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Let's Be Friends: Black Theology, Climate Change, and Trust

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Abstract: Climate change is a worldwide issue with ramifications for all ethnic groups. Yet, there is a dearth of engagement of climate change issues by Black theology and Black churches, even though the effects of climate change are predicted to affect African Americans and other racial minorities to a greater extent than other groups. Given the history of mistrust of the uses of scientific research and practices that have themselves caused negative impacts within the African American communities (e.g., Tuskegee Syphilis Experiment), this disconnect is not surprising. Furthermore, some view the attention given to anything other than criminal justice reform, police brutality, and other social issues only serves to distract from the main issues facing African Americans. This article brings Black Theology into conversation with the climate change movement via the bioethical issue of trust ethics. The author both demonstrates the direct threats climate change poses to African Americans as well as proffers pathways for a crucial partnership between Black theologians, churches, and climate change advocates.

Keywords: Black Theology, Climate Change, Bioethics, Liberation Theology, African American Churches, Trust Ethics

Black liberation theologies have not exactly been teeming with references and explorations of ecological justice and environmental concerns. It is without question that ecological justice is inextricably linked to issues of race, gender, and wealth inequalities.¹ The task ahead of us is to identify and employ strategies for mobilization in order to address the abuse and mistreatment of human beings and the environment. Yet, there are vital stipulations that must precede any attempts to engage historically oppressed communities (e.g. African American communities). As James Cone astutely recognized, science and technology have too often been used as tools of subjugation and

¹ Toban Black, "Race, Gender, and Climate Injustice: Dimensions of Social and Environmental Inequality" in Phoebe Godfrey and Denise Torres, eds. *Systemic Crises of Global Climate Change: Intersections of Race, Class and Gender* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2016), 172-184.

death for people of color- often being wielded "in the name of God and democracy."² Also, there is a disconnect between issues of racial and social justice and environmental justice movements. The result is mistrust of any issue that deflects from the gritty abuse of black bodies, poor economic conditions, etc. Such mistrust creates a biohazard, particularly as it pertains to addressing issues of climate change and its affects, which have reached into everyday life through gentrification, lack of housing, job loss, food shortages, and food toxicity (as the quality of food decreases because of the difficulty to maintain healthy livestock, loss of soil structure and nutrient degradation).³

Mistrust amongst African Americans for environmental groups are rooted in the lack of diversity represented in leadership and staffing, along with a pervasive attitude that African Americans are disinterested in environmental issues. Dorceta Taylor's 2018 report, "Diversity in Environmental Organizations," reveals huge disparities in hiring racial minorities, lack of diversity in leadership positions, and that even environmental organizations who report diversity data has decreased since 2014.⁴ What's more, the report suggests that these organizations typically ignore concerns of diversity unless they are under direct scrutiny, and pressed to implement more inclusive focus, policies, and personnel. Elsewhere, Taylor highlights the rationale for the disparity of multi-racial representation within environmental groups. She argues there are some scholars and environmental activists who often depict ethnic minorities as disinterested in the environment and ignorant of environmental affairs.⁵ The idea that minorities were neither qualified for environmental jobs nor wanted such jobs fueled the lack of priority for diversity for environmental groups, especially in terms of staffing and leadership positions.

As the effects of climate change have no respect of race or ethnicity, it behooves us to establish a framework of instituting trust, building coalitions, and adopting practices to help deter the

² James H. Cone, *Whose Earth Is It Anyway?*, in Dieter Hessel & Larry Rasmussen eds. *Earth Habitat: Eco-Injustice and the Church's Response* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2001), 24.

³ U.S. Global Change Research Program, *The Climate Report: National Climate Assessment-Impacts, Risks, and Adaptation in the United States* (New York: Melville House Publishing, 2019), 14-16.

⁴ Taylor, D.E. (January 2018). *Diversity in Environmental Organizations Reporting and Transparency*, Report 1. DOI: 10.13140/RG.2.2.24588.00649.

