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Disruptive Homiletics:
Liberationist Hermeneutics and the Preconditions of Critical Consciousness

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I. Introduction

There is no neutrality within biblical hermeneutics. To assume as much is an effort to endorse a kind of radically-objective concept of exegesis which has long been debunked. The 20th century largely saw the oft-feared specter of “eisegesis” be exposed as the masked-yet-harmless boogeyman it is. *Every* interpreter brings something to the text. Jay Williams said it well in his 1973 article on this very problem: “As an interpreter of scripture, each man [sic] brings with him a whole pile of intellectual and emotional baggage which cannot easily be dispensed with...In order to think at all, we must think within a cultural and linguistic context, and that context decisively shapes both what we see, and what we are likely not to see.”¹

This dynamic should bear an increased burden on those of us who, professionally or pietistically, emerge from a predominantly Eurocentric context. What we might now understand as the “wolf” of Eurocentric theological supremacy hiding in the clothing of the “sheep” of objective textual exegesis, the demonization of eisegesis as proclaimed by chiefly white, cisgender male academics functions—often implicitly or unconsciously—as an effort to jettison biblical readings which might aid the task of social and political liberation of oppressed peoples.

Specifically, the emergence of LGBTQ+, black, Latinx, womanist, and other specific textual hermeneutics of liberation imply, either by omission or design, the existence of hermeneutics that are unambiguously *anti-LGBTQ+*, *anti-black*, etc. As these oppressive hermeneutics have infiltrated the popular piety of religious communities, religious leaders who have come to understand the harm and violence associated with them have not only an opportunity, but an obligation, to try and reform their congregations in a liberationist image.

¹ Jay Williams, “Exegesis-Eisegesis: Is There a Difference?”, *Theology Today*, vol. 30, no. 3, 1973, 221-222.

Before that reformation can happen, however, the conditions and preconditions necessary to such an existential shift in thought must be carefully fostered.

In this paper, I examine specifically the efforts to establish the preconditions of such a shift, contending that—for Protestant and evangelical Christian communities, at least—the mental, emotional, and spiritual foundations necessary to a congregation-wide hermeneutical shift can be constructed (in part) via the practice of what I have dubbed *disruptive homiletics*, that is, homiletical events that disrupt the *status quo* and power dynamics expected to be endorsed from contemporary, white, American pulpits. I do as much by utilizing interwoven analyses of Paulo Freire’s pedagogical project, womanist ethical hermeneutics, and Black liberation theology, to the end of subverting unreflective, uncritical biblical hermeneutics.²

These unreflective, uncritical tendencies—predominantly of white, conservative Christian congregations—reflect what Paulo Freire would characterize as *naïve consciousness*. Naïve consciousness, for Freire, “sees causality as a static established fact” as opposed to *critical consciousness* which “always submits that causality to analysis; what is true today may not be so tomorrow.”³ This issue of a naïve, static causality is one that is correlative to biblical interpretations engaged primarily by conservative and evangelical expressions of American Christianity.

On this topic, church historian Karlfried Froehlich says, “A fundamentalist approach to Scripture is often the answer of well-meaning people who, facing the personal and societal ambiguities of biblical pluralism, are unprepared or unwilling to accept the measure of required

² Though this particular paper is written from a Christian theological perspective, the hope is that extra-Christian theological traditions can be substituted, thus rendering a method for differing religious traditions.

³ Paulo Freire, *Education for Critical Consciousness*, (New York: Continuum, 2003), 44.

relativism...Such an attitude joins them to a longstanding anti-intellectual undercurrent in American culture.”⁴ This passive hermeneutic utilized widely across American Christianity is problematic in that it typically takes little-to-no initiative to criticize either 1) oppressive biblical content, nor 2) the problematic history of oppressive interpretations. In a way, the text itself (and its subsequent interpretation) take on a long-held characteristic of traditional theism, viz. immutability.

