In Whose Image:
The Emergence, Development, and Challenge
of African-American Evangelicalism

by

Soong-Chan Rah

Date: _______________________

Approved:

___________________________

Dr. Willie James Jennings, Supervisor

___________________________

Dr. Kate Bowler

___________________________

Dr. Valerie Cooper

___________________________

Dr. A.G. Miller

Dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment of
the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Theology
in the Divinity School of Duke University

2016
ABSTRACT

In Whose Image:
The Emergence, Development, and Challenge
of African-American Evangelicalism

by

Soong-Chan Rah

Date: ________________________

Approved:

Dr. Willie James Jennings, Supervisor

______________________________
Dr. Kate Bowler

______________________________
Dr. Valerie Cooper

______________________________
Dr. A.G. Miller

An abstract of a dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment of
the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Theology
in the Divinity School of Duke University

2016
Abstract

The current era of American Christianity marks the transition from a Western, white-dominated U.S. Evangelicalism to an ethnically diverse demographic for evangelicalism. Despite this increasing diversity, U.S. Evangelicalism has demonstrated a stubborn inability to address the entrenched assumption of white supremacy. The 1970s witnessed the rise in prominence of Evangelicalism in the United States. At the same time, the era witnessed a burgeoning movement of African-American evangelicals, who often experienced marginalization from the larger movement. What factors prevented the integration between two seemingly theologically compatible movements? How do these factors impact the challenge of integration and reconciliation in the changing demographic reality of early twenty-first Evangelicalism?

The question is examined through the unpacking of the diseased theological imagination rooted in U.S. Evangelicalism. The theological categories of Creation, Anthropology, Christology, Soteriology, and Ecclesiology are discussed to determine specific deficiencies that lead to assumptions of white supremacy. The larger history of U.S. Evangelicalism and the larger story of the African-American church are explored to provide a context for the unique expression of African-American evangelicalism in the last third of the twentieth century. Through the use of primary sources — personal interviews, archival documents, writings by principals, and private collection documents — the specific history of African-American evangelicals in the 1960s and 1970s is described. The stories of the National Black Evangelical Association, Tom Skinner, John...
Perkins, and Circle Church provide historical snapshots that illuminate the relationship between the larger U.S. Evangelical movement and African-American evangelicals.

Various attempts at integration and shared leadership were made in the 1970s as African-American evangelicals engaged with white Evangelical institutions. However, the failure of these attempts point to the challenges to diversity for U.S. Evangelicalism and the failure of the Evangelical theological imagination. The diseased theological imagination of U.S. Evangelical Christianity prevented engagement with the needed challenge of African American evangelicalism, resulting in dysfunctional racial dynamics evident in twenty-first century Evangelical Christianity. The historical problem of situating African American evangelicals reveals the theological problem of white supremacy in U.S. Evangelicalism.
Acknowledgements

I am indebted to my academic mentors who made this project possible. My dissertation supervisor Willie Jennings has been a source of inspiration, encouragement, and tremendous knowledge. This project would not have been possible without his strong support. I could not have asked for a more helpful and accomplished group to serve as my dissertation committee. Valerie Cooper, Kate Bowler, and A.G. Miller provided insight that formed the final product. I am particularly thankful for Kate Bowler for her ongoing courage, inspiration, and challenge. The faculty at Duke Divinity School provided the fertile environment to foster my research. I am grateful for Emmanuel Katongole who sparked my initial interest in the important role of lament. Additional Duke faculty provided significant formation for my academic work. They include Grant Wacker, Mark Chaves, J. Kameron Carter, Ellen Davis, and Sam Wells. Additional faculty at other institutions also made significant contributions in shaping the trajectory of my academic inquiry: Doug Sweeney, K.K. Yeo, Eldin Villafane, Humberto Alfaro, Terry LeBlanc, Ray Aldred, Peter Cha, Doug Hall and Judy Hall.

I am indebted to the friendships forged in my involvement in Evangelicals for Justice, CCDA, and Sojourner communities. They have been instrumental in the formation of my ongoing passion to see God’s work for justice among evangelicals: Lisa Sharon Harper, Andrea Smith, Mae Cannon, Sandra VanOpstal, Liz VerHage, Paul Metzger, Randy Woodley, Jimmy McGee, Mark Charles, Kathy Khang, Peggy Flanagan, Adam Taylor, Chanequa Walker-Barnes, Danny Carroll, Leroy Barber, Michael McBride, Gabriel Salguero, David Gushee and many others who have helped shaped my personal passion for God’s social justice.
I am acutely aware that I am not telling my own story through this work. I am grateful for many of the names in this work that have graciously invited me into their communities and also granting me permission to tell their stories. With tremendous gratitude to Barbara Williams-Skinner, John Perkins, Bill Pannell, Ruth Bentley, Walter McCrae, Ron Potter, Carl Ellis, Russ Knight, Henry Greenidge, Johnny Skinner, Stan Long, and Peter Sjoblom.

Thanks to my friends and colleagues at North Park Theological Seminary, North Park University and the Evangelical Covenant Church. These communities intersect my work, my vocation, my calling, and my ministry and I am grateful for those who have been an integral part of these learning communities: Gary Walter, David Parkyn, Dave Kersten, Linda Cannell, Michael Emerson, Joe Jones, Stephen Chester, Terry Lindsay, Dan White Hodge, Elizabeth Pierre, and Stephen Spencer.

I want to extend much gratitude towards our extended family, my father-in-law in Korea, my brother-in-law in California, my sisters and their families in Maryland. My mother has always been the best example of pursuing the holiness of God alongside the embodiment of God’s justice. Every time I finish a writing project, I am reminded how much my family shapes my writing efforts. I often write with my children, Annah and Elijah in mind. I pray that my words would encourage and inspire you to live into God’s calling for your lives. My hope for you comes from my understanding of God’s work and faithfulness. My wife Sue serves as an example of God’s faithfulness towards me. I thank God every day for a partner in life and family that encourages and strengthens me to serve Him.
Contents

Abstract ........................................................................................................................................... iv

Acknowledgements .......................................................................................................................... vii

Introduction ..................................................................................................................................... 1

Part I: The Broader Historical and Theological Context of the African-American Evangelical Story .................................................................................................................. 8

1. The Historical Context of U.S. Evangelicalism ....................................................................... 9
   1.1 Defining Evangelicalism ........................................................................................................ 11
   1.2 Evangelical Engagement with Culture .............................................................................. 20
   1.3 The Church Growth Movement Between Church and Culture ..................................... 34
   1.4 Religion, Culture, and Politics ........................................................................................... 56
   1.5 Analysis ............................................................................................................................... 68

2. African-American Christianity ................................................................................................. 70
   2.1 The Slave Trade and African American Christianity ....................................................... 71
   2.2 The Contextual Burden of Slave Religion ........................................................................ 80
   2.3 George Liele and the Activist Mission Impulse ............................................................... 85
   2.4 The Spiritual Freedom Road and the Great Migration .................................................... 93
   2.5 Civil Rights and the Imagination of Liberation ............................................................... 101
   2.6 Analysis ............................................................................................................................... 104

Part II: Race and the Problem of Evangelical Theology ............................................................ 107

3. The Theological Imagination and the Sin of Exceptionalism ................................................ 108
   3.1 The Diseased Theological Imagination ............................................................................. 108
   3.2 The Sin of the Racialization of the Image of God ........................................................... 113
Introduction

Students of American religion often limit the term evangelical to refer to North American Christians of European descent. The dominance of the white evangelical story has specifically meant the exclusion of the story of African-American evangelicals. This lacuna results in an insufficient understanding of attempts at racial integration and increasing racial diversity among evangelicals in the United States in the latter half of the twentieth century. Despite the projection of evangelicalism’s rapid movement towards a multi-ethnic future, the assumption of a white-dominated evangelicalism remains entrenched.¹

Despite parallel theological positions, the black church avoids characterization as evangelical. In the last third of the twentieth century, particularly in the decades of the 1960s and 1970s, African-American evangelicals emerged as a burgeoning movement. These self-identified evangelicals held to a conservative theological framework but were often excluded from key areas of evangelical leadership and influence. The focus of this dissertation is on the development of a uniquely African-American evangelical identity in the decades of the 1960s and 1970s and its intersection with the larger evangelical movement in the United States.

The presence of African-American evangelicals had the potential for great impact on the larger movement of evangelicalism. However, various factors undermined the influence of African-American evangelicals. The diseased theological imagination of American evangelical Christianity prevented engagement with the social, historical,


In *Divided by Faith*, Michael Emerson and Christian Smith point towards numerous obstacles for the evangelical community to engage the topic of race. Emerson and Smith summarize that “white evangelicalism likely does more to perpetuate the racialized society than to reduce it . . . because of its history, its thorough acceptance of and reliance on free market principles, its subcultural tool kit and more broadly, the nature of the organization of American religion.”² The broad category of the nature of the organization of American religion can be understood through the lens of 1) evangelical history and the cultural captivity evident in that history; 2) the dominance of free market principles or a capitalistic, materialistic approach; and 3) a subcultural toolkit that is employed by evangelicals.

First, Emerson and Smith point towards an evangelical narrative that “consistently call for changes in persons that leave the dominant social structures, institutions, and culture intact.”³ The history of evangelicalism reveals a hyper-individualism that fails to deal with structural problems. Evangelical history also reveals a sense of exceptionalism that inhibits engagement with differing cultural expressions. The assumed exceptionalism of evangelicalism and the inevitable triumph of these exceptional people would prevent any systemic changes. The history of the American church, therefore, reveals the black

---

³ Emerson and Smith, *Divided by Faith*, 21.
and white Christian communities growing farther apart, moving from “separate pews to separate churches.” The history of racial segregation and the theological imagination that undergirds that racial history is an important aspect of understanding the failures of evangelical Christianity.

Second, Emerson and Smith note the evangelical preference for quick problem solving, which means that evangelicals “do not advocate or support changes that might cause extensive discomfort or change their economic or cultural lives. In short, they maintain what is for them the noncostly status quo.” This quick and effective problem-solving approach reveals a reliance on free market principles that seek greater efficiency. The Evangelical theological imagination prefers that the problem of race be quickly and efficiently addressed by religious entrepreneurs. Racial differences may be quickly dismissed and solved quickly with a colorblind approach. The colorblind approach arises from white exceptionalism that believes in the normative and mediating power of whiteness. Deeper engagement with other colors and cultures would be an unnecessary delay in the move towards racial reconciliation. The theological perversion of exceptionalism grants permission for the dominant culture to continue with the status quo.

Finally, Emerson and Smith point towards an inadequate subcultural tool kit that is excessively individualistic, leading to what they identify as the miracle motif. “The miracle motif is the theologically rooted idea that as more individuals become Christians, social and personal problems will be solved automatically . . . Society is improved by improving individuals. . . The miracle motif . . . overlooks that people do not

---

4 Emerson and Smith, *Divided by Faith*, 48.
automatically become mature Christians on conversion.”⁶ The hard work of reconciliation requires a deeper engagement with the issues beyond the individual application. The evangelical imagination fails to see beyond the cultural limitation of individualism. “There is a widespread notion in some of the more energetic contemporary Christian movements that the biblical call to reconciliation is solely about reconciling God and humanity with no reference to social realities.”⁷ Reconciliation is reduced to an individual act of morality that reflects a personal piety in relation to an individual sin. The theological deficiency of American evangelicalism results in an inadequate subcultural tool kit.

Each of these three factors outlined above reveals an evangelical Christianity with significant theological and ecclesial deficiencies. In this work, we examine a particular historical event, the emergence of African-American evangelicalism in the 1960s and 1970s to unpack the problem of a racialized theology and ecclesiology in the context of American evangelicalism. African-American evangelicalism emerged as a parallel movement to the mainstream evangelicalism dominated by European-Americans. Various attempts at integration and shared leadership in U.S. evangelicalism were made in the 1960s and 1970s as black evangelicals engaged with white evangelicals. However, the failure of these efforts points to the challenges of diversity for U.S evangelicalism.

What factors led to the failure of this integration and what lessons do we apply for the current state of American evangelicalism? How do we understand the historical problem

---

⁵ Emerson and Smith, *Divided by Faith*, 130.
⁶ Emerson and Smith, *Divided by Faith*, 131.
of situating African-American evangelicals that reveal the theological problem of white supremacy in U.S. evangelicalism?

Part I examines two important historical threads of U.S. Christianity that reveal the long pattern of racial segregation in the United States. In Chapter 1, we examine the historical threads that formed late twentieth century U.S. evangelicalism. In the latter half of the twentieth century, U.S. evangelicalism would emerge as a discrete, recognizable movement. This movement would not only emphasize distinct theological categories but would also exhibit unique sociological characteristics. The sociological identity of late twentieth century evangelicalism would be entrenched in the narrative of white Christianity and exasperate the segregation that would characterize U.S. evangelicalism.

In Chapter 2, we engage the story of African-American Christianity. The black church in American history moves through various contextual expressions of faith in the face of tremendous suffering. Despite facing a long history of oppression, the black church exhibits a movement towards autonomy and human agency. The emergence of a unique African-American Christian identity did not mean a full divergence from other Christian movements in the United States. However, social-historical factors would result in a high level of segregation in the American church, preventing the potential sharing of theological narratives. The lament of slave religion which could have provided a counter-narrative to the triumphalistic narrative of Anglo Christianity in North America was oftentimes ignored. Despite theological affinity, African-American Christianity would not find integration with the emerging American evangelical ethos in the twentieth century.
Part II offers the theological framework for our inquiry. The lack of integration of African-Americans into the wider stream of American evangelicalism reveals the theological problem of white supremacy. Problematic theology informed numerous social and historical atrocities. In Chapter 3 we examine the root problem of a diseased Christian imagination that arises from white Christian exceptionalism. This exceptionalism shapes the evangelical understanding of the image of God and of anthropology, resulting in the problematic expression of white supremacy. In Chapter 4 we examine the problem of white Christian triumphalism. The diseased imagination of white triumphalism taints our understanding of Christology, soteriology, and our ecclesiology, as specifically expressed in the liturgical absence of lament. These theological deficiencies are unpacked to reveal the profound dysfunction of the diseased theological imagination and its shaping of white supremacy.

Part III offers examples from the emergence of African-American evangelicalism in the 1960s and 1970s. These examples provided a challenge to U.S. evangelicalism that went unheeded to the detriment of race relations in the American church. Chapter 5 examines the formation of the National Black Evangelical Association (NBEA) and the agency of black evangelicals to form their own organization. The NBEA would also reveal the internal conflict experienced by black evangelicals. Ultimately, the NBEA provided the opportunity to form a community around common evangelical convictions along with the sharing of the experiences of alienation experienced by black evangelicals in the larger evangelical community.

In Chapters 6 and 7, we examine the lives of two seminal figures in the African-American evangelical movement. Tom Skinner and John Perkins both reveal the power
of personal narrative in engaging the larger evangelical world. The power of their conversion story elevated both Skinner and Perkins among evangelicals. However, the failure of white evangelicals to move beyond their individual story to engage the social structural issues that shaped their lives would reveal the failure of the evangelical theological imagination. The different trajectories of Tom Skinner and John Perkins reveal a limitation in the capacity of evangelicalism to deal with the issue of racial justice.

In Chapter 8, the final snapshot of the intersection of black and white evangelicalism is taken from the story of a Chicago church attempting racial integration. The tenuous relationship between blacks and whites attempting to live out Christian life together in an urban church reveals the difficulties of racial integration and the underlying themes of power, fear, and mistrust that characterized much of the experiences of black evangelicals in the context of white evangelicalism.

African-American evangelicalism is situated between the historical and prophetic presence of the African-American church in the narrative of Western Christianity and the emergence of American evangelical Christianity in the twentieth century. African-American evangelicals presented a prophetic indictment against the cultural captivity of American evangelicalism. The underlying narrative of white supremacy is revealed through the process of tokenism and marginalization that reflects American evangelical intersection with African-American evangelicalism. The untold story of African-American evangelicalism serves as a theological marker that reveals the underlying narrative of white supremacy in American Christianity.
PART I:
The Broader Historical Context
of the African-American Evangelical Story
1. The Historical Context of U.S. Evangelicalism

In the fall of 2011, I was returning from a yearlong sabbatical. After nearly 12 months away from my office, quite an impressive stack of mail greeted me. I spent an entire morning opening and tossing out junk mail that had accumulated over the course of the past academic year. One piece of mail caught my eye. A nicely packaged DVD had the words, “The poor will not always be with us” emblazoned on the cover. Intrigued that Scripture had been twisted to meet the needs of the communicator, I opened the package.

The intent of this material was to challenge the U.S. evangelical church to end extreme poverty within this generation. The more subliminal message (particularly given the target audience of this material) was that the U.S. evangelical church was responsible for bringing about this change. The American church had the know-how and the resources to fix the problem. Poverty becomes another problem to solve using American ingenuity and gumption. This material exemplifies the self-perception of exceptionalism for the American church, whose standing as the saviors of the world is assumed and not challenged.

American Christian exceptionalism contributes to a triumphalism that focuses on a narrative of success and victory. The suffering narrative is considered inferior and should be ignored or removed from the dominant narrative of success. Stories of successful church plants and growing mega-churches with huge budgets are front and center in how we tell the story of American Christianity. Churches that meet the ideal of a typical American success story are the stories that are circulated throughout evangelicalism. Conferences must bring in big name speakers, usually young, hip, white pastors,
entrepreneurs and “thought leaders”. These trends perpetuate the triumphalistic and exceptionalistic narrative of U.S. evangelicalism.

A narrative of success propels white evangelicalism over and above other forms of American Christianity. Spanish-speaking store-front churches may be deemed too small and labeled as “illegal,” without considering their faithful spirituality in the midst of suffering. Korean American immigrants who gather at 5AM every day to pray at the church before embarking on a twelve-hour work day are ignored because they speak a foreign language and speak English with an accent. Native American Christian communities that offer spiritual rituals to the heart of disenfranchised Natives are perceived as exotic pagan practices that dabble in syncretism and are inferior to the rich tradition of a Taize service. African-American evangelicalism is considered an inferior brand of evangelicalism whose emphasis on justice and race issues discount them from key positions of leadership. Non-white expressions of U.S. evangelicalism, therefore, can be portrayed as inferior to the successful formula for ministry put forth by many white evangelicals in mainstream U.S. Christian culture.

In this chapter, we examine the historical factors that formed a theological imagination among U.S. evangelicals that hinders the ability to engage the topic of race and racism. The assumption of exceptionalism and the corresponding expression of triumphalism results in a diseased imagination that hinders the possibility of unity in the midst of diversity. The difficulty that U.S. evangelicals encounter in engaging in a restorative dialogue on race and race relations may stem from a self-perception of exceptionalism that elevates the narrative of white Christians over and against other
narratives. This chapter reviews the history of U.S. evangelicalism to determine how that diseased imagination and self-perception emerged.

1.1 Defining Evangelicalism

Defining evangelicalism presents an elusive task. The label is used in different contexts as a political, social, ecclesial, theological term. Is “evangelical” a political designation entangled with the Republican party? Is it reducible to certain sociological categories such as White, Anglo-Saxon, and Protestant? Is it contained in particular denominations or ecclesial traditions? Does it reflect particular theological boundaries? Or is it a cross-section or conflation of all of the above? Evangelicalism does not follow the typical rules of an institution with clear boundaries of membership, leadership, and structure. Mark Noll notes that “Evangelicalism has always been made up of shifting movements, temporary alliances, and the lengthened shadows of individuals.”¹ Despite the movement’s amorphous nature, general agreement may be determined regarding key characteristics of evangelicalism. It is the fusion of these various characteristics that produced a vital movement and a self-conscious tradition.

British historian, David Bebbington posits one of the more prominent definitions of the term evangelicalism. Bebbington employs a quadrilateral in defining evangelical Christianity, with all four sides playing an important role in the identification of evangelicalism. Bebbington offers (1) Conversionism – the belief that lives need to be changed; (2) Activism – the expression of the gospel in effort; (3) Biblicism – a particular regard for the Bible, and (4) Crucicentrism – a stress on the sacrifice of Christ on the

cross. As a British historian, Bebbington emphasizes the historical development of evangelicalism in the European context (mostly in the UK context) and the overlap and intersection with the North American context. For the North American context, historian George Marsden adds the fifth characteristic of trans-denominationalism, which contributes a sociological category for evangelicalism. Marsden asserts that “evangelicalism has also always been a transdenominational movement. Since the nineteenth century it has worked increasingly through independent agencies — what are now called ‘parachurch’ institutions. Modern individualism has only encouraged this trend. . . . evangelicals emphasized that the church was made up of individual converts. Often these individuals would be so filled with zeal to proclaim the gospel that they felt compelled to move beyond ponderous denominational structures. . . . Individualism, then, combined with the spirit of American free enterprise, has shaped transdenominational evangelicalism’s distinctive institutions.”

Defining evangelical Christianity in the United States may require an examination of a sixth category of revivalism and the influence of revival Christianity. The term revivalism contains a historical component as Marsden uses this term to define “the revival movements that swept back and forth across the English-speaking world and elsewhere during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.” Donald Dayton would add that “what American evangelicals shared was a ‘vital piety’ expressed through revivalism — a revivalism that flourished due to the disestablished nature of the American churches.

