*The Cross and the Lynching Tree*
James Cone

**Introduction**
James Cone, a celebrated American theologian who died in 2018, is known as a founder of black theology, which considers theological truths in light of the experience of African-Americans. The opening paragraph of his work offers an apt summary and introduction: "The cross and the lynching tree are separated by nearly 2,000 years. One is the universal symbol of Christian faith; the other is the quintessential symbol of black oppression in America. Though both are symbols of death, one represents a message of hope and salvation, while the other signifies the negation of that message by white supremacy. Despite the obvious similarities between Jesus' death on a cross and the death of thousands of black men and women strung up to die on a lamppost or tree, relatively few people, apart from black poets, novelists, and other reality-seeing artists, have explored the symbolic connections. Yet, I believe that this is a challenge we must face. What is at stake is the credibility and promise of the Christian gospel and the hope that we may heal the wounds of racial violence that continue to divide our churches and our society."[1]

**Summary**
In the first chapter, Cone recounts the painful history of the lynching of black people, which became a sickeningly common occurrence in the U.S. after the end of slavery. Among the innumerable and incalculable horrors of lynching is that it was commonly viewed as public event – even as a family affair. Another is that lynchings were unpredictable; the most trivial or misperceived offense could result in a lynching: "Even to look at white people in a manner regarded as disrespectful could get a black lynched. Whites often lynched blacks simply to remind the black community of their powerlessness."[2] A black person – especially a black man – perpetually bore this possibility. Politicians throughout the era remained deaf to this suffering and its assault to legal justice and due process. In the face of this constant trauma the black community embraced a remarkable hope, expressed through the gospel blues and grounded at the base of the cross.

In chapter two, Cone exposes the astonishing failure by the part of the white American church and its leaders to note and respond to the similarity between the lynchings of blacks and Christ's crucifixion. Cone shows how this failure is emblematized by the well-known 20th century American theologian Reinhold Niebuhr (brother to Richard Niebuhr, of *Christ and Culture* fame). Despite Niebuhr's awareness of the reality of lynching as well as his own emphasis on the cross, Niebuhr failed to draw theological connections between Jesus' suffering and those of black Americans. He remained blind to these atrocities – or at least failed to address them. Cone concludes that "Niebuhr had 'eyes to see' black suffering, but I believe he lacked the 'heart to feel' it as his own."[3] But this chapter is not only an indictment against Niebuhr. It is a warning

[1] James H. Cone, *The Cross and the Lynching Tree* (Maryknoll, N.Y: Orbis Books, 2011), 13.
[2] Cone, 25.
[3] Cone, 49.

against reading our own scripture without opening our eyes and mouth to the sufferings of our time.

Cone opens chapter three, an account of MLK's work, with the story of Emmett Till. In 1955 – just a year after the school desegregation legislation of *Brown v. Board of Education* – the 14-year-old Emmett Till was callously beaten and murdered by a white mob for reportedly whistling at a white woman. The event launched the civil rights movement, in part because of Mamie Till Bradley, Till's mother. She insisted on an open-casket funeral, so that "everybody can see what they did to my boy."[4] Martin Luther King was twenty-six at the time. For the next twelve years King courageously lead the Civil Rights movement under the constant threat of death. Until his assassination in 1968 he remained empowered by the cross.

Even while the relation between the cross and the injustices of 20th century America were lost on white theologians and pastors, it was not lost on the artistic black community. In chapter four, Cone catalogues the work of black artists, writers, and poets. Unlike political and church leaders, these artists were prophetically able to point out the unjust reality of suffering because, as Cone observes, "Artists force us to see things we do not want to look at because they make us uncomfortable with ourselves and the world we have created."[5]

In his concluding chapter, Cone explores the unique burden placed on black women. Though not lynched as frequently as men, they were still harassed, beaten, and tortured by whites; they also suffered the loss of fathers, brothers, and sons to lynching. Despite the contradiction that this suffering posed to their faith – especially while the gospel was wielded by their white oppressors - faithful women such as Ida B. Wells, Nellie Burroughs, and Fannie Lou Hamer rose up in hopeful and creative resistance. Billie Holiday's haunting blues song, "Strange Fruit", which describes the "strange fruit" of black bodies hanging on southern trees, is one such example. Implicitly, the song raised a potent question: "How could white Christians reconcile the 'strange fruit' they hung on southern trees with the "strange fruit" Romans hung on the cross at Golgotha?"[6]

Altogether, Cone's reflection on the significance of the cross in the brutal light of American history after the end of slavery reminds us that the cross is "not good news for the powerful, for those who are comfortable with the way things are, or for anyone whose understanding of religion is aligned with power."[7] To see the cross as it is - as a critique of power - requires a profound imagination. This same imagination is able to see Jesus as a victim of lynching who was murdered by the same powers that oppress black Americans. But that's not all: "One [also] has to have a powerful religious imagination to see *redemption* in the cross, to discover life in death and hope in tragedy. What kind of salvation is that? No human language can fully

[4] Cone, 75.
[5] Cone, 114.
[6] Cone, 130.
[7] Cone, 151.

describe what salvation through the cross means. Salvation through the cross is a mystery and can only be apprehended through faith, repentance, and humility."[8]

**Suggested Pastoral and Ministerial Implications**:
Preaching

- At one point in his book, Cone references a biblical interpretation of the person of Simon of Cyrene, the man commissioned to carry Christ's cross on the way to Golgotha. Cyrene was a city in North Africa in what is now Libya and was likely dark skinned. Simon illustrates the black community's Christ-like suffering. This interpretation would make a fitting reference in sermons preached on gospel passages which feature Simon of Cyrene.
- Overall, Cone's book channels the Old Testament spirit of remembering and recounting past communal sins (see e.g. Psalm 106). It is a reminder of the important task each community shoulders to recall its own particular history of failure. Pastors and church leaders could consider what this repentant recounting might look like in their own context.
- Cone showcases the prophetic and imaginative power of art and artists. Church's should consider ways to nurture and support artists in their congregation and communities, especially art that views current events with gospel-eyes.

**Additional resources**:

- 40 minute lecture by James Cone shortly before his death: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RPM-AtBWHrI
- A link to the haunting song "Strange Fruit": https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Web007rzSOI
- Though not directly mentioned by Cone, *Crucifixion* by African American artist Aaron Douglas visually depicts Simon of Cyrene as a figure of black suffering. See second image from bottom: https://artandtheology.org/tag/simon-of-cyrene/

[8] Cone, 151–52. Emphasis added.