⁵ Taylor D.E., "Diversity and the Environment: Myth-Making and the Status of Minorities in the Field" *Research in Social Problems and Public Policy* 15, 2008, 89-148.

environmental hazards in the near future. This article is an attempt to provide at least the seeds for such a framework. I will address the bioethical issue of trust ethics (offering insight into ways we can assuage the justifiable mistrust African Americans display towards environmental justice groups and certain aspects of scientific research⁶), and offer some concrete areas of engagement that can lead to a truce between Black theology and climate change movements.

The Purpose and Function of Black Theology

“Christian Theology is a theology of liberation. It is a rational study of the being of God in the world in light of the existential situation of an oppressed community, relating the forces of liberation to the essence of the gospel, which is Jesus Christ. This means that its sole reason for existence is to put into ordered speech the meaning of God’s activity in the world so that the community of the oppressed will recognize that its inner thrust for liberation is not only consistent with the gospel but *is* the gospel of Jesus Christ.”⁷

With these words, James Cone opens his classic work *A Black Theology of Liberation*- a systematic explication of the theological analysis and power undergirding the African American struggle for liberation and justice. Cone’s main objective was to represent God, as revealed in Jesus Christ, as being firmly on the side of oppressed peoples. He also intended to demonstrate that the mission of the Church includes actions and ministries of justice as a means to liberation and equality for Black people. Racial discrimination, socio-economic disenfranchisement, and political intimidation were contrary to the gospel of Jesus Christ, and so were any attempts to ignore the plight and sufferings of those in oppressed groups.

Theology and theologians bear an urgent responsibility to address injustice and oppression. Theologians, pastors, ministers, and other church leaders must address the needs of the people- not just the spiritual and emotional needs but also the social, political, and economic issues people are facing on a daily basis. Cone’s theology is clear-cut in

⁶ There is a legacy of mistrust among African Americans with regard to scientific research, most specifically medical research. See Henrie M. Treadwell, Clare Xanthos, Kisha B. Holden, *Social Determinants of Health Among African-American Men* (Sanfransico, CA: Jossey-Bass, 2013), 135-160.

⁷ James Cone, *A Black Theology of Liberation* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1970), 1.

its desire for theology to represent the plight of African Americans in all dimensions of life. The existential condition of enslavement, Jim Crow laws, segregation, lynching, police brutality, and racial discrimination are thoroughly addressed by Cone's theology of liberation. There are several areas, however, that were overlooked in the early years of Black theology. Cone identified four areas of weakness in nascent black theology: overreaction to white racism, deficient social analysis, lack of engagement with Marxism and economic analysis, and a lack of gender/sexual analysis and issues.⁸

In the first instance, Black theology was shaped primarily in response to white racism in churches and the larger society. Consequently, it was a reactionary theology instead of theology with the sole purpose of articulating black identity and black struggle. Theological reflection of white racism was a limited source for a theology of Black existence. The existential reality of African Americans exceeds encounters with white racism. More importantly, if racism were the only focus of Black theology, then the elimination of racism would nullify the necessity of a theology for African American existence. There would be no need for theology "based on the history and culture" of Black people.⁹ Cone's corrective was to employ significant Black cultural practices and history as a new basis for Black theology, i.e., the spirituals, the blues, etc.¹⁰ In so doing, Black theology received a necessary repositioning, properly grounded in existential Blackness, and serving as a vanguard of African American reality, as opposed to a reactionary to racism.

Along with a reactionary disposition, Black theology had a deficiency in social analysis. By this Cone meant there was too much reliance on moral suasion as opposed to examining the connections between racism, capitalism, imperialism, and White racist Christianity.¹¹ Early Black theologians held to the guiding principle that deep down, racist White Christians were fundamentally Christian brothers and sisters who could be persuaded by the gospel of love and justice. Social analysis was neglected in favor of sentiment. Consequently, there was no engagement with Marxism, nor was there any thorough economic analysis. Cone admits there was ambivalence towards Marxism within

⁸ James Cone, *For My People: Black Theology and the Black Church: Where Have We Been and Where Are We Going?* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1984), 86- 98.