---


. . . a mutual commitment among evangelicals to encourage every individual to experience a ‘new birth’ — an imminent, transformative, volitional encounter with Jesus Christ.”

We could apply both Marsden and Dayton’s use of the word to the larger context of global evangelicalism to reveal the activist and conversionist impulse converging together in the spirit of revivalism. While the categories of conversionism and activism shape revivalism, the unique expression of revival Christianity in the United States in both the theological and historical use of the word merits an additional category. All six of the characteristics listed above: Biblicism (emphasizing the inspiration and authority of the Scriptures), crucicentrism, conversionism, activism, trans-denominationalism, and revivalism help shape and define the characteristics of twentieth century U.S. evangelical Christianity.

Randall Balmer approaches the topic of defining evangelicalism from a different historical angle. Balmer identifies three key historical threads that shaped contemporary evangelicalism. He identifies Puritanism, Pietism, and Presbyterianism as essential movements within evangelical Christianity. Puritanism provides the separatist and conversionist tendency; Pietism provides the activist, conversionist impulse; while Presbyterianism (or more accurately Calvinism) would provide the intellectual reasoning for evangelicalism.

An additional angle comes from British scholar Alister McGrath, who lists six fundamental convictions of evangelicals: (1) The supreme authority of Scripture as a

---

source of knowledge of God and a guide to Christian living; (2) The majesty of Jesus Christ, both as incarnate God and Lord and as the Savior of sinful humanity; (3) The lordship of the Holy Spirit; (4) The need for personal conversion; (5) The priority of evangelism for both individual Christians and the church as a whole; (6) The importance of the Christian community for spiritual nourishment, fellowship and growth.\(^7\)

McGrath’s boundaries for evangelicalism focus on theological concepts and convictions that differentiate evangelicalism from other streams of Christianity. Both Balmer and McGrath discuss evangelicalism as a historical movement with a theological framework. Evangelicals would place a high value on understanding their faith as an orthodox movement that is rooted in theological acuity.

The distinct sociological categories that emerged in the twentieth century present a different approach to defining evangelicalism from the theological categories offered by evangelical theologians and historians. Following World War II and in the latter half of the twentieth century, a neo-evangelicalism emerged that diverged from the more strident fundamentalism that defined conservative Protestantism in the early half of the twentieth century. In 1942, the National Association of Evangelicals (NAE) was formed with an evangelical identity rather than a fundamentalist identity. In addition to the NAE, evangelicals (or sometimes self-identified as neo-evangelicals) formed a number of institutions and organizations, including (but not limited to) the periodical *Christianity Today*, Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary, Fuller Theological Seminary, the Billy Graham Evangelistic Association, Youth for Christ, World Vision, and Campus Crusade

for Christ. Neo-evangelicals supported each other’s ministries and developed informal and formal networks of connection that often transcended denominations. These networks united conservative Protestants and formed “a tighter national network among previously isolated centers of evangelical activity scattered around the country . . . It re-established a link between north and south, largely absent since the Civil War.”

The evangelical break from fundamentalism led to the formation of new sociological connections that help to define the boundaries of the movement. Evangelicalism that had been theologically defined and perceived as a received tradition from historical Christianity, now exhibited an external sociological expression in the twentieth century. Evangelicalism could be viewed from the perspective of theological tenets but also from the perspective of a sociological movement. From this point forward in the rest of this work this distinction will be noted in the following nomenclature: the NAE-connected sociological network of late twentieth century U.S. Christians will be identified with an uppercase E (Evangelical), while the wider historical movement of theologically conservative Protestants will be identified with a lowercase e (evangelical).

This chapter will focus on the latter half of the twentieth century as Evangelical Christianity in the United States formed a more specific identity vis-à-vis other expressions of Protestant Christianity. Evangelical theology and sociology would provide distinct attributes that would set U.S. Evangelicals apart in American society. Evangelicals developed a sociological community bound together by the desire to

---

Evangelicals perceive themselves in the line of orthodoxy that traces back to Biblical times. Evangelicals are the inheritors of orthodox Christianity from the chosen line evident in Genesis (Adam, Abel, Seth, Enoch, Noah, Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob), to the chosen nation of Israel (Moses, Joshua, David, and the faithful prophets), to the new covenant community (the NT church) birthed in Acts 2, to the missionary efforts of the apostle Paul, to the early church and their martyrs, to the empowered missionary activist church that succeeds the early church, to the faithful remnant in the context of the Roman captivity of the church, to the great Protestant Reformers proclaiming *sola fides* and *sola Scriptura*, to those who seek a pure faith on the canvas of *tabula rasa*, to the chosen people seeking to establish a city set on a hill, to the experiencers of great revivals (exemplified by Whitefield, Edwards, Spurgeon and extending to Wesley and Finney), to the great missionaries of the great mission century, to the great evangelists calling for personal conversion (Billy Graham), and to the faithful remnant who serve as cultural warriors in the midst of the collapse of Christendom. Evangelicalism transcends denominations integrating the Lutheran, Presbyterian, and Reformed churches that trace their heritage to the Protestant Reformation; the passion of the Pietists, Puritans, and the Pentecostals; the mission emphasis of the Moravians and the Methodists; and with those who claim to seek guidance from the Bible only, such as the Baptists and the Brethren.

---

9 Donald M. Lewis, *Lighten Their Darkness: The Evangelical Mission to Working-Class*
Evangelicals will consistently read the framework of their faith back into the history of Christian orthodoxy as the inheritors and protectors of orthodoxy.

The desire to preserve orthodoxy is informed by an Evangelical theology that operates from certain key intellectual assumptions. Historian George Marsden points out that Scottish Common Sense philosophy plays a prominent role in the formation of evangelical theology.\(^\text{10}\) Scottish Common Sense philosophy asserts the human capacity to attain common knowledge through rational thought. Evangelical theology rooted in Scottish Common Sense philosophy, therefore, assumes a level of reasonableness and perspicuity. Even as the culture around them changes, Evangelicals assert a positive self-perception of the thought processes that formed their theology. Any adaptation to a changing culture, therefore, would be subsumed under the assumption that a bounded set of rational assumptions should not be challenged.

Scottish Common Sense philosophy allowed Evangelicals to assert that their fundamentalists roots engaged rational thinking. Marsden finds that fundamentalist-evangelical self-perception differed from the public caricature of the backwater, uneducated, anti-intellectual, rural, Southern fundamentalist. Fundamentalists viewed their own epistemology as a rational system in contrast to modern liberalism’s reliance on unproven hypotheses. Fundamentalists’ concern over intellectualism did not arise from a concern over all intellectual and scientific thought but in the specific thought process employed by modernists. The fundamentalist perspective would emerge from rational

\(^{10}\) George Marsden, *Fundamentalism and American Culture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), 14-16.
thought. Therefore, the fundamentals of Evangelical faith would serve as non-negotiable
tenets of orthodox faith.

The American church in the twentieth century, therefore, was particularly
cconcerned about the preservation of orthodox faith in the onslaught of secularism.
Evangelicals and their fundamentalist forebears would exhibit anxiety when American
culture and society perceived as a city set on a hill and as the New Jerusalem now
exhibited characteristics of fallen Babylon. The post-millennial optimism of nineteenth-
century American Christianity would be upended with the advent of modernity,
industrialization, urbanization, and immigration. U.S. cities would often provide the
negative example of cultural decline. The cities that had been bastions of white Anglo-
Saxon Protestant faith were now home to Italian Catholics, Orthodox Greeks, and Eastern
European Jews. The Great Migration that resulted in the massive influx of African-
Americans into urban centers would also challenge the assumption of American cities as
expressions of the superiority of white Protestantism. American cities and consequently
American society was believed to be under attack.

The dominant culture of Western European Protestantism feared a society no
longer under the dominance of Western Europeans. The Fundamentalist–Modernist
controversies that found expression in denominations, churches, and seminaries would
exacerbate this fear. As the culture around them shifted, conservative Protestants rejected
the social gospel of their liberal counterparts and opted to pit Christ against the

Auditu: An International Journal for the Theological Interpretation of Scripture Vol. 29 (2013): 54-
69.
surrounding culture. The activist impulse of fundamentalists to convert others remained intact, but now this impulse expressed itself as suspicion of the broader culture and seeking ways to rescue as many as possible from the wrecked, sinking vessel of the world.

To the U.S. Evangelical, the large sweep of church history attests to the centrality of evangelical faith in the twenty-first century. As the self-perceived inheritors of historical orthodoxy, U.S. Evangelicals would seek to preserve the integrity of the gospel in the midst of a changing world. In the latter part of the twentieth century, a distinct sociological Evangelical identity would emerge. This identity is often caricatured as white, middle-class, suburbanite, Republicans. This caricature, however, does not present a fully orbed picture of late twentieth century Evangelicalism, but reflects a particular subset of Evangelicalism that engaged the culture in a specific way, primarily through the self-perception of exceptionalism and expectation of triumphalism.

In this chapter, we examine the approach to culture employed by U.S. Evangelicals and how that approach shapes a dysfunctional intersection with a constructive discussion on race. The historical narrative of U.S. Evangelicalism reveals a movement that struggled with its place in the larger culture. As the culture changed around them, Evangelical Christianity wavered between a rejection of the culture and an embracing of the culture. The relationship of the church to the culture provides an important backdrop to the Evangelical engagement on the issue of race. The development

---

of a culturally captive Christianity that embraced an American triumphalism and exceptionalism provided an additional obstacle. The analysis of these obstacles faced by African-American evangelicals requires both a historical and theological process.

1.2 Evangelical Engagement with Culture

By viewing itself in the line of orthodoxy, U.S. Evangelicals would face the strong temptation to assume that they had inherited a completed theology. The goal of Evangelical theology, therefore, could be seen as the preservation and conservation of received doctrine, rather than a healthy engagement with social-cultural reality. This assumption could lead to a form of cultural captivity as Evangelical theology becomes more beholden to a culturally framed theology drawn from a particular context rather than actual engagement with Scripture and with the person and work of Jesus.

U.S. Evangelicals, therefore, have had an intriguing and sometimes confounding relationship with the surrounding culture. Evangelicals would assume a posture of truth possessed rather than an approach of truth pursued. The narrative of American Christianity reveals a tension in how the church relates to the world in which it resides.

In 1630, when John Winthrop, the Governor of the colony of Massachusetts arrived in what is now the Boston harbor overlooking what will become the city of Boston, he delivers the now famous sermon, “A Model of Christian Charity” and assigns the moniker of “a city set on a hill” to the American colonies (and her cities).13 Winthrop reflects the Puritan desire to establish a pure version of the Christian faith on the blank slate of the North American continent. Unfortunately, this perception of the Americas as a blank slate results in the diminution of the existing population of Native Americans
who lived in established civilizations and communities. Native Americans are now deemed as disposable and removable in order to accommodate the blank slate perception of the colonists. In closing the sermon, Winthrop cites Deuteronomy 30:18, which in the KJV reads: “whither thou passest over Jordan to go possess it.” This passage indicates the promise to Israel specifying the act of crossing the Jordan river to enter into the Promised Land. Winthrop puts the European colonists in the place of Israel by changing the quote from Deuteronomy to “we pass over this vast sea to possess it” [emphasis mine]. The experience of passing the vast sea instead of Jordan becomes the defining narrative that allows the Europeans to view the New World as the Promised Land for God’s chosen people.

This perspective that sees the Atlantic Ocean as the Jordan River and the American continent as the New Jerusalem and as cities set on a hill reveals the belief that the culture can be shaped to build a Christian society in the New World. The Puritan faith that influences early colonial Christian thought reveals a desire to maintain a pure faith in the context of oppositional forces in the world. While concerned about the decaying world around them, Puritans express optimism towards a Christian future written on the *tabula rasa* of the American colonies under God’s sovereign will.

This optimism towards the positive possibilities of the emerging American culture is evident in one of the great evangelists of the colonial era during the Great Awakening. The itinerant, evangelistic ministry of George Whitefield provided the essential revivalist flavor that would shape American evangelicalism. Whitefield was a British Anglican evangelist whose public meetings elicited a strong response from his audience, sparking

13 John Winthrop, “A Model of Christian Charity,” thewinthropsociety.com, 21
spiritual renewal in the colonies. Having been trained in the theater, a significant part of Whitefield’s effectiveness arose from his ability to incorporate a dramatic, theatrical flair to his sermons. Whitefield is identified by Harry Stout as Anglo-America’s first modern celebrity, “a preacher capable of commanding mass audiences (and offerings) across two continents. . . . [Whitefield] became not only the prototype for future mass evangelists but the prototypical cultural hero as well. In Whitefield, colonial Americans discovered their first inter-colonial hero, the first in a long line of public figures whose claims to influence would rest on celebrity and popularity rather than birth, breeding, or institutional fiat.”

Stout recognizes that Whitfield’s ability as a divine dramatist reflects the ability of early evangelicalism to co-opt cultural expressions to communicate the gospel.

A corresponding example can be found in the Second Great Awakening in the ministry of Charles Finney. Finney is credited with inventing the altar call, a staple of evangelical revival culture as well as popularizing such practices as the “protracted meeting,” the special “inquirer’s meeting,” the use of extemporaneous preaching, and other “new measures.” Nathan Hatch notes that “from 1825-1830, he stormed from obscurity into national prominence as the most talked-about and sought-after preacher since Whitefield. . . . Orthodox Presbyterians were shocked that the world beat a path to Finney’s doorstep. His methods were a jarring repudiation of century-old Calvinist ideas. He spoke in crude and vernacular speech. . . . An overall atmosphere of informality, including the active participation of women, was part of his frenzied religious services,


night after night.”16 Finney’s methods for inciting spiritual revival exemplifies Hatch’s assertion that American Christianity fulfills the role of a Populist religion, where common people assert individual rights and agency in determining their religious expression. “Religious populism, reflecting the passions of ordinary people and the charisma of democratic movement-builders, remains among the oldest and deepest impulses in American life.”17 With this assertion of individualism and the democratization of faith, revivalist Christianity could not survive without a form of popular appeal. Authority shifted to the populace who would determine the survivability of certain religious forms. Cultural values would play a significant role in the practice of Evangelical ministry, particularly in expressions of evangelism.

Aimee Semple McPherson also offers an example of the ability of revivalist Christianity to apply culturally-relevant expressions to appeal to a mass audience. Matthew Sutton’s biography reveals an evangelist who presented an image that taps into the cultural values of glamor, confidence and intrigue. McPherson was a product of her time. She had the ability to incorporate aspects of the popular culture including aspects of patriotism and political conservatism. In 1934 McPherson would present an extravagant show at the Shrine Auditorium in Los Angeles, featuring patriotic songs, a reenactment of the Mayflower landing, a villain who would try to denigrate the American flag, followed by a call for a spiritual awakening. Sutton identifies McPherson as “the first religious celebrity of the mass media era, she mastered print, radio, and film for use in

her evangelical mission.”  

Evangelical conversion would be interlaced with popular American culture.

In asserting a conversionist evangelical agenda, these evangelists tapped into cultural expressions of drama, theater, and even psychology, sociology, and politics in order to convert the masses with an active, revivalistic faith. The culture savvy example of evangelists like Whitfield, Finney, and McPherson would be reflected in the ministry of the quintessential evangelist of the twentieth century, Billy Graham. Graham’s evangelistic ministry presents a culturally-relevant effort at gospel communication, employing media to communicate to a media-based audience. Grant Wacker notes the significant reach of Billy Graham. “By the time he effectively retired in 2005, he had preached to nearly 215 million people in person in ninety-nine countries . . . Taken together, those six decades of evangelism yielded more than three million recorded commitments for Christ. . . . Between 1955 and 2103, the evangelist won a spot on the Gallup Organization’s roster of “Ten Most Admired Men” . . . . Time magazine featured him in a 1999 cover story titled ‘100 Heroes and Icons of the Twentieth Century.’”  

Wacker attributes Graham’s effectiveness to “an uncanny ability to adopt trends in the wider culture and then use them for his evangelistic and moral reform purposes.”

The above examples reflect the perspective of Joel Carpenter in his work, Revive Us Again. Carpenter offers a picture of fundamentalism in the twentieth century that challenges the prevailing notion of a movement in retreat destined for extinction. While

---

17 Hatch, The Democratization of American Christianity, 5.
wounded, fundamentalists did not dissolve into the sea of secularization and modernity after the public confrontations of the 1920s but grew in strength during subsequent decades. Carpenter notes that “fundamentalists spent these years developing a distinct religious movement . . . . Not content to remain in sectarian isolation and quietude. Prompted by their revivalist heritage to dream of another great religious awakening in America, they set about to make it happen.”

Carpenter depicts a robust fundamentalism that spent those decades regrouping and forming infrastructures of media, educational institutions, and para-church organizations. The successful engagement with the surrounding American culture made straight the path for a public resurgence in the 1950s. Evangelicals in the latter half of the twentieth century inherited not only a theological conservatism but also the surprisingly nimble cultural adaptability of fundamentalists. Carpenter offers a narrative of a movement that took pride in its uncompromising separatism but ultimately flourished in the twentieth century because of its adaptability.

Roger Finke and Rodney Stark affirm this argument by stating that religion thrives when it appeals to the tastes and preferences of its consumers. They note that “a free market religious environment that exposed religious organizations to relentless competition. . . . a growing supply of energetic clergy actively marketed their faiths, new churches arose without resistance, and a rich variety of new religious options emerged.”

U.S. Evangelicalism therefore, is significantly influenced by the masses and the market environment. Since the crowd determined acceptability, evangelical leaders would need

20 Wacker, America’s Pastor, 28.
21 Joel Carpenter, Revive Us Again (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 3
22 Carpenter, Revive Us Again, 3-32
the approval of the masses. In Evangelical leadership, authority often depends on the
power of the charisma and persuasive ability of the individual. Shayne Lee and Phillip
Luke Sinitiere notes that “religious suppliers thrive in a competitive spiritual marketplace
because they are quick, decisive, and flexible in reacting to changing conditions, . . .
Religious suppliers carve out a niche in the spiritual marketplace and distinguish their
ministries by offering an array of spiritual goods and services that match the tastes and
desires of religious consumers.”\textsuperscript{24} Lee and Sinitiere (also Stout) point to the ministry of
George Whitefield as paradigmatic of evangelical leadership that would follow in
succeeding generations. Succeeding evangelicals such as Finney, McPherson, and
Graham provides examples of evangelical authority that draws from appealing to the
masses through the use of tools that reveal a level of cultural astuteness.

While the above examples of revivalistic Christianity points towards
evangelicalism’s ability to use tools of the surrounding culture, the U.S. Evangelical
narrative also integrates a counter-point with another important characteristic of
revivalistic Christianity – standing in opposition to cultural norms. Revivalistic
evangelicalism that actively sought conversion would allow for the use of culturally
relevant methods and expressions in order to convert and save the lost. In order to move
the audience to the point of conversion, evangelists would assert the need for conversion.
The doctrine of sin and the fundamental distinction between worldliness and sinfulness
would need to be established. The evangelists revealed the world as a broken, sinful
world that needed confrontation and necessitated an active revivalistic conversion.

\textsuperscript{24} Shane Lee and Phillip Luke Sinitiere, \textit{Holy Mavericks: Evangelical Innovators and the
Whitefield’s culturally reflective theatrics during the Great Awakening would be balanced by Jonathan Edward’s strong belief that we were no more than sinners in the hands of an angry God. Whitefield’s culturally reflective theatrics during the Great Awakening would be balanced by Jonathan Edward’s strong belief that we were no more than sinners in the hands of an angry God.25 American Puritans would emphasize the Calvinistic perspective of human depravity and the necessity of conversion and redemption from that state of depravity. The conversionist emphasis would lead fundamentalist to clearly outline the fundamentals of Christian faith (1910-1915), which would distinguish them from a liberal perspective that deviated from orthodoxy. Passion for evangelism efforts towards the lost allowed Billy Graham to use the medium of television and media but would also compel Graham to express his concern for a changing world with strong anti-communist rhetoric.26 American evangelicalism would allow for the contextual communication of the gospel while at the same time, not deviating from the Reformed assertion of human sinfulness and humanity’s contrary nature to God’s holiness, necessitating conversion. At the same time, evangelistic activism meant that the assertion of the importance of the fall would not preclude the use of the culture’s tools to meet the aims of conversion and revival.

The American church standing in opposition to the culture becomes most evident in the twentieth century. Timothy Smith argues that nineteenth-century Christianity reveals a religious expression that spurred social change from a foundation of revivalism. Smith argues that historical revivals were connected to social reform movements in the nineteenth century. “Revival measures and perfectionist aspiration flourished increasingly between 1840 and 1865. . . .The quest of personal holiness became in some

26 Wacker, America’s Pastor, 231-234
ways a kind of plain man’s transcendentalism, which geared ancient creeds to the drive
shaft of social reform. Far from disdaining earthly affairs, the evangelists played a key
role in the widespread attack upon slavery, poverty, and greed.” American Christians
believed that they could change society around them for the better. Nineteenth-century
post-millennial optimism, however, gave way to an increasing pessimism about the state
of American society and culture in the twentieth century.

