struggle, especially poor black women, it does not eliminate the possibility of Christ's being seen in the faces of black men who also struggle for black women's and men's lives and wholeness. In this regard, Christ for the black community can be a black woman, but the presence of Christ is not restricted to black women.

Finally, it needs to be stressed that the womanist black Christ is found where there is at least a struggle for black life and wholeness. This means that all that black women and men engage in is not reflective of the presence of Christ. As suggested by the religio-cultural analysis, there are aspects of black reality that lead to destruction and death. Such a reality, as it thwarts life and wholeness, is antagonistic to the presence of Christ. In this regard a womanist portrayal of the black Christ avoids one of the dangers Delores Williams sees in various understandings of Christ's significance.

Williams argues that many Christian communities, including black churches, teach "believers that sinful humankind has been redeemed because Jesus died on the cross in place of humans.... In this sense Jesus represents the ultimate surrogate figure standing in the place of someone else."[17] Such a belief is problematic for black women, Williams says, since inhumane and denigrating patterns of voluntary and coercive surrogacy have been a part of their reality. An understanding of Christ that supports surrogacy, Williams rightly claims, cannot be liberating or life affirming for black women who need to be set free from oppressive forms of surrogacy. Williams further concludes that understandings of Jesus that focus on his role as a surrogate wrongly emphasize the importance of his death as opposed to the importance of his life—that is, his ministry. Williams aptly asserts that humanity's redemption is to be found in life, not death.

A womanist black Christ indeed critiques any aspect of black existence, such as various patterns of surrogacy, that do not affirm life and wholeness. And again, informed by Jesus's ministry, womanist theology emphasizes Christ's presence in the movement for black life.

So, is Christ a black woman? Yes, when black women are acting to establish life and wholeness for the black community.

Other Christological Implications

Another often-asked question is whether or not womanists' understandings of Christ can be considered christology. Typically, what the questioner really wants to know is, "Do womanist understandings of Christ take into account the Nicene/Chalcedonian tradition?"

In general, to do christology is to attempt to discern and define what it means for Jesus to be Christ—that is, "The bearer of God's rule, the mediator of God's salvation."[18] But in the dominant Western theological tradition, christological formulations typically rely in some way on the Nicene/Chalcedonian confession. This confession is seen as a norm or significant source for what is said about Christ. It claims that Jesus is Christ because of his unique metaphysical makeup. This makeup renders him God incarnate and uniquely the divine/human encounter.

Are womanists doing christology? Yes, in the sense that we are attempting to discern, from the perspective of black women in struggle, what it means for Jesus to be Christ. No, if doing christology means that the Nicene/Chalcedonian tradition must provide a norm or even a significant source for what we say about Jesus as Christ.

Womanist understandings of Christ emerge out of the black Christian tradition. This is a tradition in which black women and men confessed Jesus as Christ because of what he did during his time as well as in their own lives. They did not make this confession because of his metaphysical makeup. Those in the slave community, for instance, were most likely unaware of the Nicene/Chalcedonian tradition, just as are many black Christians today. An example from my own journey illustrates the point.

When I first entered Union Theological Seminary, I firmly believed, as I do now, that Jesus was Christ. Yet I knew relatively little about the Nicene/Chalcedonian debates. Born and raised an Episcopalian, I could

perfectly recite the Nicene Creed, but I did not know what that had to do with Jesus being Christ. Reflective of my upbringing in the wider black religious community, I believed that Jesus was Christ because of what he did for others, particularly the poor and oppressed. As I learned about the Nicene/Chalcedonian debates and statement of faith, I accepted it as a part of the wider Christian tradition and history. Though I no doubt have been influenced by its claims, I did not accept it as the basis for why Jesus was Christ. I did not make it an integral part of my own faith. As I have listened to and learned from black church women and men, I have discovered that I am not alone in my appropriation of the Nicene/Chalcedonian tradition. Black Christians tend not to consider it relevant to their own beliefs about Jesus.

Finally, there are aspects of the Nicene/Chalcedonian formulation that appear inconsistent with Jesus as he was presented in the Gospels. For instance, this formulation establishes that Jesus is Christ by focusing on God's act of becoming incarnate in him. In so doing, it diminishes the significance of Jesus's actions on earth. His ministry is virtually ignored. The formulation reads:

> We believe in one God, Father, Ruler of all, Maker of heaven and earth…And in one Lord Jesus Christ, the only-begotten Son of God, begotten from the Father before all ages…who for us human beings and for our salvation came down from heaven and was incarnate from the Holy Spirit and Mary the Virgin and became human; and was crucified for us under Pontius Pilate, and suffered, and was buried, and rose on the third day in accordance with the Scriptures.[19]

This confession of faith moves directly from the act of the incarnation to the crucifixion and resurrection. The implication is that what took place between Jesus's birth and resurrection—the bulk of the Gospels' reports of Jesus—is unrelated to what it means for Jesus to be the Christ. All that matters is that God entered the world through him. If Jesus did conduct a sustaining, liberating, and prophetic ministry, this would not significantly affect what it meant for him to be Christ.