⁹ *Ibid*, 87.

¹⁰ James Cone, *The Spirituals and The Blues: An Interpretation* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1992).

¹¹ James Cone, *For My People*, 88.

the African American avant-garde (though Cone himself advocated for a meaningful dialogue with Marxism).¹² More importantly, there should have been more exploration of the economic connections to racial oppression.

Finally, Cone speaks of a lack of sexual analysis. No attention was given to sexism and the church in the early phases of Black theology. Acknowledging the failure to address sexism was a significant step in the evolution of Black theology. It bolstered the moral authority of Black theological critique of racial discrimination by other ethnic groups. Too, there was the realization that Black theology is not a static tradition, but one that should always be willing to adapt to future conditions of African Americans. As Cone said, "if we Blacks are not self-critical in regard to our historical failings, we will not be able to correct ourselves in the present so that we can create a meaningful future."¹³ In essence, Cone instructs us that admitting the failures of the past is indispensable to begin addressing situations African Americans face in the present and future. Cone spent quite a bit of time correcting the shortcomings he identified. Yet, there is another dimension of Black life that has been overlooked by Black theology, namely, climate change and other environmental issues.

Black Theology, African American Communities, and the Effects of Climate Change

Black Theology serves primarily as a "theology of survival because it seeks to interpret the theological significance of the being of a community whose existence is threatened by the power of non-being."¹⁴ For Cone, non-being signifies the threat to the very existence and continued survival of African Americans. Climate change is an imminent and encompassing threat to every human being, and therefore a crucial existential threat to African Americans. It is the severity of climate change, and the greater extent of its effects on impoverished communities, that makes it imperative for Black theology to engage environmental justice issues in more intentional and robust ways. The effects of environmental changes vis-à-vis climate change will have crucial effects on African Americans in several areas including direct threats to habitats, health and wellness, and sacred community

¹² Ibid. 92 & 175-188.

¹³ Ibid. 97.

¹⁴ James Cone, *A Black Theology of Liberation*, 16.

institutions such as churches. Each of these creates a biohazard for African Americans, i.e., an existential threat.¹⁵

The consequences of climate change are far-reaching. Changes in Arctic temperatures and ice, ocean salinity, and wind patterns have and will continue to result in extreme weather (massive hurricanes, tornadoes, tsunamis, etc.), droughts, famine, and dangerous level heat waves. In fact, some scientists predict heat waves in North America will become more intense in the coming decades. Heat waves stand out as a major consequence of climate change for African Americans. African Americans are “more than twice as likely” to live in inner cities as White Americans.¹⁶ Heat waves are particularly detrimental to urban environments due in large part to the concrete and asphalt surfaces, which are heat retainers. In other words, the living spaces of African Americans are in danger of becoming uninhabitable. This is in addition to the crime and increased gun violence claiming the lives of youth and young adults all over the United States. There is the real potential of heat illness, heat exhaustion, and heat stroke in everyday travels to work, school, and other social activities that impacts African Americans in disproportionate numbers.

Heat illness is not the only area of health and wellness that will result from the effects of climate change. The increase in Earth’s temperatures will lead to deterioration in air quality and amplification in the range of diseases. There will be an upsurge in the disease-spreading insects in a variety of new places. Warmer conditions will allow insects such as “ticks and mosquitoes to live in places they previously could not live.”¹⁷ Furthermore, deteriorating air quality will lead to heightened cases of exposure to air toxins, causing asthma and other breathing issues. The affects of poor air quality and lack of health care leading to medical issues such as asthma is more prevalent among African American adolescents (and other ethnic minorities groups) as opposed to White American adolescents.¹⁸ African Americans are already less likely to have adequate health care insurance or regular access to medical care.