The close of the nineteenth century and the onset of the twentieth century exposed
a rift among Protestants in the United States. In addition to the challenge of
industrialization, urbanization, and immigration, American Christians faced the challenge
of modernism. Modern thought was seen as a significant challenge to orthodox
Christianity. Modernist perspectives such as an elevated view of science, the theory of
evolution, and German higher criticism challenged basic Christian notions such as the
Creation account and the authority of Scripture. The increasing sense of mistrust and
anxiety over the direction of American society reached a critical point in the Scopes Trial
of 1925. The trial of a Tennessee school teacher drew attention to the contrast between
the modernist proponents of the theory of evolution and the fundamentalists who held
steadfast to the creation account in Genesis. The portrayal of the Christian fundamentalist
prosecutor in the case, William Jennings Bryan, degenerated into caricature by the news
media. While Bryan would win the case and may have presented the better legal
argument, in the court of public opinion, the fundamentalists lost. The negative portrayal
of Christians in the national media confirmed the anxiety of many fundamentalists that
society had become a hostile place.

27 Timothy Smith, Revivalism and Social Reform (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock Publishers,
The pessimism over the future direction of American society would lead many fundamentalists to increasingly embrace pre-millennial dispensational Christianity. The narrative of a world in decline requiring a direct and divine intervention fit with the fundamentalists increasing distrust of the surrounding culture. Fundamentalists were responding to what Marsden calls the “social, intellectual, religious crises of their time.” The fundamentalists were responding to a culture that was openly turning away from God.

The fundamentalists also found themselves in the opposite theological camp from theologically liberal Christians who they believed had bought into the modern impulse. The liberals had accepted German higher criticism and were challenging the authority of Scripture and aspects of orthodox Christology. Furthermore, the liberals viewed the world with an optimism not so readily found in fundamentalist Christianity. Harvey Cox’s work, *The Secular City* reflects the optimism of the Protestant liberal church. Cox envisions the secular city as the pinnacle of human existence. “Secularization designates the content of man’s coming of age, urbanization describes the context in which it is occurring. . . . The urban center is the place of human control, of rational planning.”28 Walter Rauschenbusch’s teaching on the social gospel would be seen as situated in the midst of the modern impulse. Theological liberals would view the changes around them, not as a part of the degradation of society, but as holding humanistic possibility. The social gospel could be seen as dampening the conversionist impulse with a social transformation that could be seen as de-emphasizing personal conversion.

---

Fundamentalists, on the other hand, would more likely agree with D.L. Moody’s assessment that the world was a wrecked vessel. Because of these differing frames of reference, the Fundamentalist-Modernist controversy not only split the Protestant church along theological lines but also in the perception of the church’s role in society. Protestant liberals drew inspiration from the work of Walter Rauschenbusch and the advent of the social gospel. Fundamentalists focused on the necessity of activism through the work of personal evangelism. The activist conversion narrative comes to dominate the fundamentalist narrative. Fundamentalists separated the work of social justice from the work of personal evangelism. Fundamentalist suspicion of the world’s direction would result in a hesitation to engage the world. This pessimism presents a response to the dramatic changes in the shape of American society, resulting in a shifting view of society as exemplified by shifting perceptions of the American city.

In the early stages of U.S. church history, Christians held an optimistic view of the exceptional future of the American continent and American cities. The Governor of the Massachusetts Bay Colony, John Winthrop believed that America was to be ‘a city set on a hill.’ They would demonstrate before ‘the eyes of the world’ what the result would be when a whole people was brought into open covenant with God. . . . this was God’s country with a mission to perform.” William Clebsch notes “the vision of the new world as locus for a new city. . . . The new world prompted Christians from the sixteenth century through the nineteenth to think of America as the last and best of

---
human societies following the westward course of empire.” Colonial American Christians anticipated that the cities of the New World would become cities set on a hill, New Jerusalems and Zions occupied by Western European Protestant bodies.

This optimistic narrative of the American city transformed over the course of the nineteenth and twentieth century when the cities began to change. Industrialization, urbanization, and immigration, and internal migration altered the face of the American city. The many decades between the end of the Civil War through the Second World War witnessed drastic changes in the landscape of the city. The migration of African-Americans from the southern former-slave states coupled with the influx of non-Protestant and non-Western European immigrants into the northern and east coast cities resulted in the notable growth of these cities.

The influx of Eastern and Southern Europeans who were more likely to be Catholics, Orthodox, or Jews meant that the cities were no longer perceived as havens for Anglo-Saxon Protestants. This demographic change in immigration was compounded by the Great Migration following the Civil War and the Emancipation Proclamation and continuing into the twentieth century past World War II. The influx of African-Americans into the northern and urban centers coupled with the influx of Eastern and Southern Europeans shifted the perception of cities.

The arrival of “unwanted elements” in the cities meant that Anglo-Americans, who had previously seen the U.S. cities as places of great hope and promise, now saw them as dangerous places. Robert Orsi analyzes that “in the feverish imaginations of antebellum anti-Catholic literary provocateurs, city neighborhoods appeared as caves of

---

rum and Romanism, mysterious and forbidding, a threat to democracy, Protestantism, and virtue alike.” Randall Balmer adds: “Evangelicals suddenly felt their hegemonic hold over American society slipping away. . . . The teeming, squalid ghettos, . . . festering with labor unrest, no longer resembled the precincts of Zion that postmillennial evangelicals had envisioned earlier in the century.”

Even as white Protestants began to see the city in negative terms, the suburban communities offered an attractive alternative. Amanda Seligman notes that “in the years after World War II, a modern form of suburb, fostered by new tools, opened up around the country. Innovative financing techniques, subsidized by the federal government, enabled millions of white Americans to purchase property beyond city limits.” Many white urban dwellers took the opportunity to escape the city and participated in white flight. The twentieth century, therefore, witnessed the departure of whites and white churches from the city in significant numbers.

The suburbs became the new outposts for white Christians fearful of the changes in the city. Twentieth century Christians, therefore, adopted a strong sense of distinction and separation between the city and the suburbs. The modern city was now perceived as the center of all that is wrong with the world while the suburbs could be seen as what is right with the world. The suburbs became the New Jerusalem with the cities relegated to being Babylon. The influx of non-Western European whites and African-Americans from the South into the northern and eastern cities initiated a change in how the city was

---

portrayed. The narrative of decline dominated the Christian perception of the city. Those who participated in white flight could now justify their actions. The white Christian could flee the city as a spiritual act, citing the desire to be a stranger to the evil world. They would seek to separate themselves from the evil workings of Babylon and flee to the comfort and safety of suburban life. The suburbs would be the new destination for those seeking to build a New Jerusalem in America.

Pessimism over the future of American cities revealed pessimism over the future of American society. A negative perception of American society would lead to the withdrawal from society by many conservative Protestants. This withdrawal from society manifests itself in the establishment of evangelical institutions, such as Bible schools, Christian colleges, seminaries, periodicals, and even ghettoized expressions of Christian art and music. A fundamentalist-evangelical sub-culture developed that would help to foster the infra-structures of evangelical Christianity in the middle decades of the twentieth century.

Joel Carpenter’s observation — that the seeming retreat of fundamentalist evangelicals from society and from the city did not result in a total disengagement with the culture — applies here. Infrastructures would be formed that would help fundamentalist evangelicals regroup. While society may have been deemed evil, cultural tools could still be used to ensure the effective communication of the gospel in an activist conversionist manner. Even as Christians fled the evil city for the safe suburbs, cultural tools were used to grow churches in the suburbs. The withdrawal from the city emerged from a fear of the changes in the culture and in society. The inability to deal with the “other” resulted in a church against the culture model of ministry. Despite this fear and
anxiety, Evangelicals were able to develop a subculture that drew from the dominant
culture. The development of subcultural tools would develop cultural norms within
Evangelicalism that created a bounded set of characteristics. A community that would
pride themselves on being against the culture would actually develop and exasperate a
form of cultural captivity. This co-opting of cultural tools, while eschewing the fall of the
culture is further evidenced by the rise of the church growth movement in the twentieth
century.

1.3 The Church Growth Movement Between Church and Culture

The Church Growth movement of the twentieth century provides an example of
Evangelicalism’s ambivalent relationship with the culture. Evangelicals eschewed
cultural influence while at the same time being captivated by its charms, using cultural
tools despite the rhetoric of animosity. The Church Growth movement provides an
example of Evangelicalism’s movement from cultural hostility to cultural acquiescence.
The movement developed out of the missionary zeal characteristic of Evangelicalism in
the twentieth century. The Evangelical mission mindset emphasized personal evangelism
and salvation. American culture was co-opted to accomplish this emphasis.

The Church Growth movement in the United States would not exist without the
foundational work of Donald McGavran. Donald McGavran was born in India to
missionary parents in 1897. While born at the close of the nineteenth century, his life and
ministry would be shaped by the tensions of early twentieth-century American
Christianity. In turn, McGavran’s contributions would shape evangelical Christianity in
the latter half of the twentieth century. Although born in India, McGavran’s educational
formation occurred in the United States, with degrees from Butler, Yale, and Columbia
an array of prestigious institutions reflecting a secular, rather than a fundamentalist education.

When McGavran returned to the mission field upon completion of his education, he possessed a missiological framework more reminiscent of the theological liberalism of the early twentieth century. The combination of his academic background and his experience in the mission field would provide the foundation for the Church Growth movement in the United States. The formulation of McGavran’s missiology occurred in the context of the growing rift between proponents of evangelism and proponents of social justice in the middle decades of the twentieth century. Theological liberals held a more optimistic view of the role of the American church in society. The fundamentalist stream that emerged as evangelicalism, however, moved away from such optimism.

Theological conservatives leaned towards a more pessimistic view towards American society. Disheartened by a perceived sense of rejection by American society, fundamentalists retreated from American society. Dispensational eschatology provided additional fodder for fundamentalist separatism from a society slipping away from the optimism of a New Jerusalem towards the pessimism of fallen Babylon. Randall Balmer notes that “faced with this wretchedness, American evangelicals looked to alter their eschatology.” Dispensational eschatology fit a worldview of decline. The world had become uninhabitable for the good Christian. A drastic change from above would be required to stop the flood of secularism and societal decay. “With their embrace of dispensationalism, evangelicals shifted their focus radically from social amelioration to individual regeneration. Having diverted their attention from the construction of the

millennial realm, evangelicals concentrated on the salvation of souls and, in so doing, neglected reform efforts.”36

The widening rift between the theologically liberal segment of the American church and the theologically conservative segment resulted in a divergence of emphasis between the two groups.37 Theologically conservative fundamentalists prioritized individual spirituality over social transformation preferred by the theologically liberal modernists. Suspicion of theological liberalism and its link to the social gospel resulted in personal evangelism becoming the primary expression of Christian outreach for fundamentalists.

Theologically conservative Christians had shifted their priority from concern for both the individual and larger society to more exclusively a concern for the individual. The first half of the twentieth century witnessed the formation of this shift. David Moberg in his book, *The Great Reversal* asserts that “there was a time when evangelicals had a balanced position that gave proper attention to both evangelism and social concern, but a great reversal in [the twentieth] century led to a lopsided emphasis upon evangelism and omission of most aspects of social involvement.”38 Marsden notes that the “the Great Reversal’ took place from about 1900 to about 1930, when all progressive social concern, whether political or private, became suspect among revivalist evangelicals and was relegated to a very minor role.”39

Contrasting positions on the relationship between the church and the culture resulted in a contrasting view of the role of the church in missions. Theological liberalism

moved away from personal conversion and stressed social transformation. This approach would have a significant influence on the shape of missions. In 1932, *Rethinking Mission* spearheaded by William Ernest Hocking launched a rigorous debate among the mainline churches. *Rethinking Mission* proposed a departure from traditional forms of mission that sought conversion of non-Christians, but instead reflected the belief in the pursuit of righteousness within every religion. The Hocking Report sent reverberations throughout mainline denominations. The implication for missions for theological liberals was the prioritization of works of social justice. Missions would be the fulfillment of the Kingdom of God in the human realm through good works.

Initially shaped by theological liberalism, Donald McGavran’s early missionary work reflected the ethos and the dominant missiology of the liberal Protestant churches. McGavran’s initial affiliation was with a mainline denomination, the Disciples of Christ. Following the patterns of mainline missions work, McGavran focused on efforts to bring about social change. One of his key educational influences was H. Richard Niebuhr of Yale Divinity School. McGavran characterized Niebuhr’s perspective on missions as “everything the church does outside its four walls. It was philanthropy, education, medicine, famine relief, evangelism, and world friendship.”

---

39 Marsden, *Fundamentalism and American Culture*, 86.
missionary efforts after his graduate program at Yale were built on the foundations of a liberal theology that emphasized social change over personal evangelism.

McGavran, however, experienced a shift in his thinking. He turned to evangelism as the chief expression of Christian witness rather than good works. McIntosh summarizes this process:

In the formative years of his childhood, mission was held to be carrying out the Great Commission, winning the world for Christ, and saving lost humanity. This was the view McGavran held when he returned to the United States for his higher education. While attending Yale Divinity School, McGavran was introduced to the teachings of the influential Christian professor H. Richard Niebuhr. . . . McGavran espoused [a] liberal view of mission when he went to the mission field in 1923. As he became involved in education, social work, and evangelism in the real world of India, however, he gradually reverted to the classical view that mission was making disciples of Jesus Christ.43

McGavran, therefore, experienced a personal shift from a theologically liberal perspective that emphasized social justice to a theologically conservative perspective that prioritized evangelism.

McGavran challenged the dominant view of the mainline denominations that approached missions as social transformation. McGavran's shift towards more conservative theological views resulted in greater zeal for direct evangelism, even promoting this perspective among fellow mainline missionaries.44 He encountered the teachings of Methodist missionary J. Waskom Pickett, who “used sophisticated research instruments to gather data on people movements.”45 Quantitative data became

---

43 Gary McIntosh, *Evaluating the Church Growth Movement* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2004), 12.
44 McIntosh, *Evaluating the Church Growth Movement*, 12.
increasingly critical to McGavran in his evaluation of missions. McGavran believed that evangelism “was an input term meaning that the lost should be won to Christ and then baptized and brought into the church. The result was an output term: Church Growth! As coined by McGavran, Church Growth is simply the expected result of being obedient to the Great Commission. Church Growth was, and is, effective evangelism.” McGavran’s journey had come full circle. Starting with an evangelism focus in his youth, his theological trajectory had taken him through academic Protestant liberalism and a liberal missiology, but he returned to a focus on evangelism drawn from his mission field experience.

His findings on the mission field on why some churches grow and some churches do not grow provided the data for his major work on church growth published in 1955, the same year he finished out his missionary service. Bridges of God served as the first key document for the burgeoning Church Growth movement. McGavran’s reflections challenged the Protestant church’s perspective on evangelism in the mission field. Initially, McGavran sought to influence and shape a more evangelistic approach to his fellow missionaries in the mainline churches. "During the early 1960s McGavran exchanged correspondences with World Council of Churches (WCC) leadership, seeking to influence its direction toward a more evangelical version of missions. WCC leadership

---

46 For example, "McGavran discovered that of the 145 areas where mission activity was taking place, 134 areas had grown only 11 percent between 1921 and 1931... Yet in the other 11 areas, the church was growing by 100 percent, 150 percent and even 200 percent a decade." (McIntosh, Evaluating the Church Growth Movement, 11).

47 McIntosh, Evaluating the Church Growth Movement, 15.
seriously looked at church growth."48 Despite multiple connections to mainline churches, Evangelicals would become McGavran’s most captive audience.

When McGavran left the mission field to return to the United States, an opportunity arose to engage in academic research in the fields of missions and evangelism. In 1961 McGavran founded the Institute of Church Growth at Northwest Christian College in Eugene, Oregon. In Oregon, McGavran focused on training missionaries in Church Growth principles to apply to overseas missions. His publications garnered attention from missionaries, pastors, and denominational leadership. In 1965 McGavran moved from Oregon to Fuller Theological Seminary as the newly appointed Dean of the School of World Mission. A survey of Fuller graduates had revealed that “Donald McGavran was the mission leader most influencing them.”49 McGavran formed and shaped the School of World Mission, where he would serve as the dean from 1965 to 1985.

When McGavran moved to Fuller Seminary, he entered into the heart of neo-evangelicalism. In the process of becoming the vanguard of neo-evangelicalism, Fuller was moving away from its fundamentalist roots that tended towards cultural separation and the rejection of the academy. Marsden acknowledges that by the late 1950s, Fuller "had become so thoroughly identified with what then was widely called the 'new evangelicalism' that the role of the seminary's fundamentalist roots had been discounted."50

50 Marsden, Reforming Fundamentalism, 3.
Fundamentalism’s rejection of secular culture arose from anxiety about the changes that occurred in the early part of the twentieth century. Fundamentalists felt that they were under siege from secular society. Marsden recognizes that "fundamentalism was the response of traditionalist evangelicals who declared war on these modernizing trends. In fundamentalist eyes the war had to be all-out and fought on several fronts. At stake was nothing less than the gospel of Jesus' blood and righteousness."51 Neo-evangelicalism that emerged out of the context of fundamentalism did not espouse this deep antagonism towards culture. Neo-evangelicals did not operate in the extreme separatism endemic to fundamentalism.

Housed at Fuller Seminary, McGavran and the Church Growth movement would reflect the cultural adroitness of neo-evangelicalism. Unencumbered by extreme separatism, McGavran incorporated elements of his wide-ranging education and experience. While McGavran rejected the secular ideas of the theological liberalism garnered from his education, he embraced aspects of secular education that would serve his purposes. McGavran was able to build a paradigm of ministry that would reject the liberalism that accommodated culture while at the same time using aspects of the culture to further his own missiological perspective.

While the emerging Evangelicalism exemplified by Fuller Seminary would engage the culture in ways that would trouble fundamentalists, Evangelicals would continue to share many characteristics with fundamentalism. A key carryover from fundamentalism would be the focus on individual salvation over social transformation. In engaging the individual with the good news, Evangelical Christianity did not call for the

51 Marsden, Reforming Fundamentalism, 4.
high degree of separatism that marked fundamentalism. Evangelical Christianity could use the tools of secular culture, particularly for the sake of personal evangelism and the growth of the church.

Evangelicals engaged the culture for the sake of the gospel. Tools of secular culture should be made available for the church, particularly for the purpose of evangelism. As Wuthnow notes: “Increasingly, the emphasis shifted from thoughts about a New Jerusalem to programs of evangelism, to the work of building churches and running Sunday schools, and to the life of piety and Christian discipline.”\(^{52}\) Wuthnow recognizes that the business of running the church required programs that would draw from cultural expressions.

The neo-evangelical attempt to engage the culture at Fuller Seminary was particularly notable in academic engagement. In his biography of Fuller professor George Eldon Ladd, John D’Elia notes that “it would be difficult to overstate the extent to which conservative evangelicals were marginalized within academic life in the United States.”\(^{53}\) However, Fuller Seminary exemplified an evangelical scholarship arising out of fundamentalism. “Fuller became the key institution in the resurgent intellectual life of American evangelicalism. . . . [Ladd exemplified the] group of scholars who had been brought up in fundamentalist traditions but had rejected the strict separatism and anti-intellectualism of their own movement in favor of training of elite universities.”\(^{54}\) Ladd attempted to break into the larger arena of scholarship and earn a place at the table. “The

\(^{52}\) Wuthnow, *The Restructuring of American Religion*, 139.
\(^{53}\) John D’Elia, *A Place at the Table* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), xv.
\(^{54}\) D’Elia, *A Place at the Table*, xv.
table represented inclusion in the broader discussion of the crucial theological issues of the day.”

McGavran’s move to Fuller occurred in the context of Fuller’s move towards seeking acceptance from the larger academic community. Fuller Seminary sought to move away from the separatism of fundamentalism. Academic and intellectual pursuit, therefore, would not be eschewed by the Fuller community. Employing academic research would be considered a positive move towards reforming fundamentalism and towards a more balanced neo-evangelical position. Marsden notes that “McGavran was in the rare position of combining a thoroughgoing evangelical zeal for spreading the old-time gospel with a background that provided perspectives more common to the liberal theological position. One such perspective was a sensitivity to anthropology and the cultural context in which Christianity develops and missions take place.”

McGavran’s attempt to apply academic social research to the field of mission found an appropriate context for expression at Fuller Seminary. McGavran pulled together a wide range of academics and experts to train missionaries at the School of World Mission. McGavran “had built up a group of specialists at points where he felt church growth had to develop: anthropology, extension training, research methods, theology, the phenomenology of tribal religion, culture and personality, ethnolinguistics and other aspects.” McGavran and the School of World Mission flourished in the context of Fuller Theological Seminary and the burgeoning Evangelical movement.

---

55 D’Elia, *A Place at the Table*, xxvi. It is important to note that despite Ladd’s best attempts, a negative review of a key work by Ladd resulted in a deep sense of rejection for Ladd from the larger academic community.
56 Marsden, *Reforming Fundamentalism*, 239.
David Cook notes that “by 1970, when McGavran’s magnum opus *Understanding Church Growth* was published, the Church Growth Movement and the School of World Mission and Institute for Church Growth were firmly established in the evangelical mainstream.” Fuller Seminary provided McGavran the Evangelical platform and McGavran provided Evangelicalism with the tools for expansion.

