

More Chocolate In My Milk Please: The Necessity of Integrating Blackness and Reformedness

By Xavier Pickett

The Conversation

Black. Reformed. What do they mean? Better yet, what does it mean for the two to be integrated? Or for the two to become one? For “Blackness” and “Reformedness” to stand separately from one another in theological context is to run the risk of one dominating the other in a conversation of utmost importance. Currently, within the conversation between Reformedness (i.e. Reformed theology) and “Blackness” (i.e. Black heritage in its broadest sense), Reformed theology seems to control where the conversation should go and on a most basic level even prescribes its fundamental categories of theological formulation that determines one’s world and lifeview. And the unfortunate reality in this conversation is that those who are Black and Reformed do not realize the lopsidedness of this dialog. We are predominately sitting at the feet of Reformed theology waiting to receive all that it has to give us as though it is the ark of salvation without contributing anything to the conversation.

What makes matters worse is that we do not think we *need* to contribute anything or even have anything to contribute. We would rather remain at the whims of Reformed theology as it guides us to “the most blessed theologically sound life” here in America, even though it does not actually inquire about our lives as Blacks, which it seeks to lead whether we admit it or not. This is partly due to the fact that for many, Reformed theology is an idol that we do not want to change, which then leads to our passivity in conversation. If the truth be told, in idolatry we do not want our idol to change because if it does, we stand the chance of losing something that we think is valuable (e.g. a pseudo- pristine theology). But if we were to expect more from the idol, then our idol must change because it must conform to our particular situations and concerns that it did not address before. As a result, we would now be brought into the conversation as an equal and many times as a more important conversation partner with something significant to contribute for the benefit of both parties. Thus, this thing called Reformed theology that we once idolized will now become a conversational friend where there is much give and take rather than a static idol of lesser value.

This new trajectory and shifting of the conversation that I am suggesting are necessary for and critical to the on-going vitality of a truly Black Reformed community (and church) and for Reformed theology itself. We may not be able to see the obvious here, but Reformed theology is a construct and we, as Blacks, are people. Therefore, in any conversation where there is a construct and a person, the construct must not determine what the person is and what they should believe and do. The construct in this case must be subordinate to real human beings created in the image of God. How dare we think or unconsciously assume that the construct should do all the talking while humans sit idly learning from its inanimate mouth! Blacks as real flesh and blood image of God creatures, should be shaping and governing what the construct is and not vice versa. Quite frankly, for a

particular historically and socially conditioned construct to regulate and establish the only categories for (theological) discourse for a human being is utterly absurd!

Therefore, there must be a new emphasis in the theological conversation of Blacks not only listening to and receiving Reformed theology, but also Reformed theology more carefully listening and adapting to our Black heritage (including our theological tradition), as people in God's image. It is this construct-person reality that gives rise to our Reformed theological tradition of "always reforming." In other words, when a true conversation between Blackness and Reformedness occurs, Black people will become more Reformed, though not ultimately at the expense of their God-given Black identity as *imago dei*; and Reformedness will desire to become more self-consciously "Black" (in a broad sense) as it represents partially what God is like in His multifacetedness. And if Reformed theology does not become more "Black," then it cannot truly live up to what God is like not only as unity, but also as diversity.

Shenequa's Neighborhood?

Once a conversation of this nature starts to happen, then it will necessarily create a Reformed theology with a Black-consciousness or to put it more accurately, it will give Blacks another major category by which they are to understand God, themselves and God's world in a better light. In this way, Blacks will not be truncated by and reduced into a theological category, but rather this theological category (i.e. Reformed theology) will now become part of their more robust existence as covenantal creatures of God. This type of genuine dialog will yield a fresh and relevant theological enterprise that will not only be able to cut deeply into the pathologies in Black America, but also provide creative answers to all of the problems in creation that will speak to *every people group*. But without such dialog, we will only have Reformed Oreos¹ and Reformed Oreo churches² that will simply parrot and maintain status-quo thought categories without being able to critically speak to the particular concerns in our present-day communities because our neighborhoods are not identical to those of 16th and 17th century Europe, which gave us a great deal of our Reformed tradition being also conditioned by those particular set of people and circumstances.

