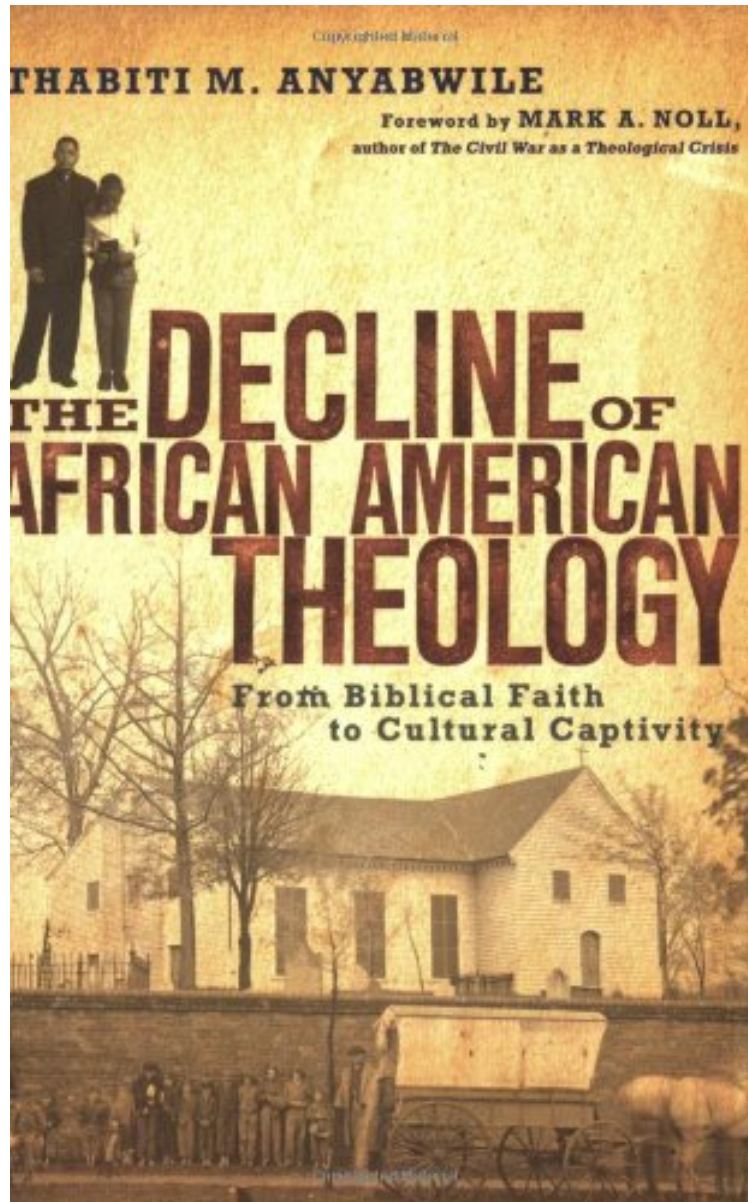


# The Decline of African American Theology: From Biblical Faith to Cultural Captivity

*Thabiti M. Anyabwile*

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**Thabiti M. Anyabwile : The Decline of African American Theology: From Biblical Faith to Cultural Captivity** before purchasing it in order to gauge whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised The Decline of African American Theology: From Biblical Faith to Cultural Captivity:

0 of 0 people found the following review helpful. Great book

By wntucA great piece of (courageous) work. I had just finished Frazier's "The Negro Church" before reading *The Decline of African American Theology*. It was pleasing and helpful to see that Anyabwile addressed the differences between his book and Frazier's in his introduction. *The Decline of African American Theology* was not only a great source of history but a refresher course in foundational Christian doctrine. Amazing how far and how subtle our drift from the roots have been. Also I was introduced to so many historical figures that simply have never been mentioned in any venue before. Every pastor, especially Black or a pastor with a mixed congregation, need this book on his desk (not on the shelf).