¹⁵ Betty Whitted Holley, “Climate Change: The Evidence and Consequence for the African American Community,” *Blessed Tomorrow*, October 24, 2018. <https://blessedtomorrow.org/climate-change-evidence-and-consequence-african-american-community/>

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁸ Laurens G. Van Sluytman and Pheobe Sheppard, “Environment of the Margins: Reconsidering Environmental Racism for Sustainable Actions,” in Denise Torres and Pheobe Godfrey, eds. *Emergent Possibilities for Global Sustainability: Intersections on Race, Class, and Gender* (New York: Routledge, 2016), 207.

This is compounded by the fact that "African Americans are nearly three times as likely to be hospitalized or killed by asthmas" as White Americans.¹⁹

There is also an ecclesiological aspect of the effects of climate change on African American communities. Climate change will have a major impact on Black churches and ministry. Black churches, like most churches, rely heavily on the giving by parishioners. Very few have endowments or other sources of income to sustain ministry. Therefore, a population with higher unemployment, health challenges that prevent them from working or volunteering, and increases in cost of operation, causes an existential threat to Black churches.

Concern for Black churches is not just about merely preserving institutions. It is genuinely about the spiritual welfare and historical identity of African American communities. Churches have always been central to Black communities- serving as places of solace and spaces for cultivating human rights activism. Even during a time of decline in church attendance in the general populace and the rise of religious *nones*²⁰, attendance and participation at predominately Black churches remains steady in comparison to other ethnic communities. African Americans are more likely to attend church services than White Americans and Latino Americans.²¹ Church seems to still have meaning for most of Black America, especially in terms of historical significance and cultural identity. Closing churches in Black communities because of the consequences of climate change, or any other reason, would be devastating for these communities. Black theology and churches have a vested interest in confronting the effects of climate change because it poses an existential threat to African American life and spiritual well-being.

Cone also saw the necessity of connecting environmental issues with the fight against racism. In his essay "Whose Earth Is it Anyway," Cone argues that the same logic that led to slavery and segregation in

¹⁹ Betty Whitted Holley, "Climate Change: The Evidence and Consequence for the African American Community." For additional studies see <https://www.aaaai.org/about-aaaai/newsroom/news-releases/black-children-asthma> and <https://www.sciencedaily.com/releases/2017/01/170106133056.htm>.

²⁰ Religious Nones refer to persons who do not identify with a particular religious tradition, yet still consider themselves to practice spirituality or religion on an individual basis.

²¹ David Masci, "5 Facts About the Religious Lives of African Americans," *Fact Tank*, *Pewresearch.org*, February 7, 2018.

the Americas, colonization and Apartheid in Africa, and the rule of white supremacy throughout the world is the same one that leads to the exploitation of animals and the ravaging of nature."²² The core ideology of white supremacy is that everyone and everything can be used for the perpetuation of white supremacy. In essence, those who wish the furtherance of white supremacy view the domination of other human beings and nature as means to the same end. This suggests that the enemy against which both those who are seeking equality for oppressed peoples and those who are seeking to protect the sanctity of the Earth have a common enemy - white supremacy and racism.

White supremacist ideological justification of dominance and oppression is akin to how Jürgen Habermas and the Frankfurt School described instrumental reasoning and action. Instrumental reason is concerned solely with the accomplishment of a goal, and not about the ethics of the means used to realize that goal. It justifies all means so long as the goal is accomplished. Instrumental action is the practical result of instrumental reasoning. Any action is permissible in the pursuit of what is deemed a "greater good" or the realization of some "manifest destiny." There are two criteria for an instrumental action: 1) that the end of the action is predetermined independently of the means of realization, and 2) it is realized by a *causal* intervention in the objective world.²³ The critique of instrumental reason became the principal task of critical theory because the progressive mastery of nature through science and technology simultaneously transformed the potential subjects of emancipation (human beings and nature itself) into objects to be dominated in order to achieve a society that is ideal by white supremacist standards. Critical theorists of the Frankfurt School maintained that technological abuses and the abuses of nature are a direct threat to the well-being and dignity of human beings. Black theologians can show how this is specifically related to African American existential realities. Cone's assessment is significant in that he calls us to recognize the interconnectedness of liberation movements and environmentalist efforts in relation to white supremacy. As a result, we cannot effectively and fully address the practices that have caused climate change unless we simultaneously address racism and the various actions that dehumanize certain ethnic groups and degrade nature.