In addition, to emphasize the uniqueness of Jesus's metaphysical nature as that which allows him to be Christ, makes what it means to be Christ inaccessible to ordinary Christians. There becomes little reason to strive to

be an example of Christ in the world, because to be Christ requires a divine incarnation, which happened only in Jesus. By ignoring Jesus Christ's ministry and focusing on his "being," he is set apart above humanity. He is seen as someone to be worshiped, believed in, but not followed or imitated.

A womanist understanding of the black Christ avoids these shortcomings. It does not begin with abstract speculation of Jesus's metaphysical nature. Instead, it starts in history with Jesus's ministry as that is recorded in the Gospels. What Jesus did becomes the basis for what it means for him to be Christ. This makes Christ more accessible to ordinary Christians. Such a christological understanding encourages others to be an example of Christ in their own lives. That is, Christ can be seen in the faces of others, black women and men, as they strive in their own historical context to promote life and wholeness.

What then is the place of the Nicene/Chalcedonian formulation in womanist christology? This formulation is seen as a part of a continuing tradition in which those who confess Jesus as Christ attempt to discern the meaning of that confession. It does not, however, have any normative significance as womanist theologians attempt to articulate Christ's meaning for the black community.

The Womanist Black Christ Challenges Womanists and the Church

Methodological Implications

To say that Christ is seen in the faces of black women struggling to bring their communities toward wholeness, and in particular in the faces of poor black women, necessitates that womanist theology be done as a part of a process of "praxis" centered in the lives of these women. Womanist theologians must resist the urge to retreat behind the walls of seminaries and universities. The womanist black Christ demands that we remain involved in the lives of "ordinary" black women in the church and in community organizations and groups. This is crucial primarily because the wisdom gained from these women should eventually empower these very women in their struggle for life and wholeness. As Patricia Hill Collins explains, it is black women's everyday "taken-for-granted" knowledge that

womanist scholars should rearticulate in such a way that it "empowers African-American women and stimulates resistance."[20]

This further means that womanist theology is accountable to "ordinary" black women in struggle. What womanist theologians say about Jesus Christ must make sense, "ring true," to these women. This presents two significant challenges for womanist theologians as we attempt to articulate the meaning of Christ.

First, a commitment to teaching womanist theology not just in seminaries and universities but also in churches and community-based organizations and groups is essential. Appropriate pedagogies for teaching church and community-based women need to be developed as a part of the womanist theological praxis.[21] New ways to communicate and teach womanist theology that grow out of the various contexts in which black women are a part have to be devised. No doubt, these pedagogies will emerge as womanist theologians become immersed in the varied lives and contexts of black women. We will learn from black women in struggle the best ways to give back to them that which we have gleaned from them. Essentially, it will be church and community-based women who will teach womanist theologians how to make theology more accessible.

Second, if it is church and community-based women to whom our theology is accountable, then our dialogues with one another must take place beyond the academy. Thus far, most of our public discussions concerning our theology have taken place in the context of the American Academy of Religion. Womanist symposiums have taken place in front of an academy audience composed of mostly white women and men. They have listened in on our debates as well as raised questions as we have worked through our theologies. This must change.

Our public discussions must move to the places where black women are. They must take place within the context of the black church and community. Black church and community-based women should be our primary audience. They should be our most significant interlocutors. This necessitates that womanist theologians create opportunities to debate and discuss their ideas where black women in struggle are the main audience. Such opportunities provide another means to be accountable to the very women whom womanist theology claims to represent.

Implications for the Black Church

Perhaps the most obvious implication for black churches is the challenge to remove icons and symbols that portray Christ as a blond-haired, blue-eyed male. Womanist theology takes seriously Malcolm X's observation that black self-esteem is sabotaged by the worship of a white Christ. Womanist theology advocates that black churches display, throughout their buildings, images of black heroines and heroes, making these images just as prominent as were the images of white Christs. Moreover, time must be spent—beyond black history month—pointing out and teaching how these black people who have struggled for the community's survival and wholeness reflect what it means to be Christ in the world.

Just as womanist theologians must create opportunities to teach and share with black church women and men, the black church must create opportunities for womanist and other black theologians to share with their congregations.

But the issue becomes, why should the churches be any more open now than they have been with black theology in the past? Why would male black church leadership give womanist theologians more opportunities to share with their congregations than they have given black male theologians? Why should male black church leadership, which is often closed to women's ordination or even presence in the pulpit, be open to what womanists have to say? What would motivate black church leadership to cleanse their buildings and pulpits of their white male images of Christ?

The impetus for black church leadership to change its images of Christ, as well as become more open to women's ministry, is going to have to come from the congregations. These congregations, which are often over 70 percent female, will have to be the ones to demand a change. It is only as black church women claim their voice and power—that is, their power as the primary financial resource and workers of the church—that the church will be changed. A demand for change can occur only as these black church women are empowered to fight for their "wholeness" within their churches and communities.

