



Applying Biblical Truth

*“For the word of God is living and active. Sharper than any double-edged sword, it penetrates even to dividing soul and spirit, joints and marrow; it judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart”
(Hebrews 4:12, NIV).*

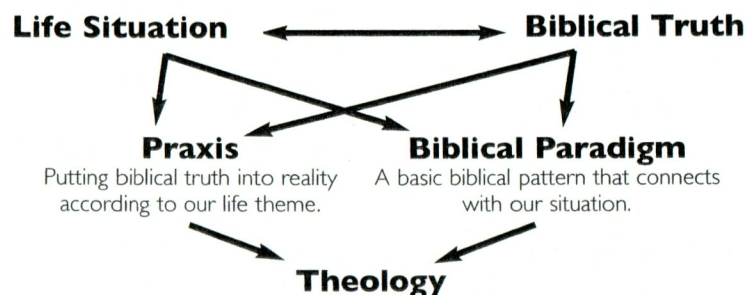
THE EMERGENCE OF THEOLOGY

As previously stated, I view theology as the application of God’s Word by persons in every area of life. God’s Word gives us a basic framework to understand the situations we face in life. One of the main purposes of developing a theological understanding is to learn to see life from God’s point of view. How can we gain God’s perspective on our life situation with a theology done without reference to our situation? While this theology can make valuable contributions, it cannot fully address our unique challenges. We can be thankful for the insights of historic African American theology and today’s White theology. However, we cannot continue our dependence on them because they do not adequately address the issues we face *today*. For this, we must free ourselves from “theological welfare,” roll up our sleeves, and get busy doing biblically sound theology—a theology that connects with our current life situation.

When life’s situations and biblical truth interact with each other, they produce two things:

1. Praxis—The exercise or practice of an art, science, or skill. All of us, whatever people group we belong to, have personal, social, and cultural issues that must be addressed by biblical truth. We must put biblical truth into reality.

2. A biblical paradigm—The identification of a basic biblical pattern that connects with our life situation.



When praxis and the biblical paradigm interact with each other, what emerges is theology.

The Bible is the revealed Word of God to us. However, the meaning of the Bible is found in its application to a life situation. Apart from this, the Bible does not say much to us. Of course, the Bible does apply in our life situation, but if we don't see it, then we do not really understand it. To apply biblical truth, we must first recognize and understand it. When we fail to apply biblical truth, it's not that the words of the Bible are not saying anything, it's just that we can't hear.

Not only does God reveal Himself in the words of the Bible, He also is revealed in the basic patterns of the biblical life situations. For every situation we go through in life, there is a basic pattern already revealed in the Bible. In other words, whatever we experience today, someone in the Bible has already experienced its basic patterns. Solomon said it

best, "What has been will be again, what has been done will be done again; there is nothing new under the sun" (Ecclesiastes 1:9).

DISCOVERING BIBLICAL TRUTH

In order to dig out the riches in the Bible, we must do the following things.

Examine basic biblical patterns. We must prayerfully look for these patterns in the biblical life situations. The key is understanding that along with the words of the Bible, the basic patterns in the life situations of biblical characters are also important.

Match biblical patterns with similar experiences in our own lives. We must prayerfully look for the basic patterns in our life situations and in the life situations of those to whom we minister. Then we must prayerfully match them with biblical situations having a similar pattern.

Take the matchups to the Scriptures. Once we match the biblical patterns to our own lives, we can see the biblical principles revealed. For example, if I know that what I'm going through is similar to what David went through under Saul, then I can look into the Scripture and see how to deal with it. Once we have done this, we can search the Scriptures to discover essentially three things:

1. How was God in control of the situation then?
2. How was God speaking to the situation then?
3. How was God present in the situation then?

The Bible gives all this information away.

We may not understand our situation. We may not know why we're going through what we're going through. But when we look at someone in the Bible who's been

.....

through an experience that has a basic pattern similar to ours, we can discover the biblical principles that address our current situation. Once we understand this, we can gain real insight on:

1. how God is in control of our situation now
2. how God is speaking to our situation now
3. how God is present in our situation now

Be inquisitive. Once we have developed this basic theological framework, we can begin to fill in the details. To do this, we need to go through what I call a theological process.