²² James H. Cone, *Whose Earth Is It Anyway?*, 23.

²³ Jürgen Habermas, *The Theory of Communicative Action. Vol.1. Reason and the Rationalization of Society*. Trans. Thomas McCarthy. (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1984), 285. See also James Gordon Finlayson, *Habermas: A Very Short Introduction* (New York: Oxford University Press, Inc. 2005), 48.

Trust Ethics, Black Theology, and Climate Science

Despite Cone's insistence on the connection between racial justice and proper environmental management, ambivalence remains towards any attempts to distract from the harsh realities and intransigence of racism. This ambivalence runs deep in the African American community and is reflected among Black leadership, politics, and theology. There is a sense that focusing on other issues- even vital issues that governments and communities should address like education, health, and the environment- without also addressing the ways in which racial oppression factors into systemic oppression of African Americans, are attempts to deflect from the truth of racial oppression and white supremacy. When it comes to climate change, this is reinforced when environmentalists seem to completely ignore issues of racism, or how certain racial/ethnic communities do not receive the same amount of funding, support, or resources to stave off the very dangers those environmentalists tout.

So, the real question is why should African Americans trust climate scientists and environmentalists? Is working with and adhering to the proposals from these groups truly beneficial for Black communities all over the world? For one thing, millions of African Americans are geographically isolated within areas that are economically depressed, polluted, and separated from more affluent job centers.²⁴ This new form of segregated living spaces translates into limited job opportunities and access to resources for environmental protections. Additionally, there is typically poor enforcement of environmental protections and regulations in predominately Black communities, i.e., air quality, waste disposal, and illegal dumping sites.²⁵ There is a proven correlation between race and locations of abandoned toxic waste sites.²⁶ Yet, there are no protests by environmentalists in the majority of these areas. There is very little news coverage, and certainly little oversight and attempts to rectify these occurrences by local officials.

Local and state governments are also more inclined to approve industries that cause and store toxic waste and pollution in African

²⁴ Marguerite L. Spencer, "Environmental Racism and Black Theology: James H. Cone Instructs Us on Whiteness," *University of St. Thomas Law Journal*, vol. 5. Issue 1 Winter, 2008, 291.

²⁵ Paul Mohai and Robin Saha, "Which came first, people or pollution? A review of theory and evidence from longitudinal environmental justice studies," *Environmental Research Letters*, Volume 10, Number 12, 2015, 5011.

²⁶ Marguerite L. Spencer, "Environmental Racism and Black Theology," 291.

American communities. Various reasons are given to justify these continued practices including the notion that it benefits these communities. "Local officials and industry leaders argue that acceptance of many reform proposals would result in plant closures, layoffs, and economic dislocation."²⁷ Environmentally hazardous industries and operations such as garbage dumps, incinerators, and sewage treatment plants tend to be more prevalent in Black communities. How can these communities trust politicians with climate change when what has been demonstrated already has been unfair targeting of African American neighborhoods for environmentally harmful conditions? And again, no rallying cries from the environmental movements.

Another exemplar reason for mistrust is that the response to climate change in cities most in danger of sea level rise has been gentrification. Gentrification can be roughly defined as the process of transforming impoverished and deteriorated urban neighborhoods into more middle-class or upscale neighborhoods via an influx of more affluent residents.²⁸ We have seen increased flooding in coastal neighborhoods but nothing on the scale of what is anticipated in the coming decades. So, why are upper class residents moving into former lower class neighborhoods? Why are governments allowing developers, and in some cases partnering with them, to build more expensive housing, shops, and upscale restaurants in places traditionally home to persons who are lower on the economic scale? And why now, instead of when the effects of sea level rise greater?