10 of 11 people found the following review helpful. High Praise!

By Celucien L. JosephIn this volume, Anyabwile explores various theological voices of African Americans from several historical periods. The author gives thoughtful consideration to how the African American Slaves, former slaves and contemporary African American writers have understood God, the Bible, and expressed those concerns in relation to their American experience. He traces the progressive state of each period, analyzes them and carefully demonstrates the decline of African American Theology. This piece is not a treatment on slavery and race, but a historical narrative of various theological thoughts emerged in the African American community in various eras. Nonetheless, the issues of theodicy, the concept of God, divine providence and sovereignty, slavery, racism, are not jettisoned by the author but carefully treated in response to the analyzed data and personality. Some of the issues are treated in passing, while others were given more attention. For example, the development of Black Theology espoused in the Civil Rights period, advanced by James Cone, is critically assessed. The theological worldview(s) of individuals such as John Jea, Jupiter Hammon, Lemuel Hayes, Marcus Garvey, Daniel Alexander Payne, Howard Thurman, and T.D. Jakes were subject of considerable discussion. Some of these men in the past upheld a reformed view of God's sovereignty and providence, believed in the Trinity, whereas others either denied such doctrines or dissociated themselves with them. (It must be acknowledged that the author is reformed in his theological perspective and has taken such approach in this present volume). For example, one biographer observes, "Indeed, Calvinism seems to have corroborated the deepest structuring elements of the experiences of such men and women as they matured from children living in slavery or servitude into adults desiring freedom, literacy, and membership in a fair society. From Calvinism, this generation of black authors drew a vision of God at work providentially in the lives of black people, directing their sufferings yet promising the faithful among them a restoration to his favor and his presence. Not until 1815 would African American authors, such as John Jea, explicitly declare themselves against Calvinism and for free-will religion" (68). In contrast, Benjamin Elijah Mays argued that "the Concept of God evolved in response to the changing social contexts African Americans encountered, developing according to a three- par typology." Furthermore, he remarks, "God may be defined as the power of force in man and in the world that impels man to seek to transform life in the interest of a healthier and more resplendent life for mankind individually and generally. The ideas are not other-worldly. They place one under obligation to adjust him to a life of peace where all may enjoy the fruits necessary for resplendent living. They go far beyond the limits of race, but the needs of the race are met in the universality of the ideas of God presented. They are constructively developed in terms of social reconstruction that is universal" (83).

Anyabwile's interaction with Mays is succinct, indicating further works need to be done on the subject. His interaction with James Cone's writings is plausibly defended from a biblical perspective. He makes very strong arguments against many tenets of Black Theology. However, it appears that Anyabwile's treatment of Black Theology, well argued by James Cone, suggests that the historical contexts in which the movement emerged (and various theological essays were written) were not well taken and considered. Furthermore, one has to take in account the social and historical milieu of African Americans, which gave birth to a host of contextual writings during the Civil Rights Era (1950-1979). For example, the quest for freedom, racial equality, and identity continue to be critical issues of great importance for many Blacks in a land that many still feel their voice are not being heard, their opinion do not matter. African American theologian such as Cone feels that essential matters such as racism, slavery and a host of others are belittled by former and (his) many contemporary white theologians. Cone emphasizes the praxis of such biblical concepts such as God is love, divine transcendence and immanence, one's love for God and neighbor. The biblical scholar must be sensitive to cultural issues. He must speak against injustice and promotes reconciliation among the people of God, and all peoples. This should be a concern of every Christian. Biblical theology is very practical at its core. For it is rooted in Christ's redemptive work. It changes lives, transforms sinners and unifies people to the glory of God.

The basic purpose of Anyabwile's work, his undeniable passion, is the theological rehabilitation and reformation of the African American Church. The presentation of this volume has given clear indications of the author's familiarity with the subject. References made to primary sources substantiate his thesis. Overall, the book is well written and balanced. I am very thankful for Anyabwile's boldness to tackle such important issues. "The Decline of African American Theology" is a significant contribution to the study of African American Christianity, Black Church and Theology in America.