For womanist biblical scholar Renita Weems, however, “[the Bible] cannot be understood as some universal, transcendent, timeless force to which world readers—in the name of being pious and faithful followers—must meekly submit.”⁵ This is often exactly as it is presented from the pulpits of conservative, evangelical churches: a literal, off-the-page reading that shuns any and all critically-reflective examination. As such, Paulo Freire’s pedagogical theory, I argue, can help us make sense of the above phenomena.

II. Freirean Pedagogy, Consciousness, and the Homiletical Task

In both *Education for Critical Consciousness* and *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*⁶, Freire discusses different modes of consciousness, including naïve, critical, magical, and fanatical consciousnesses. These are ways of classifying how one relates to the empirical world around

⁴ Karlfried Froehlich, *Sensing the Scriptures: Aminadab’s Chariot and the Predicament of Biblical Interpretation*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2014), 3.

⁵ Renita J. Weems, “Re-Reading for Liberation: African-American Women and the Bible” in *Womanist Theological Ethics: A Reader*, eds. Katie Geneva Cannon, Emilie M. Townes, Angela D. Sims, and Emilie M. Townes, (Louisville, KY: WJK Press, 2011), 56.

⁶ Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, trans. Myra Bergman Ramos, (New York: Continuum, 2000).

them. What concerns us here, though, is that of naïve consciousness and critical consciousness, respectively.

Quoting Brazilian philosopher Álvaro Vieira Pinto, Freire says that while “critical consciousness represents ‘things such as they exist empirically, in their causal and circumstantial correlations...naïve consciousness considers itself superior to facts, in control of facts, and thus free to understand them as it pleases.’”⁷ One need not look far to see a parallel emerge between American Christianity as it is described above and Freire’s theory of consciousness.

Fundamentalist hermeneutics cultivate a space for naïve consciousness to flourish, as it completely disregards the facts of historical oppression and the Bible’s role in it, thus stripping the text of any-and-all historicity or historical location. Critical consciousness, though, creates space for one to be shaped and moved by these historical facts. The question, though, is how this type of consciousness can be cultivated among people and communities for whom Freire did not intend his work.⁸

Freire was interested in cultivating critical consciousness among the poor, uneducated masses of Brazil to the end of securing their own political and social liberation. It also must be mentioned that Freire’s thought was not (often) explicitly religious or theological; it was largely developed to be utilized in secular society. However, I argue that the same psychological movement that Freire desired for his fellow Brazilians—away from naïve consciousness and towards critical consciousness—is the movement that needs to take place among non-oppressed,

⁷ Freire, *Education for Critical Consciousness*, 41.

⁸ It must be acknowledged that, while poor, uneducated communities in Brazil were the objects of Freire’s study, my intended community of impact is that of predominantly white, middle-to-upper class churches in North America. I sincerely desire to utilize their thought, not to a colonialist end, but as an exercise in critical self-reflection. By taking non-Eurocentric theologies and pedagogies seriously, I contend, rank-and-file American churches can be transformed toward acknowledgement of oppressed realities and the liberation of those subject to those realities.

privileged Christians in North America. The primary difference between the two contexts is that, in Freire's case, oppressed people needed to be moved toward their *own* liberation whereas, in our case, ethically-disinterested American churches need to be moved toward engaging in the work of liberation in concord with the oppressed and their leadership.

For Freire, true liberation must come from within the oppressed community. In his foreword to the 1986 edition of James Cone's *A Black Theology of Liberation* (which will be discussed shortly), Freire says "Through revolutionary praxis, with critical and vigilant leadership, the dominated classes learn to 'proclaim' their world, thus discovering the real reasons for their past silence...Any reconciliation between oppressors and oppressed, as social classes, presupposes the liberation of the oppressed, a liberation forged by themselves through their own revolutionary praxis."⁹ The most non-oppressed communities can do is come alongside and engage in this work of proclamation and liberation *with* the oppressed; never exclusively *for* the oppressed.