While Donald McGavran gave birth to the movement, C. Peter Wagner compelled the Church Growth movement towards its adolescence. Wagner shifted the focus on the mission field towards a focus on the church in America. As dean of the Fuller School of World Mission, McGavran excluded American pastors from his program. McGavran did not apply his principles to North American churches. Wagner, on the other hand, would find his primary audience among American churches.

McGavran’s unwillingness to engage in the North American context created a vacuum in the movement. McGavran’s disengagement resulted in the establishment of C. Peter Wagner as the *de facto* leader of the Church Growth movement in America. Thom Ranier notes that after the publication of *Understanding Church Growth* in 1970, “McGavran watched the Church Growth Movement become ‘Americanized.’ McGavran himself chose to focus his efforts in non-American contexts, and leave the North Americanization of church growth to others.”

---

McGavran and the individual that propelled church growth onto the conscience of the American evangelical church.

C. Peter Wagner had served as a missionary in Bolivia before becoming a part of the School of World Mission and the Church Growth movement. Wagner held degrees from Rutgers, Fuller, Princeton, and a Ph.D. from the University of Southern California. During Wagner’s furlough of 1967-1968, he pursued a degree in missiology at Fuller’s newly established School of World Mission, where he would study under Donald McGavran. Eventually, Wagner accepted the invitation of McGavran to join the faculty of the Fuller School of World Mission in 1971. Wagner noted that he “spent most of the decade of the 1970s teaching . . . technical church growth and also helping to bring the church growth movement into the American church scene.”

Wagner’s primary strategy involved the training of pastors and leaders in the American church. McGavran had prevented American pastors from engaging in the material offered at Fuller. As word began to spread about McGavran’s insights, it fell upon Wagner to apply and adopt Church Growth ideas to the American church. In the fall of 1972, the first class on Church Growth and the American church gathered eighteen area ministers and lay people at Lake Avenue Congregational Church under the leadership of Wagner and McGavran. The class generated strong enthusiasm for Church Growth principles. One of the members of the class, Win Arn, would go on to found the

---

63 McIntosh, Evaluating the Church Growth Movement, 16-17.
Institute of American Church Growth. Wagner and Arn would become the visible and public leadership of the American Church Growth movement. Paralleling the public resurgence of evangelicalism, the decade of the 70s would prove to be a key decade for the emergence of the American Church Growth movement.

The first incarnation of the Church Growth movement under Donald McGavran had focused on the growth of the church in non-American contexts and drew from academic work in such disciplines as cultural anthropology and quantitative and qualitative research. The second incarnation of the movement began to employ more popular terminology to increase accessibility, often forgoing the technical language employed by McGavran. The shift to a more popular approach accommodated the Americanization of the Church Growth movement. Increasingly, the Americanization of the Church Growth movement would gravitate towards a pragmatic application to the American church with a diminishing connection to the mission field.

An additional development of the Church Growth movement occurred in the decade of the 1980s and 1990s as Wagner shifted towards the more spiritual dimensions of church growth. McGavran had been the soul of the movement. Wagner emerged as the leader of the American Church Growth movement. In the 1980s, however, Wagner shifted his priority towards charismatic spirituality. Along with the founder of the Vineyard Christian Fellowship, John Wimber, Wagner began teaching a class at Fuller called “Signs, Wonders, and Church Growth.” Wagner would begin to incorporate spiritual warfare prayer, healing, and exorcisms with the technical aspects of church

---

64 Cook, “The Americanization of the Church Growth Movement,” 19-20. See also http://www.churchgrowth.net/about/history.htm for the history of the Institute of American Church Growth under the leadership of Win Arn and eventually his son, Chip Arn.
growth. Wagner’s new trajectory would allow for additional voices to be introduced that would further popularize the church growth movement among U.S. Evangelicals while not necessarily following Wagner’s charismatic trajectory.

Wagner’s shift towards charismatic spiritual renewal during the 1980s and McGavran’s death in 1990 signaled the end of the first two phases of the Church Growth movement. The loss of key two voices from the Church Growth movement left a significant gap in leadership. New voices that emerged to fill that gap focused on the popular application of Church Growth principles in the American context. The early emphasis on the academic and missionary aspects of the Church Growth movement got lost in the shuffle. McGavran’s incorporation of various academic disciplines in the context of overseas missions had found its best expression in Fuller’s School of World Missions. Wagner’s translation of Church Growth principles into the American context continued to find expression at Fuller but began to venture into more popular cultural forms.

Fuller Seminary had served as the epicenter of the movement for several decades. But the movement shifted away from the seminary to the church homes of many of the Fuller D.Min. graduates as well as new proponents. Already having minimized theological language, the third phase of the Church Growth movement delved deeper into the language of pragmatism and cultural relevance. The academic era of the Church Growth movement had drawn to a close. As the Church Growth movement sped towards popularization — practical, workable, and easily applied answers seemed to be the order

---

of the day. Best practices of the church, therefore, reflected approaches to ministry that offered the most practical and culturally relevant approaches to growing churches.

The Church Growth movement moved into the realm of business principles applied to the church context. “In the new business-oriented approach to Christianity, you didn’t start by opening a church and hoping that people would be drawn in by newspaper announcements of the services. You started by finding out what people wanted from a church.” Marketing became the primary expression of growing the church. The business world became the model for the church. The pragmatism of the corporate mentality allowed the church to merge with upper middle-class suburban structures and systems. The evangelical ability to adapt to the culture had taken on a whole new dimension. The Church Growth movement and its offspring the mega-church movement generated churches with the ability to operate with total success in the context of American culture.

The Church Growth movement opened the door for the proliferation of mega-churches. The mega-church became the standard of ministry for the evangelical church. “Some of the more successful megachurches, like Saddleback and Willow Creek, have spawned ancillary businesses as church growth consultancies themselves, offering training seminars, Web sites, and conferences for the pastors of lesser churches.” Entrepreneurial pastors such as Rick Warren and Billy Hybels became the standard of the successful pastor. Evangelical churches profited from Church Growth teachings that

spoke the contemporary cultural language and would find fertile ground in the Evangelical world.

The succeeding generation of Church Growth leaders implemented the practical Church Growth principles and wrote books and conducted seminars to further propagate these practical principles. McIntosh notes that "the third and present stage of Church Growth could be called the 'Babel stage.' Today each Church Growth authority seems to have a different niche, and each one seems to emphasize different principles or follow different methods in suggesting how to grow churches and make them effective."68

In Holy Mavericks, Shayne Lee and Phil Sinitiere state that the competitive marketplace of religion in America can elevate certain leaders who can adapt to “the existential needs and cultural taste of the public.”69 Key Evangelical leaders possessed a high level of cultural savvy. If indeed, religion operates like a spiritual marketplace in a highly materialistic and capitalistic society, then those individuals with market savvy would rise to prominence and influence. Success in the spiritual marketplace required a high level of pragmatism necessary to appease market forces. Cultural relevance through the application of marketing and business principles began to take on greater authority.

When the Church Growth movement shifted away from the academic environment governed by degrees, credentials, academic chairs, and academic institutions towards a more popularized version not governed by the rules of the academy, market forces and cultural relevancy became key guiding values. The popularization of the Church Growth movement was now driven by the Evangelical market and driven by democratic forces that called for the formation of ministry arising from a market

---

68 McIntosh, Evaluating the Church Growth Movement, 49.
economy. In other words, what worked would become more important than what was true or right. Methods and approaches to ministry would be justified not by their inherent worth, but by their effectiveness. Because the market now drove the movement, the Church Growth movement became an authentically capitalistic venture, captive to the cultural values rampant in American society.

The capitalistic priorities of the Church Growth movement would elevate the homogenous unit principle (HUP) as an effective means towards growth, but subsequently, would generate significant negative consequences. The HUP asserted that churches would grow faster if they focused on reaching their kind of people. The HUP claimed that it is easier to convert individuals and grow churches with demographically (i.e. racially) similar people. The HUP was seen as a critical aspect of the Church Growth movement and numerous mega-churches followed this principle. The foundation of the HUP was a faulty sociological analysis that was nearly devoid of any theological reflection. A misapplied sociology took priority over the Biblical goals of the church.

At the root of the HUP is the concept of homophily, "the principle that a contact between similar people occurs at a higher rate than among dissimilar people." The HUP would reflect the principle of homophily in that our relational networks (and the opportunity to evangelize and invite people to church) would more likely occur along racial and ethnic similarity. "Homophily implies that distance in terms of social

---

71 The value of numerical growth was seen as more critical than the value of racial reconciliation and integration. See Rah, *The Next Evangelicalism*, 91-107 for a more detailed critique.
characteristics translates into network distance.” Because evangelism would operate along an individual’s network, the most impactful evangelistic efforts would be with those similar to you. Homophily works because both recruitment and retention are tied to relationships based upon homogeneity.74 Church success (usually measured by numerical growth) would necessitate the HUP, reflecting the concept of homophily.

The widespread acceptance of the HUP occurred when most neighborhoods (and many of the institutions) in the United States remained segregated. Racially homogeneous churches were a result of both the demographic reality of American society and a ministry approach of the HUP upheld by growth-seeking Evangelicals. By removing the barriers of racial, cultural, and socio-economic diversity, churches would experience their desired levels of growth in the suburban enclaves. The HUP gave ecclesial justification for de facto segregation, which was already exasperated by white flight to the suburbs.

Whether intentional or not, the HUP applied by suburban Evangelical churches affirmed the wisdom of white flight, allowing the suburban churches to capture the migration of whites to the suburbs and leading to numerical growth. In turn, the growth of the suburban church gave (false) credence to, and perpetuated, the Church Growth movement principles, which offered methods of growth that were supposedly applicable to all churches everywhere.

The HUP reflects the building of exclusive relationships that excludes particular groups of people. While the concept of homophily still applies in this scenario, a

---

theological reading of this phenomenon would indicate a dysfunctional relationship between the church and society. In promoting the HUP, the church would be giving permission, under the guise of evangelism, to make racial distinctions when developing relational networks both in and outside the church. The church would give permission to self-define, what kinds of people are “like us.” Homophily could be seen as an end for the church, rather than one of the ways to analyze and reflect on the role of the church in American society.

The application of homophily, via the HUP, proliferated throughout American Evangelicalism through the process of isomorphism. "The concept that best captures the process of homogenization is isomorphism . . . Isomorphism is a constraining process that forces one unit in a population to resemble other units that face the same set of environmental conditions."75 The relatively closed system of American Evangelicalism meant that a ministry idea that seemed to demonstrate some measure of success could proliferate in a rapid manner over the entire field of American Evangelicalism. "Once disparate organizations in the same line of business are structured into an actual field (as we shall argue, by competition, the state, or the professions), powerful forces emerge that lead them to become more similar to one another."76 The quick adaptation of the HUP meant that churches did not offer a rigorous theological critique of the concept before applying the concept.

There was a blanket misapplication of the HUP to many Evangelical churches, without considering the potential unintended negative consequences. The success of the approach, as well as the concept of isomorphism, yielded the wide acceptance of the HUP and the broad application of these HUP-derived programs. Church growth strategy was formulated from sociological study without deep theological reflection. The value of growth and success overwhelmed any theological vision and goal.

A movement that had started with the best of intentions had deteriorated in the eyes of critics into a movement that focused on numbers and measurable results. The Church Growth movement now appeared to be an a-theological movement. The strongly theologically rooted influences of the movement under the direction of Fuller Seminary had moved to the local church and mega-church pastors, who prioritized the pragmatic over the theological. Initially, this academic movement reacted to the reduction of missions and sought to reassert the centrality of evangelism. The third stage revealed a movement more concerned with a type of cultural relevancy that would yield numerical results.

Critics blasted the emphasis on human effort, stressing quantity over quality, and neglecting work among people who are harder to reach.\textsuperscript{77} Despite criticism, many of the tenets of the Church Growth movement gained wide-spread acceptance in evangelicalism. “Widespread acceptance of the Church Growth movement came almost two decades after McGavran and Wagner introduced church growth to a group of American pastors in 1972. According to Christianity Today, following a ‘wave of church growth bashing in

\textsuperscript{77}Cook, “The Americanization of the Church Growth Movement,” 40.
the seventies, many of the movement’s ideas had become virtual givens in the then-current discussions of church vitality.”

The popularization of the Church Growth movement was complete by the 1990s. McGavran’s death and Wagner’s shift resulted in the diffusion of the movement. This diffusion resulted in a wider penetration of Church Growth principles. These principles were now manifesting in more direct cultural forms such as business and marketing principles. The Church Growth movement that had initially resisted the cultural pressures of modernity was now fully immersed in modernity. The cultural captivity of the movement was complete. By the early 1990s, surveys revealed that 3/4 of American pastors were positive or interested in church growth. Earlier surveys had shown that only 5% were favorable and 20% were interested. In turn, Evangelical Christianity, which had served as the most fertile ground for church growth concepts, yielded to the ethos and values of the Church Growth movement, including the value of the HUP leading to extreme levels of segregation in the Evangelical church.

The level of societal segregation would yield a high level of segregation in the church. However, the wide-spread application of Church Growth principles would lead to hyper-segregation even as neighborhoods became more integrated. In United by Faith, the authors assert that the percentage of Christian congregations that are considered racially mixed (no one racial group being more than 80 percent of the congregation) is about five and a half percent. Often the lack of diversity in congregations is attributed to

---

79 Rah, The Next Evangelicalism, 97-98.
80 Cook, “The Americanization of the Church Growth Movement,” 42.
81 Curtiss DeYoung, Michael Emerson, George Yancey, and Karen Chai Kim, United by Faith (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), 2. In a later work, People of the Dream, Michael
the lack of diversity in neighborhoods. However, Emerson reveals that the congregation’s neighborhoods are ten times more diverse than the congregations. The vast majority of congregations are substantially less racially diverse than the neighborhoods in which they reside.82

Emerson uses two different units of measurement to gauge the level of integration in the church. Both measurements reveal a severe deficiency in the level of integration in the church, especially when compared to other social institutions. The general heterogeneity index83 measures the probability that two randomly selected people in a congregation will be of different racial groups. The index reveals that “the average (mean) congregational diversity in the United States is merely .08, while the mean racial diversity of public schools in the United States is .48 – suggesting that public schools, at the time of this writing, are six times more racially diverse than are religious congregations.84 Emerson also uses the dissimilarity index that measures “the percentage of one racial group or the other that would have to switch congregations to end segregation.”85 In comparing neighborhood segregation, Emerson determined that “cities

---

82 Emerson with Woo, *People of the Dream*, 43-44.
83 The index “ranges from zero – no probability that two randomly selected people are of different racial groups – to one – perfect probability that two randomly selected people are of different racial groups. Thus a congregation that is 50 percent of one racial group and 50 percent of another would receive a value of .50 (the probability that any two randomly selected people are racially different).” Emerson with Woo, *People of the Dream*, 37.
84 Emerson with Woo, *People of the Dream*, 37.
85 Emerson with Woo, *People of the Dream*, 40.
with indexes of dissimilarity greater than .60 are considered highly segregated. . . . The value for Catholicism is .81; for mainline Protestantism, .85; and for conservative Protestantism, .91. These figures indicate hyper-segregation.\textsuperscript{86} Using various devices and units of measurements yields the same conclusion: American churches are significantly more segregated than American society, even more segregated than schools and neighborhoods.

The Church Growth movement in its U.S. incarnation can attribute its success to a sense of fear over the decline of Christianity and Christian influence in America. The movement would advocate for a form of pragmatism that would allow for greater comfort and control in the church context, even as Evangelicals were unable to deal with the increasing discomfort with a changing cultural context. The blanket application of these principles, particularly the HUP arose from a sense of triumphalism that suggested that American churches are a favored church that should not experience decline. The assumption of exceptionalism would spur the Evangelical church to proliferate Church Growth principles to every corner of the church. The Church Growth movement reveals an engagement with the culture that arises from a dysfunctional self-perception.

\textbf{1.4 Religion, Culture, and Politics}

Another snapshot of Evangelical engagement with the larger society emerges from the complicated intersection of faith, culture, and politics. Towards the end of the twentieth century, U.S. Evangelicals awakened as a public political presence. The neo-evangelical movement that emerged after World War II would attempt to distance itself from the separatist tendencies of the fundamentalists and begin to exhibit greater social

\textsuperscript{86} Emerson with Woo, \textit{People of the Dream}, 41.
engagement. Late twentieth-century Evangelicalism (with an uppercase “E”) emerged with a distinct sociological identity in the latter part of the twentieth century. This distinct identity has often been caricatured as white, middle-class, suburbanite, Republicans. The religious right would come to represent the dominant expression of Evangelical involvement in American society by the close of the twentieth century.

The rise of the religious right in U.S. Evangelical history needs to be explained by multiple factors. The Evangelical self-perception that they are the inheritors of historical orthodoxy, the dis-ease felt by many Evangelicals over societal changes (particularly around the issues of gender and sexuality), and the ability to embrace cultural tools while opposing the culture itself -- all serve as factors in the formation in the rise of the religious right in the twentieth century.

The Evangelical self-perception of standing in the stream of historical orthodoxy could lead to a sense of exceptionalism. As the inheritors of the orthodox heritage — much akin to the Puritan mindset — Evangelicals would feel a particular pressure to maintain the purity of the church. As the culture around them shifted, conservative Protestants rejected the social gospel of their liberal counterparts. Instead, conservative Protestants opted to pit Christ against the surrounding culture. The activist, conversionist impulse of fundamentalist evangelicals remained intact. This impulse, however, now expressed itself as suspicion of the broader culture and seeking ways to rescue as many as possible from the wrecked, sinking vessel.

In the latter part of the twentieth century, when Evangelicals began to engage more directly in the political process, the narrative of a fallen world remained entrenched. Twentieth-century Evangelicals had embraced the narrative of a world destined for God’s
ruthless judgment—a perspective that contrasted sharply with the previous centuries’ eschatological hope of America as an exceptional nation favored by God. A desire to return to that idealized version of a Christian America would drive many on the religious right. The Fundamentalist-Modernist Controversy of the early twentieth century exasperated that perception, and the religious right would address the belief that something had been lost.

The rapidly changing culture of the latter half of the twentieth century served as an impetus for the formation of the religious right. In *American Grace*, Robert Putnam and David Campbell assert that changing sexual norms, which were particularly evident in American society in the 1960s, contributed to the galvanizing of Evangelicals around conservative politics. Putnam and Campbell claim that the ’60s represented a perfect storm for American institutions and lit the fuse for the culture wars of the following decades. The ’60s witnessed a seismic generational shift on social issues such as birth control, premarital sex, homosexuality, and abortion. The ’60s also marked the decline of religious participation, amplifying the Evangelical perception that American society was deteriorating. Putnam and Campbell argue that concerns about sexual immorality can be closely associated with the rise of Evangelicalism. They further argue that the religious right responded to these concerns effectively, which helped to swell its ranks.87

Seth Dowland takes a similar approach by identifying anxiety over changing gender roles as a factor in the rise of the religious right. Dowland attributes the rise of the religious right to its roots in a nostalgic gendered value system, asserting that the religious right galvanized around the Evangelical emphasis on order and authority, which
reflects a more patriarchal and traditional model of the family. The religious right’s emphasis on family values reveals its insecurity concerning the drastic changes in the culture in the latter half of the twentieth century. Anxiety over these changes spurred the religious right to directly utilize overtly political tools to influence the culture, providing another example of the Evangelical ability to use whatever tools available to further its own agenda. In the same manner that fundamentalists did not hesitate to use the cultural tool of media to communicate the gospel, the religious right did not hesitate to use political tools to influence and shape the culture.

The rise of the religious right was predicated on the increasing anxiety over the changing norms evident in American society. An identifiable enemy was needed in order to galvanize American Evangelicals and the prevailing secular worldview would serve that function. Evangelical Christians would combat that dominant narrative of secularism in American society with their own counter-narrative of a Christian worldview.

The work and influence of Francis Schaeffer served as an important centralizing perspective in the face of a changing world. From his perch at L’Abri Fellowship in Switzerland, Schaeffer began to postulate a narrative of the decline of American society. Schaeffer’s work tells of a Christian worldview that was under attack in secular American culture. He asserted that in the past Christianity could depend on society affirming a Christian worldview, but the presuppositions endemic in secular humanism

---

89 Carpenter, *Revive Us Again*, xii, 3–12, 245.
enabled it to operate as a surrogate religion. This reality necessitated the assertion of a Christian worldview.

In *How Should We Then Live?*, Francis Schaeffer offered an “overarching argument about how western culture moved from a Christian worldview at the time of Aquinas to the relativistic secularism, or what he calls simply secular humanism, of the late twentieth century.” Barry Hankins summarizes Schaeffer’s argument: “Early Christianity was pure and biblical; medieval Roman Catholic Christianity became increasingly corrupt; the Renaissance introduced humanism; then the Reformation recaptured true Christianity and held humanism at bay until the twentieth century.” Schaeffer therefore, operated under the conviction that Evangelicalism of the late twentieth century needed to oppose the secular worldview. Hankins recognizes Schaeffer’s weakness as an “over-reliance on Enlightenment categories and a tendency to conflate issues of faith with issues of politics and American patriotism.”