As I have said in a previous work³, we are riding on this Reformed bus without even asking where it is going, nor have we questioned the drivers of the bus who do not know all of where we need to go, partly because they are not Black and do not share much of our valuable and specific divinely scripted stories. And what is most unfortunate is that the map of this Reformed bus route does not even include Shenequa's neighborhood or her house on 4365 Martin Luther King, Jr. Boulevard. Her neighborhood and ours are nowhere to be found. If the bus wanted to stop there, it would not know to do so because her

¹ Pickett, Xavier. "Reformed Oreos: A Call For More Self-Consciousness." *Reformed Blacks of America* (May 2007): 24 pars. 17 May 2007

<<http://www.reformedblacksofamerica.org/blog1/index.php?itemid=162>>.

² Bradley, Anthony. "Wanted: Black Reformed Churches That Radicalize Beyond Regurgitation." *Reformed Blacks of America* (April 2007): 22 pars. 27 April 2007

<<http://www.reformedblacksofamerica.org/blog1/index.php?itemid=162>>.

³ See my article entitled, "Reformed Oreos."

neighborhood is not even listed as one of the stops. It has everything else on the map from T.U.L.I.P., to justification by faith alone to the 5 Solas to covenant, but not where we grew up or currently live.

Many of us are complacently and uncritically riding on this Reformed bus that not only bypasses our communities, but also does not have our former or present places of residency on the map at all. And I have not seen on the Reformed Bus Bureau's (RBB) expansion plan where they will be developing bus routes that go through Shenequa's neighborhood or Kenneth's for that matter. This is why it is necessary to have a thorough integration of Blackness and Reformedness in order to properly and sufficiently address Blacks and their central concerns without it being belittled or taken for granted.

For Shenequa, Reformed theology must not be obsessed with only asking whether Shenequa is right with a holy God, but also be seriously concerned with how this holy God can right Shenequa's broken and distressed neighborhood. And from such a concern and vision, this will enable and expand Reformed theology in more broad and fresh ways. Therefore, Reformed theology must be reshaped to emphasize God's holiness in more corporate and societal dimensions. That is to say, because God is holy, then He must not only be concerned for individual holiness, but also societal holiness that will ultimately re-create Shenequa's neighborhood into a more purified neighborhood as it reflects His eschatological brightness in holy heaven descending to earth. So if the Reformed bus map, which has such a high view of the holiness of God neglects Shenequa's neighborhood, then such holiness is not truly holy, but rather hatred. The implications from this type of holiness is that Shenequa (and ourselves) should not simply focus on our own individual purity and holiness with it terminating mostly on ourselves, but we should also focus on being the purifying force in the "hood" and the world because we embody the cosmic-changing holiness of YHWH.

The Questions of Black America

What all of this will produce is a Reformed theology that looks Black America and its concerns square in the face. It will not be a theology that shrinks from the particular lives of Blacks, but a theology that has to learn from Blacks if it takes seriously its desire to truly mirror and understand the teachings of the Bible.

Up to this point, the primary, if not exclusive questions Reformed theology has sought to answer were those of Western European men and the challenges they faced that were shaped by their political, socio-economic and cultural locations. Although more could be said, let me give some brief and simple examples. For Luther, his theology has an individualistic shape because his questions were largely heavily influenced by Augustine, monastic life, the cultural movement of humanism, and the Roman Catholic Church in all of its reach. Zwingli, for instance, tends to emphasize God's sovereignty because in the time of many plagues, the sovereignty of God needs to be believed and embraced as a comforting reality. In Calvin's case, he particularly attended to the issues of church governance and its relationship with the civil magistrate because of the immigration problems in Geneva.