By trying to work toward liberation *for* the oppressed of the world without their express involvement and leadership, those communities are subject to even further objectification and dehumanization. Such "savior complexes" require a necessary measure of control over oppressed populations and lead only to a caricature of liberation that typically maintains the already-established power dynamics. For Freire, "attempting to liberate the oppressed without their reflective participation in the act of liberation is to treat them as objects which must be saved from a burning building; it is to lead them into the populist pitfall and transforms them into

⁹ Paulo Freire in James Cone, *A Black Theology of Liberation: Fortieth Anniversary Edition*, (New York: Orbis, 2015), xii-xiii.

masses which can be manipulated”¹⁰ The impetus, trajectory, and vision for liberation must come from within the community of the oppressed, with people outside that community playing a supporting and tangential role. One method of influencing others toward this supportive work, I argue, is through the act of preaching.

According to M. Shawn Copeland, “Contemporary Christian churches, black Christian churches in particular, must affirm the sacredness and transcendent quality of black human life... The sermon can serve as one mediation of this affirmation in its retrieval of a notion of the human person as a dynamic moral agent, rather than a passive consuming being.”¹¹ Preaching, as a central practice in contemporary American Protestantism and Evangelicalism, has the potential to be among one method by which critical consciousness could be nurtured. Before we explore this possibility, though, we must address the content of a 1984 article written by Freire for the journal *Religious Education*: “The illusion which thinks it possible, by means of sermons, humanitarian works and the encouragement of other-worldly values, to change people’s consciousness and thereby transform the world, exists only in those we term ‘naïve.’”¹²

First, as is acknowledged above, the context addressed here (21st century/white/wealthy/American churches) is much different from that which Freire was addressing (20th century/Brazilian/poor/secular society). While I cannot speak to the theological conditions and reception of preaching in 20th century Brazil, I am confident in my assessment that sermons are a valuable tool in my own context to help change and transition from one consciousness to another. Second,

¹⁰ Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, 65.

¹¹ M. Shawn Copeland, “Body, Representation, and Black Religious Discourse,” *Womanist Theological Ethics: A Reader*, eds. Katie Geneva Cannon, Angela D. Sims, and Emilie M. Townes, (Louisville, KY: WJK Press, 2011) 106.

¹² Paulo Freire, “Education, Liberation and the Church,” *Religious Education* 79.4, (1984) 525.

Freire contends elsewhere that mere acknowledgement of one's being oppressed is not liberative: "This discovery cannot be purely intellectual but must involve action; nor can it be limited to mere activism, but must include serious reflection: only then will it be praxis."¹³ For Freire, critical consciousness cannot be cultivated exclusively by rhetorical or cerebral exercises, so his prohibition on the usefulness of sermonizing is in line with his wider thought.

I do not take issue with Freire's assertion that something like preaching cannot "change peoples consciousness and thereby transform the world." However, what preaching can do is change the *preconditions* necessary for a change in consciousness. In the context which I seek to address, the preconditions needed for one to openly accept a transition of consciousness are often nonexistent in the first place. In Freire's context, the political and social oppression of the Brazilian masses have already created the conditions necessary to prime an individual for a change in consciousness. For contemporary, white, American Christianity, though, these preconditions often need to be created and cultivated; an issue for which socially conscious-and-critical homiletics may be therapeutic. This brand of hermeneutics, though, cannot and should not be univocal.

In his essay "Introducing Sermonic Militancy," Earle Fisher claims that "too often we consider sermonic material that its simply socially conscious as 'prophetic'...Socially conscious speech does not necessarily seek to change the social order but instead to manipulate it such that the speaker/preacher/rhetor is given cache and access into places of privilege."¹⁴ Fisher, in pushing back against what he perceives as a false equivalence between prophetic preaching and

¹³ Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, 65.

¹⁴ Earle Fisher, "Introducing Sermonic Militancy—A Call Toward More Revolutionary Homiletics and Hermeneutics," *Journal of Communication and Religion*, vol. 44.3, 44.

socially-conscious preaching, offers sermonic militancy as something of a critique; criteria to be adhered to in order to avoid “sermonic presentations that might be socially conscious but are not socially just.”¹⁵

To be sure, it is worth pointing out that Fisher’s primary audience is black preachers who might be invested in what they perceive as prophetic preaching, but nevertheless fail to demand “righteous actions.”¹⁶ I carefully contend that, while sermonic militancy as a homiletical method can be utilized by preachers in any context, the question engaged here is how we might consider the steps a preacher or religious leader must take in order to provoke ethical and moral development within a congregation such that they will hear a militant sermon *charitably*.

