In this our final lecture on *Prophetic Utterance and the Black Church* we turn our attention to how statements by clergy in the past have in ways mirrored what Dr. Jeremiah Wright said in his sermon and the theological critique of such statements.

In 1829 a black minister named David Walker wrote what became known as *Walker's Appeal*. Dr. Cornel West calls it the most powerful theological critique of slavery from the black Christian tradition. Dr. Gayraud Wilmore goes as far as to say that *Walker's Appeal* is steeped in biblical language and prophecy. It is certainly one of the most remarkable religious documents of the Protestant era, rivaling in its righteous indignation and Christian radicalism Martin Luther’s *Open Letter to the Christian Nobility of the German Nation* published in Wittenburg in 1520. (This statement helped lay the foundation for the Protestant belief system.)

In part this is what Walker says: “(this) is ten thousand times more injurious to the country than all the other evils put together; and which will be the final overthrow of its government, unless something is very speedily done: for the cup is nearly full. Perhaps they will laugh at or make light of this, but I tell you Americans! That unless you speedily alter your course, you and your country are gone. For God Almighty will tear up the very face of the earth!”

What one can see and hear from Walker is a righteous indignation over the country's direction. There is no special favor that protects any nation that abandons basic moral principles of dignity and fairness in its dealing with others. I am sure that when Walker's words were heard they left a stinging sound in the ears of White Americans who benefited from the slave trade both in the North and the South.
We need to remember that in the South, white cotton growers gained great wealth. But also in the North the first industry to benefit from the effects of the industrial revolution was cotton. The cotton industry was also the first industry to establish mass production with Eli Whitney's cotton gin and develop a major export market. Cotton in 1829 was what oil is today -- the commodity that runs the economic engine of the nation. Therefore, for Walker as a black preacher to speak out against slavery that counted on cheap-to-free labor was in effect taking on the power structure of his day.

Because of black theology being informed by a belief in liberation whenever governmental powers or economic systems oppress people's dignity and humanity, then black theology must speak a word of protest and a word of mobilization for change. By raising consciousness, black preachers, writers, artists and musicians are seeking to fertilize the soil to make change a coming reality. By framing the issues in ways they can be understood by ordinary people or by causing those people to look deeper into things, the work of prophetic utterance has made its impact known. Prophetic utterance seeks to make us aware of original sin not just as a theological term that deals with the man and the woman in the garden but applies to us in our bend toward domination of others and the selfishness that allows us to feel justified taking advantage of others.

Cornel West states, "I believe that human beings can change their conditions and change themselves, but neither perfect their conditions nor perfect themselves. Therefore, my viewpoint precludes the possibility of human perfection. Instead, it claims that conditions and circumstance can always be improved; that persons,
Communities and societies can always be made better than they are. Therefore, I hold that human selfishness and self-centeredness must be expected and entertained, hence discouraged and restrained rather than naively believed to be eliminated and replaced, hence forgotten and disregarded.

The acceptance of original sin in this view leads me to give the notion of accountability to other persons the high priority in my social vision. Prophetic utterance is the work of holding others accountable. This is why sermons preached like those by Dr. Jeremiah Wright, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., before him, Dr. William Sloan Coffin and others ought to lead to dialogue and discussion -- not the attack of the messenger.

The question for us to grapple with now is where does black theology go from here? Will it maintain a place in our church or will be used as a political football that strips it of its power and reduces it to sound bites?

What word does prophetic utterance have as a critique of black people's failures as it relates to the moral decay that is going on in our very communities? Is there a word from God about these issues and how will we hear that word?

These are just some of the challenges that remain. I am sure there are others but as heirs of a liberation tradition, there is much that we need to do to carry that vision of hope and power to the next generation. This month we have only begun a journey that I pray and hope will continue as we apply our faith and its meaning to the world we live.