While lacking formal education and depth in his analysis, Schaeffer exerted considerable influence on American Evangelicalism as one of its key thought leaders. Molly Worthen states that “he was a brilliant demagogue who offered up all of Western history in an hour’s lecture, stripped of confusing nuance.” His lectures at Christian colleges made sweeping generalizations about American society that led to apocalyptic conclusions while stirring the hearts of Evangelicals who were troubled by the crumbling of a Christendom they believed had existed at one point in American history. Francis

---

92 Hankins, *Francis Schaeffer and the Shaping of Evangelical America*, 169.
93 Hankins, *Francis Schaeffer and the Shaping of Evangelical America*, 238.
Schaeffer’s son, Franky Schaeffer, claims that his own desire to launch a movie career led to the production of movies that would popularize his father’s teaching. Francis Schaeffer’s lectures and movies provided the intellectual fodder (as shallow as it was) for the Evangelical masses.

The Christian worldview purported by Francis Schaeffer viewed the reality of abortions in the United States as particularly problematic. Initially seen as an issue for the Roman Catholic Church, political conservatives surmised that the issue of abortion could serve as a rallying issue for Evangelicals. The image of dolls floating in a lake, used by Franky Schaeffer in a documentary on abortion, sought to portray how far American society had fallen and to what extent a secular worldview had shaped that decline. For Evangelicals, abortion exhibited the depths of America’s fall and became their central political issue. Opposition to abortion served as an identifying marker for Evangelicals who clung to a Christian worldview.

Because the world had fallen captive to secular humanism, Evangelicals needed to hang on to a God-honoring worldview, which they believed was rapidly slipping away. Toward that end, the Republican Party sought out issues that tapped into the Evangelical sense of cultural decline. Conservative positions on abortion, prayer in schools, and the separation of church and state provided the necessary ammunition to bring theological conservatives into the politically conservative camp.

Randall Balmer argues that the 1973 Roe v. Wade decision was less critical to the formation of the religious right than the Green v. Connally case, in which the IRS sought

---

94 Worthen, Apostles of Reason, 212.
to deny tax-exempt status to a racially segregated school in Mississippi. Balmer claims that the federal government’s power to enforce the Civil Rights Act sparked the early formation of the religious right, and a subsequent case against Bob Jones University’s policy of segregation served to further raise the ire of fundamentalist Evangelicals. He maintains that the fear of government encroachment on church rights (including the right to resist racial integration) moved Evangelicals toward the larger agenda of the Republican Party. The formation of the religious right pivoted on a narrative that a Christian worldview must hold fast against the machinations of secular culture.

In response to this potential encroachment, Evangelicals began to utilize the infrastructures of media and education that had grown after the Scopes Trial and over the course of the twentieth century. While the culture may have declined during the twentieth century, the tools of that culture could be co-opted. Evangelical activists found an outlet not only in the task of personal evangelism but also in cultural transformation through political activism. Because evangelicals from George Whitefield, Charles Finney, Aimee Semple McPherson to Billy Graham had used the tools of culture to advance Christianity, the transition to political activism—one of the most significant tools of culture—to express active, conversionist faith proved to be relatively smooth.

Old time fundamentalist gospel preacher Jerry Falwell formed the Moral Majority and attempted to use the tools of American politics to impact issues like church rights, abortion, and prayer in schools. Pentecostal televangelist Pat Robertson ran for president of the United States as a Republican and successfully dabbled in media (the 700 Club and

---

95 Frank Schaeffer, *Crazy for God: How I Grew Up as One of the Elect, Helped Found the Religious Right, and Lived to Take All (or Almost All) of It Back* (Cambridge, MA: DeCapo, 2007), 242–64.
the Family Channel) and higher education (Regent University) in order to assert that elusive Christian worldview. Throughout the last quarter of the twentieth century, one could argue that the religious right successfully incorporated secular cultural tools into the toolbox of American Evangelicalism to combat what they perceived to be a crumbling culture. The Christian worldview would combat the secular worldview. Christ would stand against the culture, and the church would defeat the culture on its own terms. The strong stand against the fallen culture would prove to be more enticing to many Evangelicals than the call for social action and social justice by another stream of politically active Christians — progressive Evangelicals.

Progressive Evangelicals would offer an alternative narrative for Evangelical political engagement. The religious right rooted their narrative in the fundamentalist stream of American Christianity. As inheritors of orthodox faith and a Christian worldview, they could stand against the onslaught of the deteriorating culture and the secular worldview. In contrast, progressive Evangelicals differed in how they approached the relationship between Christianity and culture. Progressive Evangelicals could also trace their roots to a larger evangelical ethos and to an evangelical theology distinct from Protestant liberalism and fundamentalism. Dayton notes that Evangelicalism “is better understood as a specific wing of the nineteenth-century revivalist tradition that took shape before the emergence of fundamentalism and along different lines.” 97 Nineteenth century revivalism that would engage society with an activist faith and social reform and would provide the roots for Progressive Evangelicalism. The activist impulse of evangelicalism evident in nineteenth-century Christianity would provide an important

theological undergirding for progressive Evangelicalism. As such, they did not hesitate to
identity themselves as Evangelical Christians and would even claim that they were
returning to a historical evangelicalism that expressed social concern prior to the
twentieth century.

Progressive Evangelicals will also trace their roots to a larger evangelical ethos. Most progressive Evangelicals have not hesitated to identity themselves as Evangelical Christians. The main characteristics of evangelicalism identified throughout this essay would not be rejected. Many progressive Evangelicals, however, may tweak some of the definitions in contrast to those on the right. For example, some progressive Evangelicals may identify less with the forensic, penal substitution atonement approach of Reformed theology. Hence, speaking of an Evangelical Christology may be more accurate than the crucicentrism term employed by Bebbington. Biblicism may also be reinterpreted with a diminished emphasis on literal inerrancy. Despite these differences, progressive Evangelicals could embrace ideas of Biblicism and Christocentrism, but probably in different terms from earlier generations.

In *The Young Evangelicals*, Richard Quebedeaux situates the burgeoning movement of progressive evangelicals in the stream of fundamentalism-evangelicalism. While not imprisoning the larger evangelical movement in the fundamentalist, Puritan, Reformed ethos that Marsden alludes to, Quebedeaux acknowledges the influence and impact of fundamentalism on evangelicalism. However, the neo-evangelical movement emerging in the middle of the century would have the greater impact on the formation of progressive evangelicals. While fundamentalists shaped a significant portion of the self-

---

97 Dayton with Strong, *Rediscovering an Evangelical Heritage*, 43.
identified Evangelical population (including neo-evangelicals), Donald Dayton and Robert Johnston’s challenge to consider the variety of evangelicalism serves to deepen our understanding of progressive Evangelicals.98

The movement from fundamentalism to neo-evangelicalism is again exemplified by the story of Fuller Theological Seminary. Fuller Seminary began as a fundamentalist institution but began to draw scholars such as George Ladd whose work on the New Testament attempted to transcend the barrier of critical scholarship and evangelical thought. D’Elia in his book, *A Place at the Table*, points to the challenge facing George Ladd, who sought credibility from the larger academic community for his work on the New Testament. As Marsden notes, Fuller moved away from being the vanguard of fundamentalism to a neo-evangelical institution.99

The shift at Fuller Seminary presented a new thread for evangelicalism. Neo-evangelicals would remain biblicists, but not in the hard line manner of fundamentalists. Neo-evangelicals would take less of a hard line stance on biblical inerrancy. They were less beholden and captive to the doom and gloom scenario of pre-millennial dispensationalism. Neo-evangelicals would draw from the variety of evangelicalism, not just from the Reformed branch and would include the contributions of Mennonites, Anabaptists, Methodists, Pentecostals as well as those from the Reformed camp. The intellectual and ecclesial breadth of neo-evangelicalism would serve to encompass the coalition of progressive evangelicals.

---

One of the earlier markers for the formation of progressive evangelicals was the collection of younger Evangelicals that participated in Evangelicals for McGovern during the 1972 elections. Most evangelicals were supportive of the more conservative Richard Nixon and his law and order point-of-view. Harold Lindsell of Christianity Today essentially endorsed Nixon’s candidacy in the pages of CT, believing (accurately) that his support echoed the majority of evangelicals in the United States. Evangelicals for McGovern, however, presented a group of Evangelicals not solidly in the politically conservative camp. A group of younger evangelicals from various sectors of U.S. Evangelicalism would form relationships founded on their support of the Presidential candidate. At the ESA40 conference that heralded the retirement of Ron Sider, many of the “old timer” progressives (Jim Wallis, Wes Granberg-Michaelson) pointed to the McGovern group as a seminal place of connection.

While the 1972 election may be seen as a starting point for many of the relationships that formed among progressive Evangelicals, the 1973 Chicago Declaration attempted to put progressive Evangelicals front and center of the Evangelical movement. The preliminary meeting was held in the basement of North Park Theological Seminary with the critical meeting culminating during the Thanksgiving weekend of 1973 at a Chicago YMCA.

The gathering drew participation from a wide cross-section of Evangelicalism including Evangelical icon Carl Henry (whose seminal work: *The Uneasy Conscience of Modern Fundamentalism* would serve as an important theological backdrop to the Chicago Declaration as an earlier work that called for greater social engagement from fundamentalist); Mennonite (and Christian pacifist) John Howard Yoder; Richard Mouw
from Calvin College (from a Reformed, Calvinist perspective); black evangelicals such as Bill and Ruth Bentley, Tom Skinner and Bill Pannell (who were part of the NBEA but represented different denominational influences such as Pentecostalism and the Plymouth Brethren); and Latin American scholar Samuel Escobar. Ron Sider, one of the key shapers of the document would point towards the Chicago gathering and the subsequent document as the launching point of his organization Evangelical for Social Action, which would eventually be housed in Sider’s academic institution, Eastern (now Palmer) Seminary. The Chicago Declaration asserted the necessity of justice and concern for the poor alongside a conversionist perspective of repentance from sin. The document sought to frame the pursuit of social concerns in the framework of Evangelical language.

Eventually, other Evangelicals would sign the document, including Leighton Ford, Billy Graham’s brother-in-law and (at the time) Graham’s heir apparent. Graham himself would not sign the document, but would acknowledge the need for greater social engagement by Evangelicals. Leighton Ford would later acknowledge that there was some degree of suspicion on the part of those affiliated with the Billy Graham Evangelistic Association about the Chicago Declaration. In the following year, Leighton Ford’s leadership along with the influence of Latino voices, Samuel Escobar, Orlando Costas, and Rene Padilla would lead the Lausanne Congress on World Evangelization to include a statement on Christian social responsibility in the Lausanne Covenant of 1974.

Both the Chicago Declaration of 1973 and the Lausanne Covenant of 1974 challenged the twentieth-century fundamentalist-evangelical assertion of separatism from the world. The wrecked vessel motif and the conservation of a Christian safe haven did not satisfy the progressive Evangelicals. Evangelicalism would need to be shaken free of
its captivity to American values and the activist faith would now manifest not only through personal conversion but also social change. Evangelists that harped on the theme of inevitable societal decay would encounter a different worldview from the progressive Evangelicals. At the same time the fundamentalism that undergirded the religious right would gain greater traction than progressive Evangelicalism.

While persuasive and charismatic leaders were not lacking among progressive Evangelicals (Jim Wallis, Tony Campolo, Tom Skinner), the agenda of social justice activism would require greater sacrifice. The social action and transformation bent of progressive Evangelicals would not jibe with the strong personal salvation and holiness emphasis that ran down the middle of a conversionist, revivalist tradition. It is much easier to convince a middle-class audience to maintain and conserve their current lifestyle (based on capitalism) and value system (focusing on one’s own family) than to call for self-sacrificial living (often in an egalitarian, almost communistic community) and serve the poor and the marginalized. The religious right would offer a narrative of being counter-cultural while at the same time allowing Evangelicals to enjoy the benefits of the culture. Progressive Evangelicals did not want to retreat to the safety of Noah’s ark but would advance the possibility of social change through evangelistic zeal. However, transforming the culture through compassion and justice proved to be a less-alluring narrative than confronting the culture while still wallowing in the comforts of the culture.

1.5 Analysis

The historical development of twentieth century Evangelicalism reveals a religious movement that would become enraptured in its own sense of exceptionalism and triumphalism. The Evangelical conviction that they were the inheritors and guardians of a
theological orthodoxy would confer exceptional status on the movement. Evangelicals were given a task to maintain the boundaries of the faith in a shifting cultural context. This sense of calling would further the sense of exceptionalism and add the sense of triumphalism to this endeavor. The changes in the world around them meant that U.S. Evangelicals would need to engage the culture in a way to win over that culture. That triumph would require at differing times, the condemnation of the secular culture but at other times, the use of the culture’s tools, such as media, education, and political power to further their aims.

The self-perception of exceptionalism and the concomitant need for victory and triumph would isolate U.S. Evangelicalism. It would not only isolate Evangelicals from those who held a secular worldview and proposed a secular agenda, but it would also prevent a deeper connection with like-minded spiritual siblings. Evangelicals could easily dismiss the theological liberals as possessing a secular worldview. But what would happen in an encounter with a theologically like-minded community that emerged from a different historical narrative, but most importantly, would possess a different racial identification? How would theology and race intersect in the Evangelical world? To help address that question, we turn towards the history of the people that white Evangelicals would encounter in the last third of the twentieth century.
2. African-American Christianity

African-American Christianity as a transformative presence in American church history begins with the onset of the Trans-Atlantic slave trade and the establishment of a contextualized religion within the reality of the institution of slavery. Christian faith on the plantation reveals an authentic expression of faith by slaves in the midst of tremendous suffering. The lament of slave religion provides a counter-narrative to the triumphalistic narrative of Anglo Christianity in North America. Continuing through the Civil War and the Emancipation Proclamation, African-American Christianity demonstrated the power of spiritual freedom and liberation. Post-Civil War African-American Christianity extending through the Great Migration, and through the two World Wars points towards the emergence of a faith that greatly valued and asserted human agency in the face of an oppressive system of slavery, Jim Crow laws, and urban segregation. The Great Migration to the eastern and northern cities would result in the growth of an autonomous black church in the urban setting. The ability to contextualize the Christian message without falling into a cultural captivity reveals the ability to engage a narrative of Biblical justice without the limits imposed by Evangelical individualism.

Many of these African-American churches would be steeped in a biblicism that would mirror evangelical theology. However, in terms of social-historical affiliation, they would not find integration with the emerging American Evangelical ethos in the twentieth century. African-American churches, while holding a conservative theology would differ from their white counterparts in the positive assertion of God’s justice in the public square and would not be obsessed with an exclusively personal evangelism approach to
ministry. Theological affinity would exist between the African-American church with the larger Protestant church, but numerous distinctions would emerge differentiating the two threads of American religion. This chapter will not be able to present the comprehensive and complex story of the African-American church, but instead offer snapshots where the Evangelical story intersects with the black church in historical narrative, social-cultural dynamics, and in theological trajectory.

2.1 The Slave Trade and African-American Christianity

The slave trade that forced African bodies to journey to the New World was generated from a dysfunctional theological imagination that elevated white bodies over and against black bodies (see Chapter 3 for more discussion on the diseased theological imagination). The roots of the Trans-Atlantic slave trade reveal the church’s culpability at the inception of the slave trade. On the heels of Christopher Columbus’ journey towards “discovering” the new world in 1492, Pope Alexander VI would issue the papal bull, “Inter Caetera” on May 4, 1493. The Bull stated that any land not inhabited by Christians was available to be “discovered,” claimed, and exploited by Christian rulers and declared that “the Catholic faith and the Christian religion be exalted and be everywhere increased and spread, that the health of souls be cared for and that barbarous nations be overthrown and brought to the faith itself.”¹ The dysfunctional theological imagination of European Christianity would generate what would come to be identified as the Doctrine of Discovery.

The European powers drunk with colonial and imperial ambition would feel empowered with a theological impetus to conquer and subdue the world outside of
Europe. The Doctrine of Discovery would drive the European sense of exceptionalism towards the justification of conquest in the New World. Robert Miller, et al. in *Discovering Indigenous Lands* point out that, “When England and English colonists set out to explore, exploit, and settle new lands outside of Europe in the fifteenth through the nineteenth centuries, they justified their claims to sovereignty and governmental and property rights over these territories and the Indigenous inhabitants with the Discovery Doctrine. This international law has been created and justified by religious and ethnocentric ideas of European superiority over the other cultures, and religions, and races of the world.”² The New World, therefore, was a blank slate where the supremacy of exceptional white bodies would reign over indigenous bodies.

Even before these edicts were handed down from the church, the practices of dominance and assumption of white supremacy were already at work in the nascent stages of the trans-Atlantic slave trade. One of the earliest perpetrators of the trans-Atlantic slave trade, Prince Henry of Portugal staged a ritual on August 8, 1444, in the port city of Lagos on the west African coast. “This ritual was deeply Christian. . . . Once the slaves arrived at the field, Prince Henry, following his deepest Christian instincts, ordered a tithe be given to God through the church. Two black boys were given, one to the principle church in Lagos and another to the Franciscan convent on Cape Saint Vincent.”³ This supposed act of worship would find the church complicit in the initial stages of the slave trade. The kidnapping of slaves from the African continent reveals the

---

³
church as a willing participant in receiving an offering of African bodies from the slave traders. The tragedy of the slave trade would be linked to an act of acquiescence by the church.

The theological perversion that would launch the slave trade would also result in the systematic dismantling of identity as all symbols and expressions of African tribal, family and human identity would be stripped away. Upon capture, African bodies would be forced towards the coast with tribal and family bonds removed from becoming a barrier to the transformation of the African body into slave labor. After reaching the West African coast, Black bodies would be entombed on subsequent occasions, first in the slave castles on the shores of Africa followed by an entombment in the hull of the slave ships. The slave trade provided a spiritual enactment of the ritual of putting to death black bodies and black flesh.

The slave trade reveals a church culpable of guilt from its very beginnings. The reality of American Christian culpability in slavery and institutional racism should neither be overstated nor understated. “While evangelicals did not invent the sins of racism or ethnocentrism, the slave trade, segregation, discrimination, or racial hate groups, literally millions of white evangelicals have either participated in or sanctioned one or more of these things, distorting their common witness to the gospel.”  

The legacy of slavery in America is an ongoing struggle for many in the African-American community. The legacy of names and cultures stripped away by the slave trade has resulted in a loss of identity and a lack of rootedness for many African-Americans. The tearing apart of

families to facilitate the slave trade yielded the breakdown of the family in subsequent generations. The exploitation of African-Americans for free chattel slave labor wreaked havoc on the full participation of subsequent generations in social and economic uplift. The historical impact of slavery must not be understated.

In U.S. history, white Christians have a mixed record when it comes to the enslavement of blacks. But a mixed record on slavery is itself a condemnation of the church with even the hint of approval for a reprobate institution. There were some white Christians who stood against the institution of slavery. Many of the early abolitionists were motivated by their faith and their belief in the equality of humanity. “The earliest American arguments against slavery were religious. As early as 1710, an Anglican bishop, William Fleetwood, had bitterly attacked American slaveholders for withholding Christianity from their slaves and had gone on to attack slavery itself.” Many Christians confronted the immorality of slavery, drawing their opposition from Scripture. “Christian faith became a driving force for abolition, a moral cause that societies without Christian teaching have rarely birthed.”

Opposition to slavery was a prominent part of the Second Great Awakening as leaders such as Charles Finney, Jonathan Blanchard, and Theodore Weld publicly denounced slavery. “With much more significant impact, John Wesley and all the other early Methodist leaders were vehemently opposed to slavery.” Certain white Christian leaders explicitly denounced slavery, while others viewed the attempt to convey the

---

gospel to blacks as a means of challenging the institution of slavery. “Slaves assumed that Christianity did make them their masters’ equals. Some slaves who became Christians also became abolitionists, quickly challenging the Western churches’ complacent acceptance of—and at times complicity in—slavery.”

Despite the reality that an effort to reach slaves with the gospel seemed incongruous with the institution itself, there were attempts to evangelize slaves. W.D. Weatherford studies the ways various denominations viewed slavery. He states, “I wanted to find out … how much real interest the churches had in introducing the Negro to the principles of Christianity. That this interest was very great the records prove to me beyond a shadow of a doubt.” Twenty-first Evangelical Christianity, in hindsight, can find justification for Christian complicity in the slave trade and in slave ownership by asserting the value of bringing Christianity to the slaves. The common excuse would be that at least the slaves got to hear the gospel and became Christians. The warped imagination of Evangelicalism would acknowledge the social injustice of slavery, but justify the injustice with the personal salvation of individual slaves. They would also point towards the anti-slave movement among evangelicals and claim that “early evangelicalism had attracted blacks in part because of its anti-slavery tendency.” For their part, African-Americans could see beyond the falsities of a white Christianity to embrace the truth of the gospel message. “Blacks could accept Christianity because they

---

8 Usry and Keener, Black Man’s Religion, 99.
rejected the white version with its trappings of slavery and caste for a purer and more authentic gospel.”\textsuperscript{11}

Christians at the forefront of the abolitionist movement and the efforts at evangelism among the black slaves point towards the white Christians’ effort to address the theological problem of slavery. However, these actions do not compensate for the atrocities of slavery or negate Christian complicity in this institution. Actions by professed Christians reveal a negative story of the church’s involvement in the institution of slavery. In the colonial period, even being a minister did not preclude one from being a slave owner. “During the first half of the 1700s in the North, ministers often felt the need to have slaves in their own households and sometimes found them provided by thoughtful congregations as part of the parsonage furnishings. … Scores of New England ministers, including Cotton Mather and Jonathan Edwards, owned slaves in this period.”\textsuperscript{12} The unfortunate reality of some of our so-called spiritual heroes in American church history is that they woefully and inadequately confronted the problem of slavery.