Many religious leaders who are committed to the tasks, hermeneutics, and socio-political orientations necessary for liberation may find themselves shepherding a moderate-to-conservative religious community which will not truly understand or internalize the content of a militant sermon and need assistance with the spiritual and ethical development necessary. As such, I argue that socially-conscious preaching is not necessarily a hollow enterprise, but a necessary stepping-stone on the way to sermonic militancy for individuals and communities who lack the intellectual, spiritual, and theological foundations for as much. Before a community can develop a revolutionary hermeneutic or religious orientation, their current posture must be carefully disrupted so as to cultivate curiosity and empathy—not malice or annoyance—toward the liberative task.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Ibid., 42

The shape these disruptive homiletics take (i.e. the specific hermeneutics engaged, mode of delivery, etc.) will differ between each specific church community, depending on their local context, needs, demographics, and culture. However, two liberation-oriented lenses that would likely be ubiquitously transformational for most white, American churches is that of black liberation theology and womanist ethical hermeneutics, respectively. It is to these traditions we now turn.

III. Traditions of Liberation as Hermeneutical Substructure

Academically, black liberation theology is understood as materializing in the aftermath of Jim Crow laws, the murder of Martin Luther King Jr., and the birth of black revolutionary organizations such as the Black Panther Party. James Cone—regarded as the father of black liberation theology—understands the emergence of black theology differently, though: “Like black power, black theology is not new either. It came into being when the black clergy realized that killing slave masters was doing the work of God.”¹⁷

In contrast to many of his white, European colleagues who were deeply engaged in the “Neo-orthodoxy” of Karl Barth and his Christocentric dogmatics, Cone, instead, takes *anthropology* as the launch point of his theological program. In *A Black Theology of Liberation*, Cone claims that “no white theologian has ever taken the oppression of blacks as a point of departure for analyzing God’s activity in contemporary America.”¹⁸ Despite their seeming incompatibility, though, Cone and Barth are not too far from one another. Later in his

¹⁷ James Cone, *A Black Theology of Liberation*, 27.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 9.

foundational text on black theology quoted above, and decades later in his *The Cross and the Lynching Tree*¹⁹, Cone would go on to draw an ontological correlation between the crucified Christ and lynched bodies of black communities, thus establishing Cone's point of departure as a Christological anthropology.

It is in this connection of Christology and anthropology that Cone makes his claims—infamous among certain theological circles—that God and Christ are black.²⁰ Cone defines blackness as an “ontological symbol” of American oppression.²¹ By identifying the God of Christianity with this symbol is to place that God squarely in the referential frame of black Americans' collective experience of injustice and dehumanization.

Upon a first reading, Cone's project may leave one wondering whether or not non-black populations can even have a true knowledge of God, let-alone entry into such a theological enterprise. Luckily, however, Cone provides us an answer to such a query: “Knowing God means being on the side of the oppressed, becoming *one* with them, and participating in the goal of liberation. *We must become black with God!*”²² The notion of “becoming black,” functioning essentially as black theology's doctrine of sanctification, is the space in Cone's system where we might find a conduit for Freirean pedagogy.

For Cone, becoming black is the process by which we begin to recognize the true identity and sufferings of God *as synonymous with* the identity and sufferings of the oppressed. This rejection of classical metaphysics and philosophical theism—though long abandoned in many

¹⁹ James Cone, *The Cross and the Lynching Tree*, (New York: Orbis, 2011).

²⁰ Cone, *A Black Theology of Liberation*, 66ff and 125ff, respectively.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 8.

²² *Ibid.*, 69.

academic circles—will likely prove to be a revolutionary claim for many contemporary conservative communities who still endorse a divine metaphysical construct. However, utilizing black theology’s hermeneutical framework in the homiletical context is one way to disrupt actively-oppressive theological orientations and provide the impetus for a shift in consciousness.