The theological process is based on questions. Jesus told us that unless we come in faith, like a little child, we cannot enter the kingdom of heaven (Matthew 18:3). One thing little children do a lot is ask questions. Likewise, God wants us to be very inquisitive. Knowing how God is in control, speaking, and present will help us frame the issues of our situation. But the finer details come as we begin to formulate specific questions about our situation and ask God for answers.

The development of my book *Free at Last? The Gospel in the African-American Experience* came out of this very same process. As a university student in the late 1960s, I was trying to figure out what God had to do with the Black Cultural Revolution that was sweeping across the country. So I asked God, "Well, what do you have to do with all this?" For the answer, I went to the Word of God and I began to read it with this question in mind. In all of my biblical studies and readings, I continued to ponder this question.

To my utter surprise, I discovered the more I read

.....

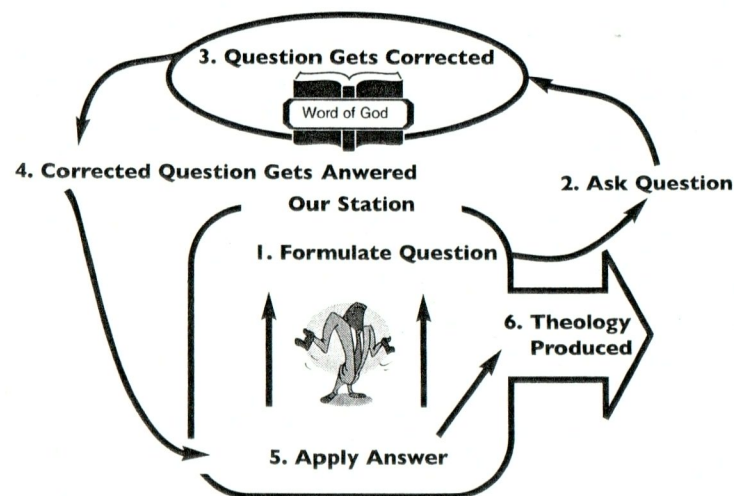
Scripture, the more I understood the question I was asking God was not really the correct one. Since the Word of God is "useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness" (2 Timothy 3:16), the Word of God began to correct my question. The more I studied, the more I began to understand the question was not "What does God have to do with the Black cultural revolution?" but "What does the revolution have to do with God?" So my question was corrected.

Next, as we meditate on God's Word and the corrected question, God gives us answers. He begins to show us things that we've never seen before and in doing so, He answers our questions. Then we must come back to our situation and apply those answers. As we apply God's answers to our situation, two things happen.

1. It causes us to produce a theology that's appropriate for our situation and speaks to its issues.

2. It causes new questions to arise. We take these new questions back to God, get them corrected, and go through the process all over again.

THE THEOLOGICAL PROCESS



PARABLES AND ILLUSTRATIONS IN THE BIBLE

Now the Bible itself uses this technique of basic patterns. You see this in the parables and illustrations of Jesus, the apostles, and the prophets. You also see this in the books of Proverbs and Ecclesiastes. Through basic patterns of life, the Bible teaches us wisdom.

Of course, a classic example of this is found in 2 Samuel 12:1-13. After David slept with Bathsheba and had her husband Uriah killed, he thought he had everything covered up. Then the prophet Nathan came to confront him. Nathan asked David to make a judgment about a story. The prophet began to elaborate about a rich neighbor who had many sheep and his poor neighbor who had one little lamb. One day, the rich neighbor had company and he took the lamb from the poor neighbor, slaughtered it, and served it to his guest. Upon hearing the story, David was angry. He said a

man like that should die. Nathan just pointed him out and said, "You are the man. You've done the exact same thing." Nathan explained what David had done with Bathsheba (a rich man robbing a poor man, stealing and killing what did not belong to him) was like the man in the story.

Many times a modern translation of the Bible can be very helpful at this point. When we read the Word of God in the language we speak every day, often the subtleties will become clearer and the principles more easily discerned.

SUPPLYING THE DETAILS

Often in Bible narratives, many of the details of the original life situation are purposefully omitted. Why? Because the Bible is designed for us to get into those patterns and supply details from our own lives.

Finally, in every theological process, God Himself must have the final say. We should always be open for correction and rebuke, and allow God to show us that, perhaps, what we've done is not right. His ways are not our ways (Isaiah 55:9). We always have to check what we've done against what God says in Scripture.