In a book published in 1857, Albert Barnes reveals that Christians and even Christian ministers were guilty of the great offense of slave ownership. Barnes reveals:

\begin{quote}
Not a few church-members are slave-holders. . . . In the aggregate the number of members of the church, in all the religious denominations, who hold their fellow men in bondage, is not small. . . . It is to be admitted, also, that of these church-members, embracing also, it is to be feared, some who are ministers of the gospel, there are those who are slave-holders in the most rigid and offensive sense, . . . who hold them under none of the forms of mere guardianship and for the purpose
\end{quote}


of humanity, but as slaves, as property, as chattels, as liable to be disposed of like the other portions of their estate when they die.\textsuperscript{13}

The institution of slavery was often left unchallenged by Christian leaders, who even participated in slave ownership.

While some evangelistic efforts existed on the plantation, by and large, American slaveholders didn’t want their slaves to hear about the Bible, because they were afraid the slaves would understand that Christianity made them their master’s equals before God.\textsuperscript{14}

The incongruence of holding slaves as property and as chattel while having a concern for their eternal salvation proved a level of inconsistency that could not be reconciled. “The most serious obstacle to the missionary’s access to the slaves was the slaveholder’s vague awareness that a Christian slave would have some claim to fellowship, a claim that threatened the security of the master-slave hierarchy.”\textsuperscript{15}

Though some Christians opposed slavery and sought to share the gospel with slaves, the failure of the church to unite and act directly to overthrow the institution of slavery yielded passivity toward slavery that would ultimately serve as approval. “With the end of the social ferment of the revolutionary period and the rapid movement of evangelicalism from the margins to the very center of Southern society, white evangelicals reconsidered the meaning of American slavery and for the most part came to accept it.”\textsuperscript{16} Initially, Methodist leaders were among the staunch abolitionists, “sometimes risking their lives to preach emancipation in the post-Revolution South. Their stance on slavery evolved toward amelioration only when it became clear in the late

\textsuperscript{13} Albert Barnes, \textit{The Church and Slavery} (Philadelphia: Parry & McMillan, 1857), 12–13.
\textsuperscript{14} Usry and Keener, \textit{Black Man’s Religion}, 98.
1780s that most slave owners in the South refused to give up their human property and would leave the church if made to do so."

American Christians chose to ignore biblical teachings about the value of all persons and continued to either actively or passively support slavery. "Though anti-slavery (and anti-elitist) sentiment lingered in the South, most southern white evangelicals hardened their attitudes toward abolition and embraced slavery as the nineteenth century progressed. Methodist ministers went along with the prevailing social climate; by 1843 1,200 Methodist preachers owned some 1,500 slaves and 25,000 church members kept 208,000 people of color in bondage."17 Christian ministers would find ways to skirt the truth instead of confronting injustice. “As religion gained a wider hearing in the southern colonies, some preachers who supported the slaveholders’ cause found a way to leave out parts of the Bible that sounded like they made the slaves equal; different catechisms were provided for slave and free.”18

Whether through silence, through passive acceptance, or through actual complicity, many Christian ministers ended up supporting the institution of slavery. James Birney in *The American Churches, the Bulwarks of American Slavery* writes about how the ministers offered support for slavery and opposed abolitionist efforts.

In 1835 in Charleston, South Carolina, at a public meeting to exclude anti-slavery publications from circulation and ferreting out persons suspected of favoring abolition, the Charleston Courier reported that “the Clergy of all denominations attended in a body, lending their sanction to the proceedings, and adding by their presence to the impressive character of the scene.” … Virginia slave holders gathered together on July 29th, 1835 in Richmond and resolved unanimously that

---

“the suspicions which have prevailed to a considerable extent against ministers of
the gospel and professors of religion in the State of Virginia, as identified with
abolitionists are wholly unmerited—believing as we do, from extensive
acquaintances with our churches and brethren, that they are unanimous in
opposing the pernicious schemes of abolitionists.”

The history of passive and complicit silence or even the outright support of slavery
challenges us in the twenty-first century to consider ways to more deeply lament this
period. Majority culture Christians are often unaware of the deep complicity of white
American Christians in the atrocity of slavery.

Given the reality of support by white Christians of slavery, the tendency towards
separation by African-American Christians from white expressions of Christianity in the
United States is understandable. As Albert Raboteau points out, “[the black churches’
necessity was due, in part, to the racism of white Evangelicals.” For slaves, the place of
encountering Christian faith would present obstacles in both the context of the white
church where they would face rejection by white Christians as well as on the plantation,
where they would face oppression and brutality at the hands of white slave owners.

Institutional and societal support of slavery by white Christians would create an obvious
and insurmountable barrier for interrogation in the church setting.

The existence of a strong, distinct, and separate African-American church
community in the United States points to the historic failure of the dominant culture’s
ability to embrace the work of the Spirit in the African-American community. Instead of
offering the acceptance Peter exemplified toward Cornelius, the white church in America

---

19 James G. Birney, *The American Churches, The Bulwarks of American Slavery* (Newburyport,
rejected the presence of African-Americans in their churches (and most certainly in their homes and in their lives). The black church, therefore, arises out of a racism that sought to keep African-Americans as second-class citizens or completely excluded by the majority culture church. Instead, the African-American church arose in a hostile context but would provide an enduring institution despite the significant obstacles.

### 2.2 The Contextual Burden of Slave Religion

Plantation life would provide a hostile environment for Christianity. The stench of sin of the slave-based system would impede the full expression of Christian love and grace in that context. But even within that hostile context, an authentic and contextualized expression of Christian faith would emerge. Slave religion can be identified as America’s first expression of culturally contextual Christianity. The ability to adapt pre-existing cultural symbols and expression would provide a spirituality and religion with contextual cultural relevance. Albert Raboteau notes that “in the New World slave control was based on the eradication of all forms of African culture because of their power to unify the slaves and thus enable them to resist or rebel. Nevertheless, African beliefs and customs persisted and were transmitted by slaves to their descendants.”

The flourishing of slave religion reveals the sustaining ability of cultural expressions even in an extremely hostile and oppressive environment.

Initial discussion regarding the religious life of slaves centered on the disconnect between religious life in Africa and life on the plantation. E. Franklin Frazier asserts that “From the available evidence, including what we know of the manner in which the slaves

---

21 The second half of this section is adapted from Soong-Chan Rah, *Many Colors: Cultural Intelligence for a Changing Church* (Chicago: Moody Publishers, 2010), 41-59.

were Christianized and the character of their churches, it is impossible to establish any continuity between African religious practices and the Negro church in the United States. . . . In America the destruction of the clan and kinship organization was more devastating and the Negroes were plunged into an alien civilization one which whatever remained of their religious myths and cults had no meaning whatever.”

Frazier argues that the effort of the slave traders and slave owners to destroy any remnant of African culture in slave life proved effective.

However, Albert Raboteau asserts that “one of the most durable and adaptable constituents of the slave’s culture, linking Africa past with American present, was his religion.” Religious life and indigenous spirituality did not get killed off despite the best efforts of the slave traders and slave owners. Spiritual agency still served the religious life of the slaves. The attempt to kill black flesh through the trans-Atlantic slave ship journey proved to be ineffective. Slave religion reveals the expression of the cultural influence and shaping of the experiences in the previous world as much as the New World.

Another justification for the belief in the disconnect between African religious life and plantation faith life would be the diversity of cultures from the diversity of Africans found on the plantation. Raboteau points out that “a large percentage of American slaves came from West Africa and from the Congo Angola region. This vast territory . . . embraced societies and cultures as diverse as those of the Mandinke, the Yoruba, the Ibo and the Bakongo.” The slave population in North America was not limited to one

---

people group from Africa. The diversity within the slave population would undermine the possibility of a monolithic culture on the plantation.

Despite the obstacles and barriers that emerged from a culturally diverse slave population, Raboteau finds that the adaptation of African culture and religion into slave life was an effective process. “It was inevitable that the slaves would build new societies in the Americas which would be structured in part from their diverse backgrounds in different African societies.”\(^\text{26}\) Slave religion, therefore, was not the imposition of a monolithic culture, but an adaptation to diversity. Commonality was discovered for greater unity, but distinctions were allowed to accommodate diversity. As Raboteau states, “the religious background of the slaves was a complex system of belief, and in the life of an African community there was a close relationship between the natural and the supernatural, the secular and the sacred.”\(^\text{27}\)

In contrast to Evangelical norms that become absolutized in a bounded set approach to theology, slave religion acknowledged commonality such as the absence of strict lines of demarcation between the secular and sacred, in the context of diversity and complexity. Faith life practiced on the plantation revealed an acknowledgment of the great diversity of African cultural roots. Common practices from African roots would emerge according to Raboteau: “Perhaps the most obvious continuity between African and Afro-American religions is the style of performance in ritual action. Drumming, singing, and dancing are essential features of African and Afro-American liturgical expression and are crucial to the ceremonial possession of cult members by their gods.”\(^\text{28}\)

\(^{27}\) Raboteau, *Slave Religion*, 15.
\(^{28}\) Raboteau, *Slave Religion*, 35.
Raboteau notes the challenges to the retention of African culture in the succeeding generation of slaves in the United States.

“The character of the religious milieu, the average number of slaves on plantations, and the number of Africans in the slave population were all factors in the survival or loss of African culture. In the United States all these factors tended to inhibit the survival of African culture and religion . . . Nevertheless, even as the gods of Africa gave way to the God of Christianity, the African heritage of singing, dancing, spirit possession, and the magic continued to influence Afro-American spirituals, ring shouts, and folk beliefs. That this was so is evidence of the slaves’ ability not only to adapt to new context but do so creatively.”29

Similarly, Doug Sweeney notes that African-American spirituality arose out of an indigenous Christian experience during the time of slavery.

Slave religions [are] one of the miracles of American religious history. Usually unbeknown to their masters, and often in violation of orders and even laws against such activity, countless antebellum slaves “stole away” for secret worship in brush arbors, swamps, and forests throughout the land. They preached, prayed, sang, and danced into the wee hours of the night, more often than not after a long and grueling day’s work.30

The black church serves as the continuation of indigenous faith. Its emergence in the context of profound suffering provides a historical context and depth to its history. The black church is not merely the social response to suffering, it is also a theological response. Because the black church must bear multiple levels of responsibility, there may emerge, what Curtis Evans identifies as the burden of black religion.

The emergence of a stable religious system in the midst of turmoil has served as an additional burden to bear by black churches. Lincoln and Mamiya describe this reality: “As the only stable and coherent institutional area to emerge from slavery, black churches

29 Raboteau, Slave Religion, 92.
were not only dominant in their communities but they also became the womb of black culture and a number of social institutions."\textsuperscript{31} The expectation for black churches to uphold the entirety of black society may serve as an undue burden, particularly in how dominant culture views the role of the black church. Evans points out that, "white images of black religion had an almost ethereal romanticized quality about them and rarely touched on the actual cultural and practical work that could bring the nation closer to some semblance of racial harmony and political and economic equality. . . . [It] allowed whites to create a safe and idealized image of blacks that seldom addressed the concrete situation of black/white relations in the nation."\textsuperscript{32} Once black religion became identified as the container of the entirety of black culture, extrapolation of the characteristics of the black community occurred. “So the romantic racialists grounded blacks’ humanity in their religious sentiments. . . . Claims that blacks excelled in the ‘feminine’ virtues, such as religion and the arts, followed from assertions that whites excelled in the ‘masculine’ virtues of reason and enterprise because of their race. Religion, then, as a natural gift or characteristic of blacks, was celebrated in part because its promoters firmly believed that blacks did not equally possess the intellectual capacities of Anglo-Saxons.\textsuperscript{33} White exceptionalism would be affirmed as black culture was essentialized and stereotyped as a religious expression occupying an incomplete space.

By exorcizing and essentializing black religion, the white mind would further the otherness of blackness. The “other” culture could be further marginalized by placing as its sole purpose the role of providing a counter or surrogate over and against the “norm”.

This type of approach would place the ethnic, racial, culture “other” in a role that perpetuates rather than challenges the existing system. Curtis Evans notes that the study of black religion often results in a form of essentialism that places an undue burden upon the impact of black religion and places a racialized religious stigma upon African-Americans. Instead, we must see this encounter, not as an objectified clash of cultures or as an additive to the existing norm, but as a necessary balancing influence.

Slave religion played an important role in the development of contextualized faith that found common ground in the midst of great diversity. Despite great opposition and oppression, African-American Christianity emerged to form an important social institution. However, the black church would face the undue burden for the black community. By placing the entirety of the cultural burden on the black church, the diseased imagination of the white Evangelical church could impute a range of characteristics and place an undue burden upon the black church. Through this process, white exceptionalism could be affirmed by showing the inadequacies of the black church as reflective of the inadequacies of the black person.

2.3 George Liele and the Activist Mission Impulse

The intersection of Christian faith and African culture would yield a unique expression of Christianity in the United States. At the same time, aspects of American Christianity arising from the dominant culture would find expression in the context of the African-American church. An important characteristic of Evangelical Christianity is the conversionist impulse. The story of George Liele (sometimes spelled “Lisle”) provides

---

important evidence of long-standing activist mission impulse within the African-American Christian community.

While Adoniram Judson embarked on a journey that earned him the title of America’s First Foreign Missionary, George Liele actually owns the honor. Liele was a freed black slave who left the colonies for Jamaica in 1782 and began a ministry of preaching in 1783-1784, nearly three full decades before Judson would sail for Burma from Salem, Massachusetts in 1812 and a full decade before William Carey sailed for India from England.

About 1750 in Virginia, America’s first missionary was born to Liele and Nancy, both slaves belonging to the Sharpe family. Adoniram Judson was born nearly thirty-eight years later in 1788. George Liele’s master Henry Sharpe served as a Baptist deacon who eventually settled in the colony of Georgia. Liele was the child of a Christian father and a slave to a Christian master. Despite the modern incongruity of a Christian slave owner, Sharpe was a church deacon whose slaves actively served in their Baptist Church.

George Liele’s conversion occurred in 1773 under the preaching of Rev. Matthew Moore. The white pastor baptized Liele and received him into membership in his church. Liele soon launched into his preaching career, expressing a particular concern for his fellow slaves. George Liele’s career, therefore, began as an evangelist and a church planter in the American colonies. Like many Baptist pastors of that time, Liele received no formal training as a pastor. Instead, he received the approval of his church and a group of white Baptist pastors for his license to preach.

---

By 1774, Liele had extended his preaching ministry across the Savannah River into South Carolina, gathering slaves together for worship. These gatherings can claim to be the first Negro church in America. Liele’s ministry expanded further into South Carolina with the establishment of a church in Silver Bluff, South Carolina. Liele would be fully ordained into Christian ministry in 1775 and would serve the church until the start of the Revolutionary War. During the Revolutionary War, Henry Sharpe, who served as an officer in the British army granted Liele his freedom. With his newly granted freedom, Liele began to minister to escaped slaves at Tybee Island, a British stronghold. After the war, Sharpe’s children disputed Liele’s freedom and had him imprisoned. Faced with limited options, Liele became an indentured servant to a British officer and left the newly formed United States for Kingston, Jamaica, with other evacuating British forces.

George Liele arrived in the mission field of Jamaica when the island colony served as the main center of the slave trade. Four hundred thousand of the 600,000 slaves that had arrived in Jamaica had already been shipped to other parts of the Caribbean and North America. Liele was not the first Christian to arrive in Jamaica. Two Roman Catholic priests accompanied Columbus, and the first Moravian missionaries arrived from Europe in 1754. Liele’s significance is stated by Clement Gayle in his biography: “Liele was a pioneer in the sense that he was not just the first Baptist, or the first black minister to preach in Jamaica, but the first one to win a significant number of slaves on the Island to Christ, and certainly, as in the case of the United States, the first to organize a church made up predominantly of negroes on the Island.”

---

35 Clement Gayle, George Liele: Pioneer Missionary to Jamaica (Kingston, Jamaica: Jamaica Baptist Union, 1982), 3.
In 1783, having arrived as an indentured servant to Colonel Kirkland, Liele’s first priority was to earn his freedom so as to be able to preach throughout the island. Liele himself writes:

I was landed at Kingston, and by the colonel’s recommendation to General Campbell, the governor of the Island, I was employed by him two years, and on leaving the Island, he gave me a written certificate from under his own hand of my good behavior. As soon as I had settled Col. Kirkland’s demand on me, I had a certificate of my freedom from the vestry and governor, according to the act of this Island both for myself and my family. Governor Campbell left the Island.36

Once free, Liele devoted himself to supporting his family (Liele and his wife had four children) and preaching the gospel message. Liele supported himself through various means, including farming and leasing his horses and carriage for public service. Living into his Baptist ordination from the former colonies, Liele continued to preach in private homes and public settings (including services at the Kingston Race Course), drawing crowds of slaves to his gatherings. In a letter written in 1791, Liele reports five hundred converts and four hundred baptisms.37 In 1789, Liele’s congregation had organized to begin work on a house of worship. The church building would be completed in 1793 and become known as the Winward Road Chapel, the first Baptist church on the island.

Liele achieved these successful evangelistic and church planting efforts despite opposition from a powerful constituency on the island. White masters feared the impact upon the slave population if the slaves were to embrace Christianity. Concern arose that “if their minds are considerably enlightened by religion, or otherwise, that it would be

36 “Letters from Liele to Rippon” as cited in Gayle, George Liele: Pioneer Missionary, 13.
37 Gayle, George Liele: Pioneer Missionary, 15.
attended with the most dangerous consequences.”  

Methodists in Jamaica had not sought the permission of masters to evangelize to the slaves. Liele, on the other hand, took additional precautions not to antagonize the slave owners. He writes: “We receive none in to the church without a few lines from their owners of their good behaviour toward them, and religion.”  

Liele explained that their church bell was not used to summon members to worship, but “to (give notice to) the owners of slaves that are in our society, that they may know the hour at which we meet, and be satisfied that their servants return in due time.”  

Liele also implemented the public reading of a church covenant that outlined the importance of living in accordance with the law.

Despite Liele’s numerous efforts to appease the slave owners, he still faced stiff opposition. In one instance “he was charged with sedition after preaching a sermon on Romans 10:1 in which he expressed a strong desire for freedom from sin and its consequences.”  

Trumped up and unjust charges led to Liele being jailed on multiple occasions. “Mr. Liele was charged with preaching sedition, for which he was thrown into prison, loaded with irons, and his feet fastened in the stocks. Not even his wife or children were permitted to see him. At length he was tried for his life; but no evil could be proved against him, and he was honourably acquitted. [However, he was thereupon] thrown into gaol [jail] for a balance due to the builder of his chapel. He refused to take

---

40 Holmes, “George Liele,” 347.
the benefit of the insolvent Debtor’s Act, and remained in prison until he had fully paid
all that was due.”42

Despite these obstacles, Liele was able to baptize new converts as well as planting
and organizing new churches. His evangelistic and church planting efforts led to the
establishment of the Baptist denomination on the island, with slaves, freedmen, and
whites joining churches started by Liele. By the time Liele had established numerous
churches by the end of the eighteenth century, Adoniram Judson was still in a child in the
Boston area.

In 1802, however, the Jamaican Legislature passed an act restricting preaching to
the slaves. “Any person, not duly qualified according to the laws of the island, who
should presume to preach or teach in any assembly or meeting of negroes or people of
colour, was declared a rogue and vagabond, and ordered to be treated as such.”43 The
1802 Act was annulled by the British Parliament in 1804 but was replaced by an 1805 act
that forbade all preaching to slaves. Enforcement of the law resulted in the following
gruesome example:

Some slave owners determined to stamp out a slave prayer meeting. They armed
themselves and raided the meeting, with the intention of killing all present. The
leader of that group of Christians, Moses Hall, was absent, and his place for that
day was filled by his assistant, David. David was seized and murdered. His head
was cut off, and those white savages paraded with it through the village as a
warning to his followers not to attend Prayer Meeting. In the middle of the village
David’s head was hung on a pole.44

42 John Clarke, *The Voice of Jubilee, A Narrative of the Baptist Mission, Jamaica, from the
Commencement, With Biographical Notices of Its Fathers and Founders* (London: J. Snow, 18650,
32.
The ministry of George Liele in Jamaica was effectively curbed by the enforcement of these legislative acts. “Liele quietly accepted the restrictions brought on by the restrictive laws and spent his time clearing off the debts owing on his buildings. There is no further account of his activities after the passing of the laws.” Eventually, Baptist missionaries would arrive from the United Kingdom. When the British missionaries arrived, close to 8,000 Christians would await them, a result of the ministry of George Liele. While the impact of Liele’s ministry continues to this day, Liele himself is buried in an unmarked grave in Jamaica.