35 of 39 people found the following review helpful. An Assessment of African American Theology

By Robert W. Kellemen"The Decline of African American Theology" is an important contribution to the ancient/modern study of African American Christianity. Author Thabiti Anyabwile, Sr. Pastor at First Baptist Church of Grand Cayman in the Cayman Islands, writes from his perspective as a founding member of the Council of Reforming Churches (CRC). The CRC is an association of churches subscribing

to the historic five solas of the reformation, the core doctrines of grace commonly known as the five points of Calvinism, and the system of theology summed up in such catechism/confessions as the historic Baptist Confession of Faith 1689, The Westminster Confession of Faith, and Heidelberg Catechism. Their purpose is to see biblically reformed theology sown, take root in, flourish among and eventually become the dominant theology within the black church and African-American community. Understanding this framework is essential for understanding Anyabwile's writing. The book itself attempts something that has rarely been pursued: a full account of the course of African American Christian theology. Anyabwile organizes his historical survey according to six core theological/doctrinal categories: revelation (bibliology), God (theology proper), man (anthropology), Christ (Christology), salvation (soteriology), and the Holy Spirit (pneumatology). Additionally, each chapter is organized into five periods: early slavery era through abolition (1600-1865), Reconstruction to the "New Negro" movement (1865-1929), depression to WW II (1930-1949), the Civil Rights Era (1950-1979), end of century to post-modern era (1980-present). The book's premise is to trace the development of African American theology from its earliest manifestation to the present. The premise continues by stating that secularization overtook the Black Church replacing its evangelical and Reformed theological upbringing. Finally, the book purposes to call the black church back a proper theocentric (as defined from a Reformed perspective) view of itself and the world. Each of Anyabwile's chapters starts strong with in-depth, primary source material on a rather diverse group of African American believers from the North and South during the slavery era. Having examined the identical terrain in my book "Beyond the Suffering" related to African American soul care, I can attest to the thorough research work the author does. However, at times it seems that evidence that supports the premise of an early, almost exclusive Reformed theology among African Americans is presented in the absence of evidence for a less Reformed, more "Arminian-Wesleyan" early perspective. As Anyabwile moves through each subsequent era in each of the six doctrinal categories, the coverage becomes somewhat less extensive and somewhat more selective. That is, examples from later areas are selected that exclusively highlight the movement away from the early, Evangelical, Reformed theology proposed in early African American church history. While not disputing or doubting that the African American church has to some degree moved away from its early Evangelical roots, this selective presentation tends to minimize the many ongoing historical examples of stalwart Evangelical and/or Reformed theology in black church history. In other words, by a somewhat selective citing of negative examples, the reader is left with the impression that few if any African American churches/pastors/denominations have remained true to their Evangelical theological legacy. In fact, in these five later eras, and in the current era in particular, only one positive example (Tony Evans--and he is somewhat chided for his somewhat non-Reformed theology) is cited. My own study of the current theological scene in the African American church, and my own engagement with a plethora of African American pastors, counselors, lay leaders, and churches indicates that there is no one monolithic non-Evangelical, non-Reformed stereotype of the modern black church. A countless number of examples of current black pastors, some well known and others ministering in obscurity, could be provided to counter the sense that the typical modern black church has lost its theological moorings. The final chapter does something that books like this often fail to do--it provides suggestions and solutions for moving forward. All too often historical books like this, especially those critical of the current scene, focus on the negative without any input on how to make positive changes. Anyabwile is to be commended for going far beyond that and offering a constructive agenda toward greater theological fidelity in the African American church. "The Decline of African American Theology" should be read by anyone concerned with the current state of African American theology. In my opinion, it should be read with the realization that "another side" could be presented that perhaps provides a more balanced and fair perspective of the overall picture of black theology today. That said, this is still a well-written, necessary, engaging, and thought-provoking work. Reviewer: Bob Kellemen, Ph.D., is the author of "Beyond the Suffering: Embracing the Legacy of African American Soul Care and Spiritual Direction," "Soul Physicians," and "Spiritual Friends."