One potential pitfall of black theology, though, is its seemingly default position of a male-oriented task which does little to address injustices suffered exclusively by women. Likewise, feminist theology has similar stumbling blocks in its seemingly-default position of whiteness, which does not often address injustices suffered exclusively by women of color. Womanism, though, is a critical-intersectional perspective focused on the convergence of these three: racism, sexism, and classism. In her landmark book, *Black Womanist Ethics*, Katie Cannon says, “Black women are the most vulnerable and the most exploited members of the American society. The structure of the capitalist political economy in which Black people are commodities combined with patriarchal contempt for women has caused the Black woman to experience oppression that knows no ethical or physical bounds.”²³

As such, womanist ethical hermeneutics also take an anthropological point of departure, but one more specifically-defined than black theology, beginning not with traditional theological loci like Christology or trinitarianism, nor with a generalized conception of black oppression, but with the specific experiences of *black women*. As such, by centering these particular lived, embodied experiences within a space typically occupied by the lived, embodied experiences of predominantly white men, a disruption of conservative theological orientations has already occurred. However, similarly to the hypothetical novice’s potential misunderstanding of Cone

²³ Katie Cannon, *Black Womanist Ethics*, (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1988), 4.

above, black women to do not compose the boundary of womanist ethical and theological traditions, but merely the center.

In “Re-Reading for Liberation: African American Women and the Bible,” Renita Weems—one of the foremost womanist biblical scholars active today—identifies the goal of womanist ethical hermeneutics as “changing consciousness and transforming reality.”²⁴ It’s worth noting the lack of qualifiers in Weems’s assessment. Given the intersectionality of womanist perspectives, liberation for black women will necessarily indicate concurrent racial, sexual, and class liberation for all oppressed people in any one or combination of those categories.

And in order to participate in such a theological task, one must assume a womanist lens when engaging scripture by critiquing the Bible’s seeming endorsement of countless acts of violent oppression on the basis on sex, race, and class and thinking critically about how and why this violent, oppressive text still holds power today. These practices can be difficult to undertake for people who are not primed for such disorientation, but by utilizing black theology or womanist hermeneutics from the pulpit—a place often associated with authority and divine sanction in white Protestantism—preachers can begin to disrupt their hearers’ uncritical, comfortable piety and begin setting the stage for a shift in consciousness.

IV: Practical Implications and Conclusion

The goal of this paper and the above analyses has been two-fold: first, to acknowledge and identify an often-overlooked phase in the congregational-pedagogical process. Rather than

²⁴ Renita J. Weems, “Re-Reading for Liberation: African-American Women and the Bible” in *Womanist Theological Ethics: A Reader*, eds. Katie Geneva Cannon, Emilie M. Townes, Angela D. Sims, and Emilie M. Townes, (Louisville, KY: WJK Press, 2011), 57.

demanding direct, immediate ascension to a new way of critical thinking, there must be an period of incrementalism whereby people are brought along and intellectually challenged at a pace they can handle.²⁵ And second, this paper has sought to suggest the sermon as a method of engaging in this incrementalist phase. For Freire, “*Conscientização* [or critical consciousness] represents the *development* of the awakening of critical awareness” which must be born out of a “critical educational effort.”²⁶ The disruptive quality associated with the particular brand of homiletics I am recommending here is intended as a necessary component of such “awakening”—the first gesture meant to shake one from their dogmatic slumber.

That being said, the above analyses, though interesting and thought-provoking, are meaningless without a concrete, external expression intended as part of that critical educational effort. Unless the concept of disruptive homiletics has a vehicle to move from theoretical to actual, then it can never become the praxis necessary for the work of liberation. Here in this final section, several suggestions are offered on how preachers may begin incorporating the above liberationist hermeneutics into the homiletical life of their communities.

Cone, above, contends that “we must become black with God.” While the preacher may be in agreement, ethically and theologically, with Cone, we might first consider how we can communicate this concept to people unfamiliar both with Cone and the philosophical underpinnings of his language. Quoting Cone directly here, especially to predominantly white, conservative-to-moderate congregations is a non-starter; doing as much would likely result in a complete nullification of the message in its entirety, regardless of the rest of its quality or

²⁵ This might be compared to the concept of the ZPD, or Zone of Proximal Development, in educational theory.