It could be that among calls for preparation, there is the suggestion to "retreat" from vulnerable places. Several climate scientists offer this suggestion to those living in coastal areas. Rachel Cleetus, policy director of the Climate and Energy program for the Union of Concerned Scientists, suggests that we "adopt bold, transformative policies that foster new frontiers of opportunity on safer ground for those who may have to retreat from high-risk areas."²⁹ To be fair, Cleetus emphasizes that investment be made in coastal resilience and for those who will eventually have to abandon their coastal living spaces

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ See <https://www.cnbc.com/2018/08/29/climate-gentrification-is-changing-miami-real-estate-values.html> and <https://overtownurban.com/climate-gentrification-and-the-renaissance-of-overtown-miami/>.

²⁹ Astrid Caldas; Erika Spanger-Siegfried; Kristina Dahl; Pamela Worth; Rachel Cleetus; Shana Udvardy, *Underwater: Rising Seas, Chronic Floods, and the Implications for US Coastal Real Estate* (Cambridge, MA: Union of Concerned Scientists, 2018), 3.

whilst ensuring that resources are available for low-income and disadvantaged communities. Nevertheless, the suggestion of retreat looms large in the minds of ethnic groups who suffer from racial discrimination and insufficient economic means. When people from the coast retreat, they have and will move to areas that are already occupied.

How does this connect to racial discrimination? One example has to do with ownership of property and the lack of availability of loans and credit for people of color. A 2018 study revealed a pattern of denials of mortgage loans for people of color in major metropolitans across the United States.³⁰ This study was a yearlong analysis, and it was based on 31 million records, using the techniques of leading academics, the Federal Reserve, and Department of Justice to identify lending disparities. Despite legislation and constant efforts of civil rights groups, lending and housing disparities persist. Gentrification is possible mainly because the residents in low income areas typically do not own their homes, buildings, apartments, etc. And when they attempt to purchase their homes once the area has been transformed, either they are priced out of range or denied a mortgage loan.

Climate change is indeed a critical issue for African Americans, but not at the expense of vigilance for racial, gender, political, social, and economic equality. The task remains to establish a framework for trust in order to properly marry environmental justice with racial equality. The first step in this framework is the admission that global warming, climate change, and sea level rise are realities. Africans Americans will be affected along with everyone else in the world. Climate change does not discriminate based on race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, or religion. As such, African Americans cannot hide from it, and thus should not ignore the future state of our habitat. It behooves us to become engaged at every level of talks, planning, policy, and any other actions. Engagement with climate scientists and environmentalists is for the overall benefit of African American communities. So, the first step in the trust process has to be the realization of necessity.

Trust is an attitude that is directed towards person(s)/institutions viewed as trustworthy. We can identify two types of trust: non-

³⁰Aaron Glantz and Emmanuel Martinez, "For People of Color, Banks Are Shutting the Door to Homeownership" in *Reveal, The Center for Investigative Reporting*. Accessed May 25, 2019. <https://www.revealnews.org/article/for-people-of-color-banks-are-shutting-the-door-to-homeownership/>.

cognitive human emotive trust and cognitive human rationalized trust.³¹ Noncognitive trust refers to the natural confidence, a sort of naïve trust, we display prior to any experience of violation of trust (something like an infant innocently trusting its caregiver). When we experience a violation of trust or at least when we realize the potential of violation of trust, we shift to cognitive rational evaluation of trust. Cognitive rationalized trust is “an intrinsic preservation tool in all thinking creatures.”³² In other words, it behooves us to ask questions and/or hold a posture of distrust until sufficient evidence is presented to move us towards an attitude of trust. It is not enough that climate change is a reality and that it will affect the entire human population. It is also not enough to provide reports and figures detailing how more impoverished communities will be affected to a greater extent than others. The proposals and solutions of environmentalists, scientists, and politicians *must* account for the realities of racial discrimination in terms of the distribution of resources and actions taken to combat climate change. There should be sustained transparency with planning and implementation at all stages.