Who were Jupiter Hammon, Lemuel Haynes and Daniel Alexander Payne? And what do they have in common with Martin Luther King Jr., Howard Thurman and James Cone? All of these were African American Christian theologians, yet their theologies are, in many ways, worlds apart. In this book, Thabiti Anyabwile offers a challenging and provocative assessment of the history of African American Christian theology, from its earliest beginnings to the present. He argues trenchantly that the modern fruit of African American theology has fallen far from the tree of its early predecessors. In doing so, Anyabwile closely examines the theological commitments of prominent African American theologians throughout American history. Chapter by chapter, he traces what he sees as the theological decline of African American theology from one generation to the next, concluding with an unflinching examination of several contemporary figures. Replete with primary texts and illustrations, this book is a gold mine for any reader interested in the history of African American Christianity. With a foreword by Mark Noll.

A welcomed addition to every pastor's library, whether African American or not. It will benefit African American pastors by giving them an excellent summary of the history of the African American theological heritage. Pastors of other cultural backgrounds will benefit from seeing some of the depth of theological insights in cultures different from

their own. The last section of the book is also very valuable. In it the author gives a four-point plan to correct what he feels are the deficiencies in the categories of theology he has addresses. Anyabwile is to be commended for pointing out the problems and also for offering solutions. (John Bray with Glenn R. Kreider, *Bibliotheca Sacra*, October-December 2009)A good starting point to learn about trends current in African American theology. (J. Alan Branch, *Midwestern Journal of Theology*,). . . A triumph. . . Anyabwile's work is a resounding call for the African-American church to return to orthodox views of Scripture held by the earliest Christians, the Reformers, and leading African-American theologians of the past. (C. E. Moore, *The Christian Manifesto*, February 20, 2008)"It is remarkable that, to my knowledge, there has never been a book that attempts what Thabiti Anyabwile's *The Decline of African American Theology* attempts. For historical purposes, the book makes an unusually valuable contribution with its full account of the course of African American Christian thought. Theologically, it makes another signal contribution with its critique of the general development of that thought. For both historical and theological reasons, this is a very important volume. . . . Because I have already learned so much from its pages, I am delighted to recommend it wholeheartedly to others." (From the foreword by Mark A. Noll, Francis A. McAnaney Professor of History, University of Notre Dame)"An impressive array of historical and theological reflections on the African American church's religious tradition. Anyabwile presents a cogent argument that places the demand on the church's leadership, its theologians and its laypeople to continually evaluate its biblical and theological foundations for both the church's self-understanding as the people of God, and its objectives as God's agents in the world." (Bruce L. Fields, associate professor of biblical and systematic theology, Trinity Evangelical Divinity School, and author of *Black Theology: Three Crucial Questions for the Evangelical Church*)About the AuthorThabiti M. Anyabwile is senior pastor at First Baptist Church of Grand Cayman in the Cayman Islands. Thabiti has a strong professional and educational background in community psychology, with special interest in the history and development of the African American church.Mark A. Noll (Ph.D., Vanderbilt University) is Francis McAnaney Professor of History at the University of Notre Dame. He is a Fellow of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences. He is advisory editor for *Books Culture* and subeditor for the new *Religion in Geschichte und Gegenwart*. Noll's main academic interests concern the interaction of Christianity and culture in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Anglo-American societies. He has published articles and reviews on a wide variety of subjects involving Christianity in modern history. Some of his many books include *The Civil War as a Theological Crisis*, *Is the Reformation Over?*, *The Rise of Evangelicalism: The Age of Edwards, Whitefield and the Wesleys* and *The Old Religion in a New World*.