These examples serve to demonstrate that all God talk and theology do not happen in a vacuum. In effect, theology is a product of one's (or the theologian's) social, political, and culture situation. Luther, Zwingli, and Calvin were not doing theology while being locked up in a room without a window to the world, but rather their theology is what it is because they chose to interact with the specific struggles and concerns in their world. Therefore, their theology will and does look a certain way because it reflects their point in history.

If this is true about their theology and ultimately, what theology is (by virtue of its nature and formulation), then how much more will Reformed theology be enriched, strengthened, and re-defined when Reformed Blacks begin to "do theology" in a similar way that starts to answer more of the questions and concerns of Black America. Because the fact of the matter is that all of the questions have not been *asked* or *answered*, which means there is a tremendous amount of theological work to do! And once these theological answers come down the pipe to address Black America, we ought not be surprised if these answers do not always look like traditional/contemporary Reformed dogmatics.

Below are just a few statistics and issues affecting Black America that deserve theological attention, especially by Reformed Black folks because they are not going to tell us Black Reformed folks this in the Reformed books we own. Nor are they going to address any of these issues in Reformed sermons/talks we listen to or at the Reformed conferences we attend.

Education:

- ❑ "Just 12 percent of African-American 4th graders have reached proficient or advanced reading levels, while 61 percent have yet to reach the basic level."⁴
- ❑ "While 9 percent of white students have repeated a grade, twice as many or 18 percent, of black students have been held back at least once."⁵

Health Care:

- ❑ "Close to 1.8 million African-American children in the United States do not have health insurance."⁶
- ❑ In December 2004, the American Journal of Public Health reported that 886,000 more African-Americans died between 1991 and 2000 than would have died had equal health care been available.⁷

Justice System:

- ❑ "One of every three black males born today can expect to go to prison in his lifetime."⁸

⁴ Tavis Smiley, ed., *The Covenant with Black America* (Chicago: Third World Press, 2006), 32.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 33

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 9

⁷ Priorities of Congressional Black Caucus for the 109th Congress

⁸ Tavis Smiley, ed., *The Covenant with Black America* (Chicago: Third World Press, 2006), 53.

- While African-American men represent approximately 6% of the total population, they represent 44% of all male inmates in state and federal prisons and jails (an estimated 12% of black males) and African-American females are five times more likely than white females to be incarcerated.⁹

Wealth:

- Unemployment rates for African-Americans are consistently almost double the rates for White Americans.¹⁰
- Home ownership for African-Americans is 48% compared to 72% for White Americans and African-Americans are more than two times more likely to be denied a mortgage and more than two times more likely to receive predatory loans.¹¹
- The median weekly earnings of full-time African-American workers are consistently over \$130 less than White workers who are similarly educated and situated.¹²

These concerns and others like teen pregnancy, victimology, absentee fathers, self-destructive behaviors, low expectations, HIV/AIDS and anti-intellectualism must interact with Reformed theology in order for there to be real “reformation” or transformation of many Black churches and communities. In other words, if Reformed theology is not brought to deal with the concerns of Black America by particularly Black Reformed people and churches, then we will continue to be at best, dominated by the conversation or at worse, lead astray in the conversation.

What this calls for is a fresh and relevant Reformed theology (e.g. my brief holiness discussion above) that deals with the plight of Shenequa’s neighborhood more appropriately, which will create a new mission field in the theological enterprise. Moreover, this will begin to manifest and demonstrate what “Reformed Black” and/or “Black Reformed” truly means. Therefore, a thorough integration of Blackness and Reformedness of this kind will amount to an authentically Black Reformed theology that has a missional engine with incisive steering. *Hence, more chocolate will not only be in my milk, but I will in fact have chocolate milk!*

⁹ Priorities of Congressional Black Caucus for the 109th Congress

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Ibid.

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