George Liele’s story reveals an example of hidden and untold stories in American Christianity. Despite preceding Adoniram Judson by three decades, the story of George Liele remains largely unknown. Why does Liele remain unsung as the first American overseas missionary? There may be a bias against the manner in which Liele left for the mission field. The account of Adoniram Judson departing for foreign shores with the American church supporting his endeavors evokes a romanticized notion of the Western missionary traversing oceans for the sake of the gospel. Judson (and William Carey) have defined our assumptions about the traditional missionary from the West. Crossing cultures and national boundaries to pursue sanctioned missionary work served as the defining characteristic of the Western missionary for the last few centuries.

Liele, however, left under questionable circumstances. He had sided with the British during the American Revolution. Even though he had been unjustly jailed, going to Jamaica helped Liele escape future imprisonment at the whim of Sharpe’s children. There seems to be the absence of a missionary call narrative for George Liele. Knowing

---

45 Gayle, George Liele: Pioneer Missionary, 32.
Liele’s full story, however, reveals the depth of devotion required of him. Liele’s call to ministry is clearly revealed in his evangelistic work in the American colonies. As his biographer Clement Gayle notes: “By the time he arrived in Jamaica he was an experienced evangelist and pastor. It is almost impossible to conceive of Liele, the ordained, experienced, Baptist minister seeing himself other than in the role of a missionary to his people.”

Liele traversed national and cultural boundaries to share the gospel. His ministry in Jamaica endured numerous challenges including imprisonment. His life clearly reveals a deep missionary calling by God.

Despite Liele’s evangelical missionary credentials, he has been largely ignored by U.S. Evangelicalism. His story lies outside of traditional parameters of thinking about missions. Liele’s story does not have the romantic missionary allure of Adoniram Judson’s story. Judson’s story provides a more attractive and familiar narrative for the people group more traditionally identified as missionaries. Throughout history, people tend to privilege their own point of view. There are minimal consequences to not knowing another’s history.

George Liele presents an early example of a vibrant faith outside of the dominant cultural expression of Christianity in America. Subsequent developments such as the large number of conversions of freed slaves in the Mississippi delta following the Civil War and the Azusa Street Revival (the birthplace of Pentecostalism) sparked by an African-American pastor, William Seymour, reflect a vibrancy in African-American Christianity that reveals a mission-minded Evangelicalism. Liele evidences evangelical faith before U.S. Evangelicalism had even become clearly defined. His conversionist

---

46 Gayle, George Liele: Pioneer Missionary, 14.
activism would place his evangelical expression of faith in the long line of orthodoxy to which Evangelicals would cling.

2.4 The Spiritual Freedom Road and the Great Migration

The expansion of African-American Christianity from the nineteenth into the twentieth century reveals an adaptable expression of faith that continues to hold to certain central principles. The patterns established by the development of slave religion would help the black church adapt to the changing needs of the community. A revivalistic conversionist impulse would also persevere and manifest in the African-American community as it had through the missionary impulse of George Liele. This impulse would result in the planting of new, vibrant, and growing churches as part of the Great Migration to the northern cities. The formative impact of slave religion would persevere through the antebellum period, the end of the Civil War, the Emancipation Proclamation, and the Reconstruction era and profoundly shape African-American Christianity.

Throughout this era, the need to assert human agency and freedom would find ongoing expression. For the era following the Civil War, that desire for human agency for African-American Christians would continue to manifest in a rapidly changing society.

Even after emancipation, most African-Americans would still live under the oppressive and even violent culture of the South. John Giggie describes "the spiritual lives of African Americans living after redemption in the violent and uncertain world of the Arkansas and Mississippi Delta. It is the story about how blacks found in their sacred beliefs and practices a mediating space though which to respond to the ambiguities, horrors, and hopes of life in the New South. It is about a reinvention of southern black religion during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, about newly formed independent black churches confronting
white supremacy and sweeping changes in technology and the consumer market, and about the spiritual dimensions of the Great Migration.”

Giggie describes a robust church expression that engaged the existing culture with a contextualized faith. “African Americans developed a surprisingly rich and complex sacred culture during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. It was a time of intense religious transformation, when blacks experimented with new symbols of freedom and racial respectability, forms of organizational culture, regional networks of communication, and popular notions of commodification and consumption that enabled them to survive, make progress, and at time resist white supremacy. These innovations, in turn shaped the arc of black culture during and after the Great War.”

The church was helping to shape the culture. Giggie points to the ability of the black church to adapt to the rapidly changing culture. The African-American community would embrace various cultural symbols and even embrace certain material expressions that would assert their pursuit of freedom.

The post-Civil War era witnessed the rise of the independent black churches. The dominion of white churches over the black church would be rejected by many freed slaves who sought a level autonomy that had been denied them. “After the war, blacks forged a religious culture that, above all, reflected their desire for autonomy. . . . As they build their churches and communities, blacks stressed [among other things] managing their own ecclesiastical affairs with little or no involvement from former masters; worshipping in their own churches; [and] being led by black preachers.”

---

48 Giggie, *After Redemption*, 5
assert agency and self-autonomy would serve as a self-defense measure for many of the recently emancipated African-Americans. The long history of enslavement by Christian slave owners and the constant threat of violence to black personhood would call into question the wisdom of submitting to white leadership in matters of the spirit. African-Americans, therefore, would seek to assert their agency even in the midst of tremendous challenges. “While the threat of racial violence certainly hung over Delta blacks, they made decisions about what mattered most to the according to a range of cultural imperatives, especially their ideas about religion. For them, religion was a space where they integrated the realities of second-class citizenship with dreams of overcoming it, where they fashioned ideas and institutions that helped them minimize the ills of segregation and sometimes even overturn them, and where they planned for a future of unchecked liberty even thought they knew not when it would come, only that it would.”

Religion would serve an important function in the time period following the Emancipation Proclamation. Religion would offer the hope of freedom and even the motivation and strength to participation in the Great Migration. The agency to imagine the possibility of a better future in the North would emerge from a prophetic social imagination offered by the church.

The Great Migration, that transported a huge population of African-Americans to the Northern cities, resulted in the establishment of significant urban congregations in the northern and eastern cities. The Great Migration coupled with new immigrants from Eastern and Southern Europe would forever change the landscape of U.S. cities. For example, in Chicago, “since the Civil War, the emerging metropolis had attracted peoples

---

from every part of the world. By 1890, 77.9 percent of its population was foreign born or of foreign parentage.\(^5^1\) Into this diverse mix would enter the African-American community. As Isabel Wilkerson notes: “Over the course of six decades, some six million black southerners left the land of their forefathers and fanned out across the country for an uncertain existence in nearly every other corner of America. . . . It would transform urban America and racist the social and political order of every city it touched.”\(^5^2\) The growth of the African-American community would be acutely felt in the city of Chicago, which saw the community grow from 4,000 to 15,000 between 1870 and 1890 and between 1890 and 1915, that population would swell to 50,000. The numbers would continue to swell past World War II as “Over ten times as many Negroes lived in Chicago in 1966 as in 1920.”\(^5^3\)

Part of the attraction to Chicago was because of the economic opportunity available in cities like Chicago. As the authors of *Black Metropolis* note: “In the 1930’s Chicago was already an immense gathering place for American Negroes. . . . It is in the slaughtering houses, the steel mills and the various industries of Chicago . . . that Negro and other rural Americans and aliens got their foot on the bottom rung of the industrial ladder.”\(^5^4\) The significant influx of African-Americans would increase the presence of Christians and churches in the North. For example, during the Great Migration, the number of African-American churches would increase dramatically in the city of


\(^{53}\) Spear, *Black Chicago*, 6,11,223.

Chicago. Church growth in the city of Chicago would follow the influx of African-Americans. By 1938, there were 475 churches in Chicago. In the African-American neighborhood of Bronzeville, which also served as the center of African-American cultural life for Chicago, there would be “five churches . . . seating over 2,000 persons and claiming more than 10,000 members, and some fifty church buildings seating between 500 and 2000 persons.” The black churches on the south side of Chicago would be the first evidence of the mega-church phenomena in the United States, preceding Willow Creek and Saddleback by several decades. The conversionist and activist impulse that defined evangelicalism would be most evident in the African-American churches with numerous church plants and notable church growth demonstrated these Christian communities committed to a missional activist faith.

African-American churches in Chicago would not only exhibit numerical strength, they would also show strong denominational involvement that reflected the desire for autonomy and the assertion of agency. The churches in Bronzeville would claim 200,000 members distributed among over thirty denominations. Most of the churches would exhibit a desire for independence in their denominational affiliation and in their social networks. “Almost half of the churches, and over two-thirds of the people who claim church membership, are affiliated with one of the two Negro National Baptist Conventions. These congregations and their ministers have virtually no face-to-face relationships with any of their white co-religionists. . . . About ten percent of the churches and less than ten percent of the church-goers in Bronzeville are affiliated with

---

predominantly white denominations.” Occurring during roughly the same time period would be another movement in the church that would also impact black and white relationships in the American church. The Azusa Street Revivals that sparked the Pentecostal movement in the United States would begin as a diverse community that would splinter along racial lines. The igniting spark of the modern Pentecostal movement is usually traced to the Azusa Street Revivals led by an African-American pastor, William J. Seymour in Los Angeles, CA. Seymour would provide an unlikely leader of a movement that would serve as one of the most important religious movements of the twentieth century.

Seymour grew up in the American South during the Reconstruction era as a child of former slaves. Born in 1870 in Louisiana, Seymour would grow up in the heart of the south, his family existing at the poverty level after the Civil War and emancipation. In 1895, Seymour would make his way to Indianapolis, a city with a mixed racial history, where he would have a conversion experience in a Methodist Episcopal Church. Seymour would travel throughout the United States with stops in Cincinnati, OH, where he attended Bible school, Jackson, MS and Houston, TX. In Jackson MS, he is believed to have met with C. H. Mason, who was the founder of the Church of God in Christ. In Houston, he would encounter the intolerant camp revivalist, Charles Parham, who allowed Seymour to attend his school by setting him outside the regular classroom. Parham would preach “on divine healing, on baptism in the Spirit with the ‘Biblical

---

56 Drake and Cayton, Black Metropolis, 412-413
evidence’ of speaking in tongues, and on evangelism.”

On February 22, 1906, Seymour would arrive in Los Angeles, CA, where the Azusa Street Revivals would be sparked. Revival meetings started by Seymour would be reported in the Los Angeles Daily Times. The April 18, 1906 newspaper article report that tongue speaking had broken at the Azusa Street Mission on would be met with both disdain and curiosity. The revival meetings “were marked with spontaneous worship and shouts of praise to the Lord, fervent prayers, dynamic preaching, cries for repentance, yearnings for sanctification, manifestations of the gifts of the Holy Spirit and testimonies.”

Seymour would preside over a multi-ethnic gathering of believers that could be identified as both a “communicative phenomenon” and a “social protest.” The presence of a multi-ethnic gathering would provide a sharply contrasting image to the existing social imaginary of extreme segregation, particularly evident in the church context. Randall Stephens’ summary account of the Azusa Street Revivals points towards “an astounding interracialism.” He describes southern newspapers reporting of blacks and whites in Christian fellowship and praying together. The breakdown of racial prejudice is

---

58 Unless otherwise specified, the above paragraph draws from Robeck Jr., The Azusa Street Mission and Revival, 17-86; from Estrella Alexander, Black Fire: One Hundred Years of African American Pentecostalism (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2011), 15-27; and from Grant Wacker, Heaven Below (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2001), 226-235.
lauded and the color line was described as being “washed away in the blood.”

“According to the California Eagle, Los Angeles’ African-American newspaper, Pastor Seymour came to Los Angeles with the intention of founding a congregation in which members of all races would be welcome.” Diversity became a key aspect of the Azusa Street revival.

That diversity and the integration of races would not be sustained. The first grumblings would occur with the arrival of Seymour’s former teacher, Charles Parham. Parham would arrive in Los Angeles and seemingly expected control of the revival to be ceded to him. Parham not only sought to temper the movement’s religious enthusiasm, he sought to end the integration evident in the movement. “He was appalled by what he saw as improper race mixing and the ‘animalisms’ of the unsightly, over emotive worship.”

Eventually, Parham would set up separate meetings at a nearby YMCA and would begin to discredit Seymour throughout the country. The promise of integration would begin to disintegrate. “Within four years the Azusa Street Mission had a largely black constituency. . . [as] most newly birthed denominations were formed along racial lines. . . . Within ten years of the movement’s beginning, there were virtually two Pentecostal movements — one heavily white, the other almost entirely black.” The Church of God in Christ which had been founded by an African-American pastor, C. H. Mason, had been biracial in its early years. But in 1914, the majority of whites voted to form a separate fellowship now known as the Assemblies of God. This split occurred along racial lines,

---

62 Robeck Jr., The Azusa Street Mission and Revival, 14.
63 Alexander, Black Fire, 138.
64 Alexander, Black Fire, 139.
“stemming primarily from the reluctance of some whites to serve under a black leader.” 66

The opportunity for racial integration was derailed by a dysfunctional theological imagination that could not envision the possibility of a black leader over white members. The assumption of white exceptionalism would prevent the emergence of a truly multi-racial denomination.

2.5 Civil Rights and the Imagination of Liberation

The deep levels of racism, cultural insensitivity, and cultural incompetence resulted in a deep-seated rift between different communities in the United States. Not only have explicit examples of racism generated animosity and mistrust, but implicit approval of racism and a passive inactivity toward injustice have perpetuated the racial divide. The social, political, and cultural gulf between the historic black churches and the white churches would continue to widen as the experiences of the white church would diverge significantly from the experiences of the black church. Segregation in the church was exacerbated by segregation in society, and vice versa. This lack of integration allowed racism to become a rampant problem not only in society but within the church. With primary relationships and connections built along racial lines, affinity toward one’s own racial group took precedence over a Christian community that could bridge the racial divide.

Segregation in the church fostered the growth of unique and specific traditions. As Sweeney notes, “Black Christians developed their own ecclesiastical traditions, improving on the message they heard and returning significant contribution to the

evangelical movement. The Africans’ full-bodied, improvisational, communal worship and praise; their dynamic preaching methods; their commitment to biblical justice; even dozens of their spirituals have leavened the evangelical movement here and abroad.”67

Over the years, these unique cultural expressions of Christianity arising out of the African-American church became another point of disconnect between black and white Christians.

The divergence between the black church and the white church became even more pronounced during the civil rights movement. During the time when African-Americans were pursuing justice and civil rights, many Evangelical white congregations remained on the sidelines. By failing to stand for justice and opting to ignore injustice in society for the sake of focusing on the salvation of individual souls, many of the white churches lost credibility in the black community. The power of Christian witness was diminished when the white church failed to stand with those fighting for civil rights.

The civil rights movement (rooted deeply in the black church) is an important spiritual and social movement that affected both individuals and society. The movement had an impact not only on the African-American community but on all ethnic communities, including white ones. Civil rights are often seen in social and political terms. We often fail to recognize this movement as one of the most significant faith-based campaigns in American history. The failure by many in the white church to participate would lead to an understandable sense of distrust.

In his famous Letter from a Birmingham Jail, Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., the leader of the civil rights movement and a Baptist pastor, challenges white Christians to take a

---

stand against the injustices being perpetrated. Dr. King saw the need for the entire church community to unite and stand against a social injustice.

I have been so greatly disappointed with the white church and its leadership. … I do not say this as one of those negative critics who can always find something wrong with the church. I say this as a minister of the gospel, who loves the church. … When I was suddenly catapulted into the leadership of the bus protest in Montgomery, Alabama, a few years ago, I felt we would be supported by the white church. I felt that the ministers, priests, and rabbis of the South would be among our strongest allies. Instead, some have been outright opponents, refusing to understand the freedom movement and misrepresenting its leaders; all too many others have been more cautious than courageous and have remained silent behind the anesthetizing security of stained-glass windows. … In the midst of blatant injustices inflicted upon the Negro, I have watched white churchmen stand on the sideline and mouth pious irrelevancies and sanctimonious trivialities. In the midst of a mighty struggle to rid our nation of racial and economic injustice, I have heard many ministers say: “Those are social issues, with which the gospel has no real concern.” And I have watched many churches commit themselves to a completely otherworldly religion which makes a strange, unbiblical distinction between body and soul, between the sacred and the secular. … There was a time when the church was very powerful—in the time when the early Christians rejoiced at being deemed worthy to suffer for what they believed. In those days the church was not merely a thermometer that recorded the ideas and principles of popular opinion; it was a thermostat that transformed the mores of society.68

Because of the failure of many in the white church to stand against injustice, the rift between black and white grew. These historical rifts provide obstacles for cross-cultural communication and ministry even into the twenty-first century. These historical examples provide a small glimpse into the tainted racial history of the American church. Christian witness and the unity of the body of Christ have been damaged by a less-than-stellar racial history in the United States.

68 Martin Luther King, Jr., “Letter from a Birmingham Jail,” The Martin Luther King, Jr., Research and Education Institute,
2.6 Analysis

The ghettoizing of the African-American church as a novelty topic of historical study has hindered the U.S. Evangelical church from engaging a more robust historical narrative. The rich narrative of the African-American Christian experience has been largely ignored by Evangelicals. The assumption of the exceptionalism of the white American Evangelical story hinders this engagement. Despite tremendous theological affinity between the black church and the Evangelical church, the historical divergence, or more accurately, the historical silencing of the black church results in a theological famine. Historical and theological engagement between these two branches of the American church would require new paradigms that allow for transcendence beyond the limited theological imagination of Evangelical Christianity.

My denomination, the Evangelical Covenant Church denomination (Covenant) has been touted as a success story of a predominantly white (Swedish) denomination that has transitioned to a multi-ethnic denomination. The historical roots of the Covenant are found in the Swedish immigrant story, which contributes an important narrative to the overall story of the Covenant. Often, the Swedish immigrant story is presented as the exceptional narrative around which the rest of the denomination revolves around. The dominance of the Swedish heritage is evident in the denominational seminary where every notable space is named after a Swede. The idealized image of the Covenant is the Swedish male.


69 Portions of this section are drawn from Soong-Chan Rah, “Response to Peterson,” The Covenant Quarterly Vol. LXVII, No. 1 (February 2009), 44-47.
At the same time, the growth edge of the denomination has been notable in the non-white, non-Swedish segment of the denomination. “The denomination’s ethnic presence has grown 162 percent – more than three times the rate of overall Covenant growth.” The challenge for the Covenant is to develop a unity out of the diversity that now characterizes the denomination. One approach to diversity was to centralize the narrative of the Swedish immigrant as the primary narrative to which other narratives would be added. The image that is conjured with this approach is the Scriptural image of Gentiles being grafted onto the tree of the Jewish faith. An incorrect appropriation of that image emerged with the grafting on of new ethnicities to the trunk of the Swedish Covenant story. The historiographic assumption was the primacy of Swedish culture and history. The new members of the denomination were simply adding a colorful face to the existing culture and narrative. The more appropriate image is not a tree trunk with branches grafted on, but a reversal of that image with tributaries leading towards the larger sea. The Swedish heritage of the Covenant would serve as one of many of the contributors. Each tributary holds equal value and contributes to the larger sea.

In the imagination of the Evangelical mind, the story of whiteness provides the central tree trunk. The stories of the Puritan fathers who maintained the integrity of the gospel, the story of the great American missionary Adoniram Judson and his heroic self-sacrificial activism, the story of entrepreneurial pastors who built mega-churches in the suburbs, and the growing influence of Pentecostalism through the Assemblies of God all point to the exceptionalism and triumph of the white body and white mind. However, each of these stories is a part of the larger story of God. Lost are the narratives from slave
religion, the story of George Liele, the first mega-churches in the U.S. found on the south side of Chicago, and the original roots of Pentecostalism. The elevation of the narrative of the exceptional white Christian prevents the U.S. Evangelical from seeing the full story of the church and assumes the triumph of the Evangelical church as part of the long victorious march of White Christianity.
Part II
Race and the Problem of Evangelical Theology
3. The Theological Imagination and the Sin of Exceptionalism

The narratives of U.S. Evangelicalism and the African-American church overlap in significant ways. Despite theological affinity between African-American Christians and U.S. Evangelicalism, there is a lack of an ecclesial connection. The lack of integration of black evangelicals with the wider stream of U.S. Evangelicalism reveals the theological problem of white supremacy. White supremacy evident throughout the history of Western Christianity elevates the white body and mind over the black body and mind. The creation account and Biblical anthropology are manipulated to affirm the exceptionalism of whites. These dysfunctional theological assumptions are revealed in the justification of the slave trade and the establishment of the oppressive system of slavery in the American colonies.

3.1 The Diseased Theological Imagination

The power of theology is the power to generate a view of the world that expands beyond the limitations of one’s own immediate reality. The capacity to see beyond one’s own context to engage God offers both a strength and a weakness. Christian theology raises the possibility that humanity can engage a transcendent imagination. At the same time, this capacity for transcendent vision can lead to a sense of arrogance and privilege by limited human beings. The capacity to connect with the divine can lead Christians to assume that they not only know what is best for the world but that they speak from a position of privilege, chosen and preferred by God. This sense of exceptionalism shapes the imagination of the dominant racial group and informs their engagement with the other, who stands outside of the boundaries defined by the dominant culture.
Willie Jennings asserts that theology is the “imaginative capacity to redefine the social.”¹ Walter Brueggemann calls the church to a theology that engages the prophetic imagination. Brueggemann believes that “the task of prophetic ministry is to nurture, nourish, and evoke a consciousness and perception alternative to the consciousness and perception of the dominant culture around us.”² The power of theology is the power to expand our imagination. William Cavanaugh adds that “the imagination of a society is the sense of what is real and what is not; it includes a memory of how the society got where it is, a sense of who it is, and hopes and projects for the future. . . . [it] is the condition of possibility for the organization and signification of bodies in a society.”³ Theology offers the possibility of a prophetic imagination that can transform the individual and society.

