



The Cross and the Lynching Tree

By James H. Cone
(Orbis Books, 2011)
202 pages

Rarely have I read a book (at least not a non-novel) that has been so compelling I could not put it down. However, this was one of those books.

I purchased the book because one of my students in one of my classes referenced it in some of their writing and the title of the book captured my attention. I ordered it off Amazon (right after reading the paper), and it sat on my shelf for nearly six months before I picked it up and started to read it.

It was disturbing, compelling, distressing, captivating and shocking – all at the same time.

James H. Cone is the Charles A. Briggs Distinguished Professor of Systematic Theology at Union Theological Seminary in New York. He is an influential theologian addressing issues of Black America and Black theology. His first book, *Black Theology and Black Power* rocked the theological world, and still exercises influence on modern liberation theology. As an African American himself, he is well suited to speak to the African American experience.

Just a side note: I have already lost some of you who read this because you may say, "Why do we need a Black theology? We shouldn't separate theology by color." However, those who would say this fail to understand that theology is an expression of what we believe about God based on the experiences we have had. There is no doubt that the African American experience and the Anglo American experience has differed widely in the last 250 years. Cone simply acknowledges this in the development of his theology.

The point of this captivating book is simply this: "Until we can see the cross and the lynching tree together, until we can identify Christ with the 'recrucified' black body hanging from a lynching tree, there can be no genuine understanding of the Christian identity in America, and no deliverance from the brutal legacy of slavery and white supremacy."¹ Before reading this book, I probably would have argued his point. After reading, I don't think I can.

He draws a comparison between the unjust treatment of Jesus Christ, his brutal beating, his unfair trials at the hands of the Jews and the Romans, and his torturous and cruel killing on a cross to that of the lynching of black men and women, during the years after Reconstruction (in the American South) until the mid-1950's. There are some profound similarities and Cone challenges the preconceptions of an American Christian culture and its toleration of incredible and unspeakable killings of blacks in America.

The primary wrestling point for me in reading this work was trying to reconcile the fact that black men and women embraced the very Christianity that was being used to justify their

¹ James H. Cone, *The Cross and the Lynching Tree* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2011), xv.

disenfranchisement, their oppression and, often, their killing. As Cone writes, "It was not easy for blacks to find a language to talk about Christianity publicly because the Jesus they embraced was also, at least in name, embraced by whites who lynched black people. Indeed, it was white slaveholders, segregationists, and lynchers who defined the content of the Christian gospel,"² at least in America.

This book gave me a new sense of the tragedy that fell upon Christ during his final hours. It also gave me a new appreciation of the trauma and the tragedy that has fallen upon black America. It has given me a new appreciation for the African American Church and the theology that has arisen from their experience.

There were moments of tears in this book when I saw the culture celebrated in movies (such as *Gone with the Wind*) portrayed for what it actually was. There were moments I was angry that white men and women used the faith I proclaim to be justification for their violence. There were times in my reading where I was simply appalled at man's inhumanity to other persons created in the image of God.

There was a song, referred to in the book, that captured for me both the immense tragedy and the image of protest of the lynching tree. Billie Holiday was one of America's great jazz singers, and she called this song her protest. The lyrics of this song are:

Southern trees bear strange fruit,
Blood on the leaves and blood at the root,
Black body swinging in the Southern breeze,
Strange fruit hanging from the poplar trees.

Pastoral scene of the gallant South,
The bulging eyes and the twisted mouth,
Scent of magnolia sweet and fresh,
Then the sudden smell of burning flesh!

Here is the fruit for the crows to pluck,
For the rain to gather, for the wind to suck,
For the sun to rot, for the trees to drop,
Here is a strange and bitter crop.

If you wish to hear Billie Holiday's rendition of this song, grab your Kleenex and go to <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=h4ZyuULy9zs>.

Like the 137 Psalm, this song and this entire book require us to rethink our faith in the midst of tragic circumstances. This book helped me to think of my own theology in light of such horrible tragedy.

² Cone, 118.