Black theologians and church leaders must be at the vanguard of those who demand accountability and inclusion in the conversations on climate change. The absence of consideration of discrimination based on race and ethnicity among environmentalists will not be remedied unless there are those present who continuously publicize these actualities. So, theologians should get involved, making connections between inaction on climate change and white supremacist ideologies as well as ensuring fair consideration of the danger of systemic and systematic racism. Open dialogue about political, social, and economic implications of climate change can foster deeper levels of trust among the African American community for environmentalists and climate science proposals.

Trust requires people having a genuine seat at the proverbial table of decision making. Trust, however, also requires at the very least a posture of vulnerability and a reasonable optimism that the entity we are trusting is not only competent in the area/skill in which we are trusting, but acting in a manner that our trust will eventually be proven as justifiably placed. In order for trust to grow between African American communities and those who are at the forefront of climate change

³¹David Hodge (2018). Xenotransplantation, Trust, and Trustworthiness: Ethical Issues for African Americans. *Ethics, Medicine and Public Health*. 7. 59-67. [10.1016/j.jemep.2018.10.003](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jemep.2018.10.003).

³² Ibid.

discussions there has to be genuine and intentional efforts on the part of climate scientist and environmentalists to acknowledge and include the realities of racial discrimination. African Americans need to feel that the realities of historical and systematic racism are not being jettisoned in the name of some greater good, but recognized in an effort to avoid the racial oppressions and disenfranchisement of the past. You cannot repair past hurts and wrongs in any relationship by ignoring them. Only by owning them, and making intentional efforts to solve them will the relationship start to heal and flourish. The same holds true for the trust among social institutions, governments, and the communities they serve.

Theologically, Black theologians can articulate the biblical and spiritual principles that engender trust such as hope, reconciliation, and justice. Each of these principles offers some insights for the framework of trust. Despite the realities of racism, there is the possibility for hope in working together to solve the problems of climate change. As mentioned earlier, there are proposals addressing climate change, such as the ones posited by the Union of Concerned Scientists, that include statements about safeguarding impoverished neighborhoods, and persons with little or no economic means to protect themselves from the effects of rising sea levels or air pollution, etc.³³ There is, thus, at least some recognition of the ways in which resources have been distributed unfairly, and a desire to prevent this from happening. So there is hope that racial disparities can also be addressed in a serious manner when they are brought to the forefront. This means there is a chance for reconciliation, a chance for cooperation. Black theology can serve as a bridge to reconcile the efforts and agendas of African Americans and environmentalists. But it has to be a bridge of justice. The entire catalog of Black theology has been for the sole purpose of protecting and defending the interest of persons of African descent, protecting the souls and bodies of a people who have experienced oppressive atrocities for centuries. They are replete with the reframe of God's love for Black people by demanding justice and equality for Black people in all areas of society. To establish trust among African Americans and environmental movements requires the Black theologian to be a vigilant spokesperson of justice in all planning and processes addressing climate change.

³³ See Astrid Caldas, et al., *Underwater: Rising Seas, Chronic Floods, and the Implications for US Coastal Real Estate*.

Confronting Climate Change, Building Coalitions, and Adopting Sustainable Practices

Climate change is a reality that is already affecting communities all over the globe. Sooner or later, life as we know it will change. This is so in terms of the environment and geography, but this is also the case in terms of how society functions, employment, travel, and general lifestyles. The only proper response is developing new habits and practices to help us both fend off the effects as well as adapt to the new reality.

Black communities have already started to take climate change more seriously. A 2012 study juxtaposed two predominately African American communities on the Eastern Shore of Chesapeake Bay.³⁴ The communities of Smithville and Bellevue were engaged in terms of knowledge and openness to the issue of climate change and its effects on African American communities specifically. The researchers discovered helpful information as to the challenges, level of vulnerability, and plans of actions to deal with increased flooding and more frequent and powerful storms. Researchers learned that community members were not well-versed in science of climate change, or the various reports published by scientists over the past few decades. However, this did not engender distrust about climate change. In fact, both of these communities embraced the facts of climate change, and were enthusiastic about learning more about what the science says about the ways in which their communities would be affected, and even more so, how to prepare for it.