The Bible can provide a basic framework for understanding our current situation. The main purpose of the theological process is to develop a framework to understand our situation by learning how to see it from God's point of view. After doing this, then we begin to fill in the details inside the frame.

Dr. Henry Mitchell has said that the Bible is like powdered milk: It has all the ingredients of whole milk, but it would be difficult to drink in its present form. I suppose a person could spoon powdered milk into their mouth and get all the

.....

nutrients that way. However, God's Word becomes most useful and goes to work in us when we apply the water of our lives to it.

Consequently the Bible is meant to be applied to us; it's not meant to be spiritual knowledge that is disconnected from application. God wants us to get into His Word to understand our situations from His point of view and to govern our responses according to His principles. This is how we will gain wisdom. If we wisely apply the Word of God to our life situations, we will make a difference in our community.

The African American community today is in desperate need of a fresh approach to theology—a theology that is true to Scripture and, at the same time, speaks to our current situation. It is very important that we understand that God speaks to us in many ways in the Bible, and one important way is through its basic patterns. Now if we approach theology this way, the Word of God will come alive and speak to us not just in the “sweet by and by,” but also in the “nasty now and now.”



Called to Righteousness— Transcending the Culture

“But you, man of God, flee from all this, and pursue righteousness, godliness, faith, love, endurance and gentleness. Fight the good fight of the faith. Take hold of the eternal life to which you were called when you made your good confession in the presence of many witnesses” (1 Timothy 6:11–12, NIV).

CULTURAL UNRIGHTEOUSNESS

Culture is a critical component of a people's sense of history and destiny. It has been defined as the patterned way in which people do things together. However, visible actions are more a manifestation of culture than culture itself. Culture is composed of commitments, values, and beliefs about the world and people. When basic underlying cultural principles do not include God, the entire culture will end up with a distorted view of reality, and godlessness will affect every area of life.

The African American community today is in serious need of a fresh examination of our culture. In the context of the current cultural crisis, unrighteousness assaults us from all sides. Its powerful impact is most visible in our younger

generation. Countless children are being lost to the practices of humanism (a way of life centered on human interests or values), hedonism (a doctrine of pleasure viewed as the primary good in life), nihilism (thug mentality), and materialism (a preoccupation with material things over spiritual things). This is unacceptable. We must rescue our youth with a strong biblically based world and life view. We must also equip them with theological tools to enable them to positively impact our culture and overcome the unrighteous assaults they face.

It is only by seeing ourselves as God sees us will we be able to avoid negative values and self-destructive behavior. Efforts to repair culture based upon a secularist worldview will eventually degenerate and fall apart because it is an inadequate foundation. The secularist notion that we can be independent from God denies the reality of God's lordship, and any effort based on denial can never succeed. To successfully reconstruct our African American culture, we must build upon the standards and values contained in the Word of God.

COMPONENTS OF UNRIGHTEOUSNESS

Whenever people lack a basic commitment to God, unrighteousness follows. Both righteousness and unrighteousness are covenantal and relational terms. The covenant itself is best expressed in God's statement, "I will be your God and you will be my people" (Leviticus 26:12; Jeremiah 7:23; 11:4; 30:22). A simple definition of unrighteousness, biblically speaking, is a failure to do right by the other party in the covenant.

Scripture identifies at least four dimensions of unrighteousness. I call them: *ungodliness* and *oppression*

as expressed in the *individual* dimension and the *institutional* dimension.

Ungodliness happens when a person sins and suffers his or her own consequences. Oppression happens when a person sins and forces others to suffer the consequences or when a person tries to force his or her sin on others. These unrighteous behaviors are expressed in the individual dimension by face-to-face intentional sin. They are expressed in the institutional dimension through sin that is woven into the structure and social fabric of society; this type of sin does not need the intention or the consciousness of the individual to have an effect on its victims.

By pairing these dimensions, we end up with four manifestations of unrighteousness as illustrated in the figure below.

