

Atonement as a liberation for african american christians



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

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Can the gospel message of the Atonement have a liberating message for all African-American Christians? Is there really power in the blood? JoAnne Marie Terrell in her exposition explored the meaning of the cross, sources of suffering and sacrifice – from the beginning of Christianity through modern times and it is written by an African-American feminist who has suffered both abuse and oppression as a black woman.[1](J. M. Terrell 1998).

JoAnne Marie Terrell, *Power in the Blood* examines in her exposition the historical exploration of the meaning of the Cross and the impact it has towards the identity and history of African-Americans. From her introduction, she interprets the evil and suffering in which black theology approached the issue of the atonement and the cross. She identifies the various devices such as Negro spirituals, those oppressed in slavery, biblical texts, and other writings which conveyed both positive and negative experiences of African-Americans. She crafted her own observations by beginning with her own remembrance of the cross from slave narratives and other sources bringing them together while linking them with that of the character of Celie in the *Color Purple*, with the description of God echoing her own: “ He big and old and gray-bearded and white. He wears white robes and goes barefooted.[2] (Terrell n. d.).

The Christians have always placed the great emphasis of Jesus’ death on the cross, though theologians often are at odds on how to interpret The Crucifixion. Many grapple with the images of torture and abuse, the suffering, and abandonment that Jesus endured while on the cross. Those of

us as theologians and who study Christianity often attempt to define God's nature by explaining Jesus' final line, " my God, my God, why have you forsaken me," (Matt 27: 46, Mk 15: 34). One may question, " Did God actually forsake Jesus?" The divine and human nature of Jesus were never separated. Yet, it is clear, that His fellowship with the Father was temporarily broken as He took the sins of the world upon Himself. Jesus used the words of Psalm 22, which begins with David affirming his conviction that God was in control. With the sins of the world upon him, Jesus felt the agony of separation from his Father. At times, we may feel alone, abandoned or rejected but we should remember God's promise: Never will I leave you; never will I forsake you (Heb 13: 5).

Today our social conditions continue to compel women to accept surrogacy roles. Both African-Americans and other ethnic races continue to labor as domestic workers and are often subjected to modern-day indentured servitude by our white employers. While our black men are being incarcerated at a rate 9. 6 times that of white men, leaving the women to take on the role of both mothers and fathers to their children. Convinced by our churches teaching that suffering is a virtue, African-American women remain trapped in sexually, mentally, and physically abusive relationships. They are told in some of our churches to pray for them and faithfully bear their crosses. They identified with Jesus," writes Jacquelyn Grant of black women in slavery, " because they believed that Jesus identified with them. As Jesus was persecuted and made to suffer undeservedly, so were they. His suffering culminated in the Crucifixion. But Jesus' suffering was not the

suffering of a mere human, for Jesus was understood to be God incarnate.”[3](Grant 1993, 281).

Since crucifixion was a curse from God (Deut 21: 22-23), the act was particularly heinous to Jewish people and what has become so despicable among us has become the instrument of our salvation. Jesus previously instructed his disciples to take up their crosses and follow him (Matt 16: 24). Demetrius K. Williams finds redemptive meaning in Jesus’ crucifixion and how the cross sparked the formation of our religious community with an allegiance to Christ. This fellowship breaks down race, gender, and class distinctions that separate people in the larger society, and it unifies all who proclaim Christ crucified.[4](Williams 1993).

Jesus crucifixion affirmed their faith in their understanding of the saving work of Christ. It depicts all that Jesus endured overcoming evil and set believers free. For Christians, it demonstrates God’s love towards the world and our instructions that we must love God, our neighbors, and our enemies, as well as, the punishment we deserve as sinners – which Jesus suffered in our place. “ Jesus was wounded for our transgressions, crushed for our iniquities; by His wounds, we are healed.” (Isaiah 53).

From the similarity during slavery, lynched bodies and Jesus’ body on the cross, to crosses being burned on people’s lawns, the cross has always been a source of tension in black history. Nevertheless, the cross offers our communities faith, hope, and surviving power. By appropriating Jesus Crucifixion with African-American histories in mind and the deep faith in Jesus and the biblical witness in their hearts, black theologians and feminists

free the cross for redemption. It symbolizes the suffering a person may have to endure who chooses to place Christ and his kingdom first in their lives and in doing so, they renew its liberating power for other suffering and abused persons living as the least of these in society today. The Crucifixion of Jesus proclaims that love is more powerful than hate and Jesus invites us to put our trust in Him, even in the face of evil, suffering, and oppression. Therein lies the power of Jesus Cross' saving power.

[1]Terrell, JoAnne Marie. *Power in the Blood? The Cross in the African American Experience*. Eugene: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 1998.

[2]Terrell, Joanne Marie. " Strange Fruit: JoAnne Marie Terrell's Power in the Blood." <http://frjody.com/writings/seminary/strange-fruit-joanne-mari>.

[3]Grant, Jacquelyn. *Womanist Theology: Black Woman's Experience as a Source for Doing Theology, with Special Reference to Christology, in Black Theology: A Documentary History*, ed. Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1993.

[4]Williams, Demetrius K. *Identifying with the Cross of Christ, in the Passion of the Lord*, ed. Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1993.