What is most interesting for our present purposes is the fact that the African American residents of Chesapeake Bay consider the churches in the community as primary resources for climate change preparedness plans. Churches provide the social cohesion necessary for cooperative readiness throughout the communities. It is also churches that serve as the vanguard for galvanization, and a shield for apathy or apprehension. This assessment, I believe, reflects the general attitude of African American communities (as well as other ethnic groups) all over the United States. Theological and ecclesiological resources are crucial for communities in which religious/spiritual constitutive for the members of that community. So, it is not surprising to discover the prominent role of

³⁴ Michael Paolisso, Ellen Douglas, Ashley Enrici, Paul Kirshen, Chris Watson, and Matthias Ruth, "Climate Change, Justice, and Adaptation among African American Communities in the Chesapeake Bay Region" in *Whether, Climate, and Society*, vol. 4, Issue 1, January 2012, pp 34-47.

the churches in making plans for addressing future issues. This further demonstrates the necessity for Black theologians to engage even more so in conversations and research on climate change.

Forging coalitions is a mandatory method of preparing for a world after climate change becomes more pronounced. We have to ensure, though, that these coalitions are fair and just. A major example includes the construction of new infrastructure, housing units, dams and levees, and other barriers to handle the rising waters. As companies are being selected, African American businesses and entrepreneurs must be included, not only as consultants, but also as actors who reap the financial benefits. African American liberation movements will be more willing to cooperate with environmental movements if there are tangible vested interests for all. This should also translate in to increased green jobs and opportunities for gainful employment for African Americans.

Black theology cannot stop at inclusion though. Theologians' jobs include inspiring innovation and creativity on the part of African Americans to help confront climate change. Many Black leaders, including Black theologians, stop at explicating and articulating Black struggle and existential angst. These are, however, not the only experiences African Americans live with day to day. Like other groups, African Americans have aspirations, hope, and desire a better future for posterity. The Christian tradition is replete with messages of growth, purpose, and creating new spaces for opportunities in life. Thus, Black theologians must challenge their communities to join the fray against climate change by employing their intellect and creativity in the same manner as Garret A Morgan, Madam C. J. Walker, and Marie Van Brittan Brown.³⁵ These individuals help to develop things that have influenced the world.

Climate scientists groups should be as diverse as possible. While research on the world's temperature and the condition of the Earth's crust, for instance, are not influenced by race and ethnicity, the interpretation of data and the suggestions made based on that data should account for all communities and cultures that comprise the human family. In other words, the proposals should be cognizant of subsequent policies and the tendencies of policy makers to be influenced

³⁵ Garret A Morgan, Madam C. J. Walker, and Marie Van Brittan Brown were celebrated African American inventors and entrepreneurs. Morgan is most known for inventing the traffic light.,Walker for her business ecumen, and Brown was the co-inventor of a home security system, amongst other things.

by race and ethnicity. Black theology is ardent in upholding the dignity of human beings. In fact, "the dignity of the human entity is foundational to everything" Black theology engages.³⁶ There is no unbiased scientific data or implications. Human beings are the recipients of the decisions of those in power who are listening to scientists. Therefore, diversity and representation is critical to building coalitions and trust.

Finally, Black theology and Black churches can become more vocal in preaching and teaching about climate change and how it is and will affect Black communities. Theology is responsible for interpreting the Christian faith tradition in ways that reflect the current issues of our time. Pastors and church leaders can help parishioners understand the issues surrounding climate change and to begin to adopt a lifestyle conducive to alleviating the effects of global warming, rising waters, more severe weather, drought, etc. Messages from the pulpit and seminaries who are connected to the communities can lend credence to environmentalist movements and scientists who are trying to connect with and serve African American communities but are met with resistance of suspicion. Partnership is possible if we build a framework of trust, with Black theology at the forefront.

³⁶ J. Deotis Roberts, "Dignity and Destiny: Black Reflections on Eschatology" in Dwight N. Hopkins and Edward P. Antonio, eds., *The Cambridge Companion to Black Theology* (Cambridge, 2012), 214.

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