THE WINDOW OF UNRIGHTEOUSNESS

Individual Ungodliness	Institutional Ungodliness
Individual Oppression	Institutional Oppression

EXAMPLES OF UNRIGHTEOUS ACTION

• *Individual Ungodliness*

When we lie, cheat, or steal, we manifest individual ungodliness, and it can have far-reaching effects. An infamous illustration of this came in the O. J. Simpson trial (January–October 1995). Mark Fuhrman, the lead police detective in the case, testified that he found incriminating evidence on Simpson's property. In the course of the trial, Fuhrman was accused of being a racist. Under cross-examination in this racially charged case, Fuhrman emphatically stated that he was not a racist. Later, the jury heard taped excerpts from a 1988 interview in which Fuhrman was clearly heard referring to African Americans as "niggers." Not only did this discredit Fuhrman's testimony, it severely damaged the prosecution's case.

• *Individual Oppression*

When we harass, bully, or ridicule others, we commit acts of individual oppression. As a pastor I dealt with scores of people whose lives were adversely affected by the abuse their parents inflicted on them. In too many cases these negative effects were passed down to succeeding generations. The apostle Paul warns us about parental abuse, "Fathers, do not embitter your children, or they will become discouraged" (Colossians 3:21). J. B. Phillips translates it, "...don't overcorrect your children, or they will grow up feeling inferior and frustrated."

• *Institutional Ungodliness*

The activity of the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force is a good example of institutional ungodliness. This is a whole

community of people who have made a lifestyle choice that is immoral. They pursue it as if it is legitimate and insist that the rest of society must accept their lifestyle.

• *Institutional Oppression*

The sharecropper system is a clear example of institutional oppression. In the rural South, being a tenant farmer was often the only means of survival. The landowner had the only source of food, clothing, shelter, and farming supplies in his possession. Thus, sharecroppers had to obtain these things from the landowner on credit, to be paid in full out of the proceeds from the harvest. Typically, the sharecropper kept from one-half to four-fifths of the yield from his cash crops. He received his share from the landowner in a "settling-up" at the end of the harvest. However, the money that the share cropper made seldom covered his debt. The landowner usually inflated the amount he charged his tenants for what he supplied, and minimized what he paid them for their cash crops. The state and local laws favored the landowners.

The plight of many Appalachian coal minors was the same. In the mid 1950s, Tennessee Ernie Ford depicted this in his hit song "Sixteen Tons." The chorus goes:

"You load sixteen tons, and what do you get?
Another day older and deeper in debt.
St. Peter don't you call me 'cause I can't go.
I owe my soul to the company store."

For me, the most vivid example of institutional oppression involved my father, an original Tuskegee Airman. He and his cohorts flew P-51 Mustangs and escorted bombers over the European theater in World

War II. They amassed an outstanding combat record, i.e., they never lost a bomber to enemy fighters.

His goal was to be an airline pilot upon his return after the war. However, in spite of his superior flying skills, the airlines never considered his applications. Their reasons went something like this: "People will never accept a Negro pilot. If you fly for us, we'll lose passenger loyalty. Please understand, we have nothing against you. It's not personal. It's just business."

One reason the church has failed to address the cultural issues of our day is because we tend to focus only on individual ungodliness. As a result, when we encounter the institutional oppression that we've experienced for far too long, we have nothing to say about it and we are unable to show how Scripture addresses it. If the whole window of unrighteousness represents the Great Commission, then we perhaps have withdrawn from three-fourths of it. To affect cultural unrighteousness, we must begin to address every issue we face biblically.

COMPONENTS OF RIGHTEOUSNESS

In my book, *Free at Last? The Gospel in the African-American Experience*, I describe righteousness as:

the perpetual pursuit of God and His revelation in every area of life, both individually and corporately. It consists of seeking to live by the principles of the kingdom of God—principles that manifest themselves in [biblical values] such as...equality, integrity, compassion, grace, and love (261).

A simple description of righteousness, biblically speaking, is to do right by the other party in the covenant. The Bible

identifies at least four dimensions of righteousness. I call them: *godliness* and *justice* as expressed in the *personal* dimension and the *social* dimension.

Godliness consists of doing right by God; it usually involves devotion and piety. Justice consists of doing right by our fellow human beings; it usually involves freeing people from unjust situations and helping them to do the right thing. These righteous behaviors are expressed in the personal dimension by doing right on a one-on-one basis. They are expressed in the social dimension by doing right corporately as a society.

By pairing these dimensions, we end up with four manifestations of righteousness as illustrated in the figure below.