²⁶ Freire, *Education for Critical Consciousness*, 15, emphasis original.

content. For some, specific “buzz-words”—including those regarding race, politics, or morality beyond the sentimental—will immediately be noted as unacceptable or incompatible with their preconceived ideas of faith.

Instead, we might begin by camouflaging the qualities we believe to be associated with “becoming black”—care for the poor, economically exploited, socially oppressed, etc.—and endorsing those first by tacitly interpreting texts through a liberationist lens. One way this can be done is through a type of “Socratic preaching;” not giving answers or opinions to the hearers, but speaking and asking questions specifically about the biblical text in such a rhetorical manner as to lead the hearers to the answers themselves. While some may suppose the preacher has some kind of implicit agenda (political or otherwise), by the communicator extrapolating directly from the biblical text and avoiding reference to figures explicitly tied to liberationist systems, the hearer will be forced to reckon directly with the biblical text itself, having, at least intellectually, to deal with the proposed interpretation.

Freire claims that the development of critical consciousness can only be carried out by placing people “in consciously critical confrontation with their problems, to make them the agents of their own recuperation.”²⁷ In this case, the problems that must be confronted are not the problems of governmental and economic exploitation—as was the case for Freire—but the problems of faulty, oppressive personal hermeneutics. Unless the hearer can be led to direct confrontation with these violent hermeneutics and personally label them as such, the needle of consciousness will not be able to be moved.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 13.

In her above-named article, Weems offers practices for Christians interested in liberationist hermeneutics. She encourages readers to “judge biblical texts, to not hesitate to read against the grain of a text if needed, and to be ready to take a stand against those texts whose worldview runs counter to one’s own vision of God’s liberation activity in the world.” Likewise, she asks students to “[turn] their attention to stories of rape and violence in the Bible” and consider “what kind of world would our world be if stories like these were normative, if we duplicated, reproduced or transmitted them to the next generation without warning and comment.”²⁸

Though intended for a general readership, including non-clergy laypeople and students, Weems’s recommendations can be adapted for use in the pulpit. Again, however, we must consider how these practices *should* be adapted for people outside a progressive cultural milieu. Before someone entrenched in fundamentalist hermeneutics can “judge biblical texts,” like Weems recommends, there must be a modeling of such judgement in a safe and trusted environment. A preacher is in a perfect position to do as much. By examining the precarious historical shaping of the Bible texts and canon as a whole, by showcasing the narrative arc of liberation throughout the Old and New Testaments, and by updating popularly-held traditional metaphysics, a preacher can push back on texts and lead the hearer to a direct confrontation with the problems of their own interpretations. Openly questioning and taking issue with biblical texts can serve to be revolutionary for many who have only ever been taught to accept it as a perfect, self-contained, isolation system.

²⁸ Weems, “Re-Reading for Liberation,” 61.

Weems's second suggestion, though, may be more directly utilized vis-à-vis the act of preaching. Though tempting to avoid, such texts which recount horrific scenes of (often) divinely-sanctioned violence *require* comment. That space reserved for comment and explanation can be used to begin the process of suggesting that such stories are not only incompatible with the god of liberation as found throughout the above-mentioned narrative arc of liberation, but also that such attempts to reconcile the two have long been used to oppress women, people of color, and LGBTQ+ people. Utilizing historical examples of such oppression which directly resulted from these hermeneutical choices can lend legitimacy to such arguments by acquitting the preacher from any accusation of fabrication.

Before critical consciousness can be cultivated and people moved to join in the work of liberation, they must be moved to understand why it is necessary in the first place. Preaching cannot do it alone, but it is a starting point, both theologically and practically. And utilizing liberationist thought—the likes of Cone's, Weems's and others'—can provide preachers tools they will not find in white, Euro-centric, hetero-dominated spaces. If preachers desire to move their hearers into alignment with the oppressed, then the oppressed must be heard in the words of the sermon and this hearing will undoubtedly create space for hearts and minds to be transformed.

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