The charge for womanist theologians is therefore great. We must be vigilant in our efforts to teach and share with these women. We must take advantage of every opportunity, whether it is in the context of community-

based programs or women's programs in the church. Womanist theology can impact the church only as much as it impacts the women in the pews. When black church women find their voice and demand a church that empowers them and their families, then the black church leadership will have to respond or be willing to lose its most loyal and supportive constituency. Moreover, it is when black women find their voice in the church and begin to move the church toward wholeness that the church will be truly filled with the presence of Christ. Christ will then be seen in the faces of those black women.

The Black Christ from a Womanist Eye

We have now come full circle, affirming what Malcolm X claimed some thirty years ago, that Christ is black. But in affirming Malcolm's claims, and similar claims before and after him, we do it with a womanist eye on what is required if the black Christ is to compel the black church to advance wholeness for black women and men.

A vital and effective black Christ must reflect the complexities of black reality. A womanist black Christ is one who can respond to those complexities—that is, the black struggle to "make do and do better" in the face of racist, sexist, classist, and heterosexist oppression. A womanist black Christ avoids the myopic concern for white racism. At the same time, a womanist black Christ enables black women and men, girls and boys, to see themselves in Christ and Christ in themselves.

As I now reflect on my grandmother's faith in Christ, I realize that the Christ in her life had to be one who understood more than just what it meant to live in a racist society. My grandmother's Christ was one whom she could talk to about the daily struggles of being poor, black, and female. So, it is in this regard that I continue to learn from my grandmother's faith. Her faith in Christ's empowering presence suggests, at the very least, a womanist black Christ. But most importantly, it is in the face of my grandmother, as she struggled to sustain herself and her family, that I can truly see Christ.

In Alice Walker's Pulitzer Prize–winning novel, *The Color Purple*, one of her female characters, Shug Avery, reminds the main protagonist, Celie, that God is present inside her. Shug simply says, "Here's the thing…. The thing

I believe. God is inside you and inside everybody else."[22] For a womanist black Christ, "here's the thing." Christ is inside of my grandmother and other black women and men as they fight for life and wholeness.

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1. Walker, *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1983), xi.

2. Ibid.

3. Ibid.

4. Sanders, "Christian Ethics and Theology in Womanist Perspective," *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 5, no. 2 (Fall 1989): 90.

5. See Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment* (New York: Routledge, 1991), 194.

6. Ibid.

7. Ibid.

8. This general assembly was held in Oaxtepec, Mexico, December 7–14, 1986. I have discussed the women's dialogue in Oaxtepec in "Reflections on the Second General Assembly of EATWOT," in *Third World Theologies: Commonalities and Divergences*, ed. K. C. Abraham (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1990), 174–79.

9. Sojourner Truth, "Ain't I a Woman" (1851), in Miriam Schneir, ed., *Feminism: The Essential Historical Writings* (New York: Vintage Books, 1972), 95.

10. In previous writings I have labeled this a "spirituality of survival." Informed by what Patricia Hill Collins describes as a "culture of resistance," which black women have nurtured, I now describe this as a "spirituality of resistance." The term "resistance" implies more than just finding a way to exist, but it also suggests fighting back against that which is oppressive. Resistance suggests a more active image than perhaps suggested by the term *survival*.

11. *Maria W. Stewart, America's First Black Woman Political Writer: Essays and Speeches*, ed. Marilyn Richardson (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987), 50.

12. Ibid., 29.

13. See pages 24 and 43 above where I mentioned that the slaves saw Jesus in the line of Moses, and King understood him in the line of Amos.

14. See, for instance, Paul Tillich's discussion of religious symbols in *Dynamics of Faith* (New York: Harper Colophon Books, Harper & Row Publishers, 1957). See esp. Chapter III, "Symbols of Faith," 41–54.

15. See, for instance, *White Women's Christ and Black Women's Jesus: Feminist Christology and Womanist Response* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1989); "Womanist Theology: Black Women's Experience as a Source for Doing Theology, with Special Reference to Christology," *Journal of the Interdenominational Theological Center* 13, no. 2 (Spring 1986): 195–212.

16. Grant, "Womanist Theology," 210.

17. Williams, “Black Women's Surrogacy Experience and the Christian Notion of Redemption,” in *After Patriarchy: Feminist Transformations of the World Religions*, ed. Paula M. Cooey, William R. Eakin, and Jay B. McDaniel (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1991), 9.

18. Richard A. Norris, trans. and ed., *The Christological Controversy* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1980), 3.

19. Ibid., 2.

20. Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment* (New York: Routledge, Chapman and Hall, 1990), 31–32.

21. I have discussed an appropriate methodology for teaching womanist theology in the seminary in “Teaching Womanist Theology: A Case Study,” *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 8, no. 2 (Fall 1992).

22. Alice Walker, *The Color Purple* (New York: Washington Square Press, 1982), 177.