THE WINDOW OF RIGHTEOUSNESS

Personal Godliness	Social Godliness
LOVE + Personal Justice	LOVE + Social Justice

EXAMPLES OF RIGHTEOUS ACTION

• *Personal Godliness*

When we "say grace" before we eat or have daily devotions, we demonstrate personal godliness.

• *Personal Justice*

When we as individuals participate in activities that free people from bad circumstances or improve the quality of their lives, we demonstrate personal justice. This can con-

.....

sist of things like being a mentor to someone who needs the life skills we have, helping the unemployed find gainful employment, developing a fatherly relationship with fatherless children, etc.

- *Social Godliness*

During the mid-1980s, several top musical entertainers responded to a famine in Africa by producing a hit recording entitled "We Are the World." The proceeds from the sale of this record went to a special famine relief fund. These artists did not claim to be Christians. Yet, they were motivated by a sense of compassion for others who were less fortunate. This example of social godliness inspired similar efforts by many other countries.

- *Social Justice*

One of the best examples of social justice was the effect the Civil Rights Movement had on this country. While it did not solve all of America's social ills, it did have a positive effect on countless millions, both here and abroad.

In the Christian community in America, our inadequate view of righteousness tends to focus only on personal godliness. If the whole window of righteousness represents the Gospel, then perhaps we have neglected three-fourths of it. While personal godliness or piety is a good thing, it falls far short of the complete righteousness God calls us to be about. Our failure to demonstrate righteousness, especially the areas of personal and social justice, has caused us to have an inadequate and oftentimes irrelevant theology. To exercise a theology that is appropriate and biblical, we must, by God's grace, display all four manifestations of righteousness.

.....

Here are a few general observations about the windows of righteousness and unrighteousness. Each pane of these windows is dependent upon the other three panes for support. If one section is removed or broken, the integrity of the whole window is compromised. The removal of each additional pane further degrades the window's integrity, and ultimately the last pane left will be stressed to the breaking point and lost.

Consequently we, as the body of Christ, must address all four manifestations of unrighteousness with the Word of God. We must also practice all four manifestations of righteousness by the power of the Holy Spirit. If we limit ourselves to only the scope of personal godliness and individual ungodliness, we will end up failing in these areas also.

THE RIGHTEOUSNESS OF GOD

God is the God of righteousness and justice (Psalm 89:14; 116:5). He has compassion and love for people (Psalm 86:15; 1 John 1:10). The righteousness of God made available to us through faith in Jesus Christ sets us free from sin. It is by God's grace alone that we have the power and the will to demonstrate righteousness and resist unrighteousness. When God is left out, so is His special grace. And without God's grace, we lose the very possibility of both righteousness and true freedom.

A godly form of justice is illustrated in the Jubilee principle in Leviticus 25:10-17. Here God says, "Consecrate the fiftieth year and proclaim liberty throughout the land to all its inhabitants. It shall be a jubilee for you; each one of you is to return to his family property and each to his

own clan" (v. 10). When the Israelites inherited the land of Canaan, God gave every family a parcel of land, and they were free to buy and sell as they pleased. Although many prospered, others went broke, suffered oppression, or experienced misfortune. Those who had no means of survival had the option of selling themselves to their neighbors as "slaves." At the end of six years, the "slaves" were to be freed and given a large farewell present (Deuteronomy 15:12-15).

In the year of Jubilee at the end of a fifty-year period, all land would revert to the original owner and all debts would be cancelled. All slave contracts would be cancelled also. That's why it was called the year of Jubilee. This biblical economic example illustrates God's concern for human liberation and empowerment.

Israel never practiced the Jubilee principle. Therefore, they became a society marked by all four manifestations of unrighteousness. God judged them for their disobedience by sending them into Babylonian exile for 70 years to make up for the Jubilee years they ignored.

The freedom to obey God and the power to do what is right in His sight is the ultimate freedom. John 8:36 teaches us "if the Son makes you free, you will be free indeed." Human freedom comes from God. Therefore, as African Americans, our search for liberation is not a search for freedom from God, but a search for freedom in God. Apart from the pursuit of righteousness, true liberation is impossible.

The pursuit of righteousness must become the top priority of the African American Christian agenda if we are to become the people God created us to be (Matthew 6:33). When we move forward in this pursuit, we will have the kind of cultural and spiritual revolution we've needed for a long time. It would help us to understand why God has us here in the first place and propel us to take our rightful place in the unfolding purposes of God in the world.