The reality of a broken world, however, means that Christians often engage in a dysfunctional theological imagination. As Jennings asserts, “Christianity in the Western world lives and moves within a diseased social imagination.”⁴ This diseased social imagination has resulted in a racialized identity that elevates the worth of the dominant culture over and against other cultures. A warped Christian imagination that projects whiteness as normative and as exceptional gave power to white Christianity to project a defining negative image of the other. The theological deficiency at work in American society and in the American church can be identified as the sin of the racialization of the image of God.

Steven Newcomb offers an example of how a diseased theological imagination can ultimately corrupt civil society. He draws upon cognitive theory to explain how imagination shapes practice in the arena of federal law. Newcomb summarizes that how the United States interacted with the Native community “can be studied as an ongoing process of mental or conceptual activity and socialized human behavior. In part, it [federal Indian law] can therefore be analyzed and studied in terms of conceptual metaphors, image-schemas, and other cognitive operations.”\(^5\) In other words, how the dominant culture imagined the world around them and how their imagination engaged with the presence of the indigenous community in North America shaped a dysfunctional narrative in U.S. history. “The judgment that the Indians were savage ‘heathens’ living in ‘an unhealthy state’ led to the inference that they were living an immoral way of life. This in turn led to the conclusion that Christian European missionaries and educators needed to lead the Indians to a moral way of life, which, from a Christian European perspective, was considered to be a ‘civilized’ and ‘Christian’ way of life.”\(^6\)

Newcomb points out that “the central premise of U.S. Indian law and policy -- that the United States has plenary (virtually absolute) authority over Indian nations on the basis of a discovery of the North American continent by Christian people.”\(^7\) The assumption that dominion and authority were based on the Christian identity of the European colonists traces back to fifteenth century Church doctrine that came to be known as the Doctrine of Discovery. This series of papal bulls allowed the European colonialists to believe that they had discovered lands in Africa and in the Americas. In

\(^7\) Newcomb, *Pagans in the Promised Land*, xxi
1493, Pope Nicholas V wrote the following words in a papal bull: “invite, search out, capture, vanquish, and subdue all Saracens and pagans . . . Reduce their persons to perpetual slavery, and to apply and appropriate to himself and his successors . . . And to convert them to his and their use and profit.”

As the true image-bearers of God, Europeans would have the right to conquer, subdue, and kidnap those made in a lesser image. This assumption would serve as the justification for conquest in the New World. White American enslavement of Africans and the removal and eventual genocide of Native Americans emerges from a diseased imagination shaped by the Doctrine of Discovery. In turn, this diseased imagination would find expression in the social fabric of American society.

Newcomb notes that the 1823 Supreme Court ruling Johnson and Graham’s Lessee v. M’Intosh serves as the cornerstone of federal Indian law. The unanimous decision written by Chief Justice John Marshall argued "that 'Christian people' had 'discovered' the lands of North America and that this event had given Christian Europeans 'dominion' over and 'absolute title' to the lands of 'heathens.'" Newcomb notes "the presumption that the United States has a legitimate right to lay down numerous laws and policies for Indian nations is rooted in the idea expressed by Chief Justice John Marshall in the Johnson ruling that the first "Christian people" to discover lands inhabited by 'heathens' has ultimate dominion over and absolute title to those lands." The language of Johnson

---

9 Newcomb, Pagans in the Promised Land, xxi.
10 Newcomb, Pagans in the Promised Land, xvi.
11 Newcomb, Pagans in the Promised Land, 11.
reveals a theological influence that shows a Christian imagination at work in a
dysfunctional way in American society.

American Christianity’s perpetuation of the myth of the Promised Land for white
Americans arises from a self-perceived exceptionalism. White Americans are an
exceptional people endowed with certain rights and privileges as inheritors of God’s
image. This sense of exceptionalism allows for the exclusion of those who do not fall
inside the boundaries of whiteness. A warped Christian imagination that projected
whiteness as normative gave power to white Christianity to project a defining negative
image of the other. White Christians seized the power to name another and assume
power and authority over the other.

The positive potential of the theological imagination finds dysfunctional expression in
a social imagination that operates out of a significant sense of exceptionalism and
privilege by limited humans. The diseased imagination that forms the foundation of a
racialized society confronts the central Christian doctrine of the *Imago Dei*. By replacing
God’s standards regarding human anthropology, the dominant culture assumes a
privileged position embedded in the superiority of whiteness. This assumption of
exceptionalism allows the self-exalted Christian to determine what is best for the rest of
the world.

The diseased theological imagination of the American Evangelical requires a
challenge that cannot arise from within its own community. African-American
Christianity and theology are a profound and essential theological marker that has been
largely ignored by U.S. Evangelical Christianity. Intersection with the African-American
Christian narrative would benefit U.S. Evangelicalism. The diseased imagination hinders
the opportunity to engage in authentic conversation on race and racism. Evangelical theology engages sin on individual terms and allows white Evangelicals to determine the parameters of sin based on the experiences of white privilege and supremacy, rather than engaging the whole of human experience.

For Evangelicals, the doctrine of sin serves as a crucial and central doctrine. However, the lack of engagement with the narrative of the African-American church results in a deficient doctrinal position for Evangelicals. The doctrine of hamartiology must be revisited in light of how white Evangelicalism has created a dysfunctional anthropology of whiteness and white supremacy. A proper theological understanding of sin is needed in order to address the issue of racism in the American Christian context.

3.2 The Sin of the Racialization of the Image of God

In *The Death of Satan*, Andrew Delbanco laments the loss of the sense of evil in American society asserting that recognizing evil may now be beyond the reach of the American imagination. While the doctrine of sin serves as a foundational topic of Christian theology, the U.S. Evangelical understanding of sin is often limited by an individualism that arises from a Western cultural captivity. The nature of humanity and human sinfulness has been reduced to individual, personal, and private action and fails to extend into a corporate, social setting. The social and corporate origins and implications of sin may be lost on a community where sin is understood strictly in individual terms. The diseased theological imagination expressed in the context of hyper-individualism

---

prevents a more robust engagement with the doctrine of sin, particularly as it relates to race and racism.

While U.S. Evangelicals may agree that racism is a sin — how that sin is defined may range widely. Among Evangelicals, racism is often understood as personal prejudices and biases rather than being understood in social context as a structural problem. Emerson and Smith note that this inability is a result of an inadequate theological toolbox for white evangelicals.\textsuperscript{14} The need to re-examine this doctrine arises from the failure to engage the broader context of theology, particularly the perspective arising from the narrative of African American Christianity. The culturally captive definition of sin endemic to Evangelicalism contributes to a furthering of the diseased theological imagination. Evangelical hamartiology needs the corrective of a prophetic theological imagination.

One of the definitions of sin employed by Evangelicals is the usurping of God’s rightful position in creation. Sin is the human attempt to take God’s place in creation and determine what is good from a God-like position of authority. Evangelical theologian, John Stott writes: “to sin is, therefore, to take away from God what is his own, which means to steal from and so to dishonor him.”\textsuperscript{15} The racialization of the \textit{imago Dei} provides for us an example of the human attempt to elevate human standards in the place of God.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer examines this approach to sin in \textit{Creation Fall}. Bonhoeffer posits that “man’s limit is in the middle of his existence, not on the edge. The limit which

\textsuperscript{15} John Stott, \textit{The Cross of Christ} (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1990), 188.
we look for on the edge is the limit of his condition, of his technology, of his possibilities. The limit in the middles is the limit of his reality, of his true existence.\(^\text{16}\) Bonhoeffer explains sin as the human attempt to transcend “the limit.” Humanity created in the image of God attempts to transcend “the limit,” established by God. To Bonhoeffer, material existence in the body is not an inherent evil to overcome but a reality to be embraced.

While bodily existence is not considered evil, it does operate within limits. Bonhoeffer asserts that this limit gestures towards true human existence. Limit defines and orders humanity rather than besmirches humanity. It is in the limit that there is true human existence.\(^\text{17}\) Transcending that “limit” would be an essential element of the nature of sin. Racism, particularly as expressed as white supremacy would be an example of transgressing “the limit”.

Transcending that “limit” would be an essential element of the nature of sin. Racism, particularly as expressed as white supremacy would be an example of transgressing “the limit”.

Bonhoeffer describes the Fall as the following: "the middle has been entered, the limit has been transgressed. Now man stands in the middle, now he is without limit. That

\(^{16}\) Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Creation and Fall / Temptation* (New York: Touchstone, 1959), 57.  
\(^{17}\) Bonhoeffer, *Creation Fall*, 51-58.  
\(^{18}\) Bonhoeffer, *Creation Fall*, 77-78
he stands in the middle means that now he lives out of his own resources and no longer from the middle. That he is without a limit means that he is alone. To be in the middle and to be alone means to be like God. Man is *sicut deus*. Now he lives out of himself, now he creates his own life, he is his own creator. He no longer needs the Creator, he has become a creator himself, to the extent that he creates his own life."\(^1^9\) To Bonhoeffer, human life is not about transcending the limit but about embracing the limit.

God graciously preserves humanity in his creatureliness. "The created world is now the fallen, preserved world. In the world between curse and promise, between *tob* and *ra*, good and evil. . . . With his whole existence split into *tob* and *ra*, in estrangement from God, in the Fall, he remains in the fallen and falling world. He is, therefore, in a twilight. And because he is in a twilight, all his thinking about Creation and Fall is bound to it -- the thinking of the biblical author as well -- as far as it remains objective thinking and does not become fantastic. . . . He remains in the twilight and God affirms him in this, his new *sicut deus* world, by preserving him there."\(^2^0\) For Bonhoeffer, the Creation narrative affirms rather than denies creatureliness. Simplistic abstraction and the separation of the material from the spiritual and heavenly provide an affront to the Creation narrative. It is an example of the human attempt to assert the human self as the standard in the place of God.

The sin of racism, therefore, is best understood in light of the creation account and Biblical anthropology. Genesis attests that the Spirit of God was endowed upon all humanity. Humanity is an image bearer of God. To deny the image of God from certain races would be the ultimate expression of transcending “the limit”. It would place

\(^{19}\) Bonhoeffer, *Creation Fall*, 80.
humanity in the role of God, determining good and evil. Theologian G. C. Berkouwer states: “sin is only understandable in the glow of the fullness and majesty of God’s activity.” Racism elevates the image of God in one people group and diminishes the image of God in others.

This perspective reflects a dysfunctional Evangelical Christian imagination. The theological imagination engages sin purely on individual terms. The white Evangelical transcends the limit and determines the parameters of sin based on the experiences of white privilege and supremacy, rather than engaging the whole of human experience. Evangelical theology fails to engage the communal suffering of the African American church. For U.S. Evangelicals, the understanding of sin should be re-examined in light of how white Evangelicalism’s diseased imagination has created a dysfunctional anthropology of whiteness, white supremacy, and white exceptionalism.

3.3 The Sin of Elevating the White Body

Evangelical theology asserts a high anthropology by placing humanity as “the highest creature God has made, an image-bearer of God, who is only a little lower than God, and under whose feet all of creation has been placed.” Every human being is believed to be made in the image of God. The sin of racism determines that the full expression of the image of God is found only in certain races. Racism is the usurping of God’s rightful position in creation. The main expression of racism in the United States is the theological distortion that elevates whiteness to an exceptional position over other races. This sinful expression racializes the image of God and links God’s image to

---

20 Bonhoeffer, *Creation Fall*, 100-101.
whiteness. Whiteness becomes universalized and becomes the embodiment of all that is good, true, and honorable. The racialization of the image of God serves as a key factor in understanding racism as sin.

The fundamental Christian doctrine of the *imago Dei* asserts that humanity “bears and reflects the divine likeness among the inhabitants of the earth, because he/[she] is a spirit, an intelligent, voluntary agent.”\(^{23}\) The Christian understanding of the doctrine of the image of God means that “we could search the world over, but we could not find a man/[woman] so low, so degraded, or so far below the social, economic, and moral norms that we have established for ourselves that he/[she] had not been created in the image of God.”\(^{24}\) The sin of Western Christianity was to take this meaningful doctrine that affirms the dignity of every human being and warp it to elevate one people group over another.

The human attempt to take God’s place in creation results in sin. Human hubris leads to the assumption that his/her own judgments of the world are equal or even superior to God’s judgments. Racialization of the image of God elevates one race over against another. The diseased theological imagination assumes that a superior expression of God’s image exists in the body of the white American, allowing the rejection of those who differ from the body image of the white American, particularly those of African descent. This belief reflects a fundamental violation of the image of God found in all people.

The image of the white person becomes the norm by which other races are judged and measured. Whiteness is elevated to the level of godliness. The person of color


becomes the opposite of what is closest to God. The determination of white superiority and the relegation of blacks to the opposite end of the spectrum is a theological perversion. The creation account is at the whim and mercy of white supremacy, rather than arising out of an understanding of the Christian Scriptures. There exists within the project of the racialization of the image of God, an underlying assumption of White American Christian exceptionalism.

The rise of the concept of American exceptionalism, therefore, is a theological problem. Belief in exceptionalism is fundamentally related to how people view themselves in relationship to God. The sin of setting up one’s own physical image as the ultimate ideal results in an exaggerated self-perception. This assumption of superiority allows the white Christian American to take a position of final authority over who has greater access to the benefits of American society.

Rather than confronting sinful racist perspectives, theology became the tool of ongoing oppression. A warped understanding of the doctrine of the image of God becomes the justification for white supremacy. As Willie Jennings explains:

Whiteness was being held up as an aspect of creation with embedded facilitating powers. Whiteness from the moment of discovery and consumption was a social and theological way of imagining, an imaginary that evolved into a method of understanding the world. It was a social imaginary in that it posited the existence of difference and collectivity for those in the Old World faced with the not easily explainable peoples and phenomena of the New World. It was a theological imaginary because whiteness suggested that one may enter a true moment of creation gestalt. Whiteness transcended all peoples because it was a means of seeing all peoples at the very moment it realized itself. Whiteness was a global vision of Europeans and Africans but, more than that, a way of organizing bodies by proximity to and approximation of white bodies.\(^\text{25}\)


White bodies, not God, became normative in Christian anthropology. A dysfunctional theological imagination could not envision a world without the primacy of white aesthetics. Tragically, the Western theological imagination was rooted in the assumption of white exceptionalism and the elevation of white flesh.

White American Christians have made their own bodies the standard of reference in the determination of values and norms. Whiteness has become universalized and has become the embodiment of all that is good, true, and honorable. In contrast, blackness became the opposite of proximity to God. Black bodies were set in a negative position vis-a-vis white bodies. The question of human identity and worth is a theological question. Unfortunately, cultural captivity and white supremacy are more indicative of Evangelical theology than the actual Biblical account.

The attempt to justify the exceptionalism of the white body yields two different dysfunctional interpretations of Biblical anthropology: the polygenic and the monogenic perspective. The polygenic perspective of creation claims that the different races were created separately. Different races have different origins with different creation stories. Blacks and whites, therefore, belong to entirely different species. For example, the Dake’s Annotated Reference Bible, a popular Bible with commentary used by many Pentecostal denominations, states that God created different “species” of humans. The commentary also talks about a Biblical prohibition for miscegenation.\footnote{Finis Jennings Dake, \textit{The Dake Annotated Reference Bible} (Dake Bible Publishers) See also \url{http://faithandheritage.com/2014/04/finis-dake-on-racial-segregation/}} Black bodies would have entirely different origins from white bodies. The image of God, therefore, can be attributed to whites and denied to blacks. The polygenic approach manipulates
Scripture in an attempt to justify a warped perspective on the gradation of the value of human life.

Polygenism results in the assertion of the superiority of whites over blacks. “Polygenists . . . believed that the races were created separately and that they had been endowed with different attributes and unequal aptitudes from the start. . . . Polygenism is the more radical theory, because it supports the contention not just that black people and white people have evolved (or devolved) at different rates, but that they belong to entirely different species.”27 Because black bodies had different origins from white bodies, the image of God could be attributed to those who are white and denied to those who are black. Only whites, therefore, could be considered as made in the image of God, since the Genesis account of creation is now only applicable to the history of whites.

An example of how the presupposition of the inferiority of non-white people led to the perpetuation of dysfunctional theology is found in the story of Louis Agassiz. A nineteenth century Harvard professor, Agassiz was an American scientist who became a leading authority in the natural sciences. He was also responsible for the perpetuation of the belief that science supported the inferiority of non-whites. Despite an absence of scientific proof, Agassiz explained in a lecture that “the brain of the Negro . . . is that of the imperfect brain of a 7 month’s infant in the womb of a White.” Agassiz writes that “viewed zoologically, the several races of men were well marked and distinct. . . . These races did not originate from a common centre, nor from a single pair.”28

---

His analysis did not arise from genuine scientific research but instead arose from his feelings towards blacks that are revealed in his initial encounter with them. Agassiz in a letter to his mother writes “that he had come into contact with actual Negroes for the first time in his life. . . . [He states:] It is impossible for me to repress the feeling that they are not of the same blood as us. . . . What unhappiness for the white race to have tied its existence so closely to that of the negroes in certain countries! God protect us from such contact!” Agassiz’ visceral racist “feeling” towards African-Americans led to the formation of a racially-biased conclusion that blacks could not have been of the same species as whites.  

Additionally, American anthropologist, Samuel George Morton wrote pseudo-scientific works that cataloged and ranked human races by cranial capacity. Morton created artificial racial categories that had no foundation in science. “In descending order of volume, these were: Caucasian, Mongolian, Malay, Native American, and Negro. . . . Morton’s data were completely unsound. Since he possessed only the skulls and whatever information their donors chose to send along with them, he had no way of checking the reliability of his racial attributions. He failed to factor gender and overall body size — information he sometimes did not even have — into his calculations. And he dealt with skewing in his samples by making seat-of-the-pants adjustments.”  

Science was manipulated to justify racist perspectives.

Stephen Jay Gould in *The Mismeasure of Man* asserts that Morton had manipulated the data to fit his bias that Europeans had larger brains and therefore, greater

---

30 Menand, *The Metaphysical Club*, 103
intellectual capacity. A 2011 New York Times article argues that Gould’s analysis was incorrect. Wade states that “Gould . . . based his attack on the premise that Morton believed that brain size was correlated with intelligence. But there is no evidence that Morton believed this or was trying to prove it.” Unfortunately, the real motivation for Morton proves to be even more damning of the diseased theological imagination in that “Morton, was measuring his skulls to study human variation, as part of his inquiry into whether God had created the human races separately.”

The inability of the white supremacist to deal with an encounter with black flesh meant that the creation account had to be re-imagined. The prevailing theological framework of the time supported, rather than challenged biased notions. A polygenist position that different races emerge from a separate creation origin has no foundation in Scripture but arises from a preference for white skin over and against black skin. In other words, a warped theological imagination arising from an assumption of white superiority leads to the manipulation of a worldview or framework to fit one’s own biases.

The monogenic perspective concedes that all humans are descended from a common origin. Racial inequalities are attributed to different rates of degeneration for different races. This theological perversion is a misreading of the account of Noah and the flood in the Scriptures. The white mind extrapolates the story to fit the narrative of white exceptionalism. The curse that Noah inflicts upon Canaan in Genesis 9 is seen as a curse inflicted upon all blacks. In 1857, George D. Armstrong, a Presbyterian pastor in Virginia, wrote a pamphlet called “The Christian Doctrine of Slavery.” Armstrong argued that slavery is a consequence of sin, rooted in a curse found in Genesis upon Ham, one of


123
the sons of Noah (Genesis 9:20-25)\textsuperscript{33}. Noah, of course, would be perceived as a white patriarch (maybe someone as handsome as Russell Crowe) with the authority to curse non-white flesh. The Bible story is manipulated to justify white supremacy and black oppression.

The interpretation that the appearance of black flesh is connected to the cursing of Canaan is based on the white supremacist assumption that having black skin must be a punishment from God. This association of black flesh with a curse fails to acknowledge the power of God’s image found in all of humanity. The privilege of the dominant race is the ability to manipulate biblical interpretation to impose an identity upon the other. The power to take a level of authority that defines the other is a power that is only accessible to the Creator. In co-opting that power, the white supremacist places him/herself in the place of God.

White bodies not God became the norm of the creation account. The theological imagination could not envision a world with any other expression of the fullness of humanity other than white flesh. As the European colonial Christian mind began to encounter inhabitants of the African continent, the diseased imagination could not conceive of a world where white flesh did not reign supreme. The diseased theological imagination could only operate within the assumption of European centrality and exceptionalism. The encounter with “the other” resulted in the elevation of white bodies and minds over and above African bodies and minds.

The emergence of a dysfunctional perspective on race can be attributed in part to the inability of the dominant group to deal with difference. A warped theology that privileged the perspective, narrative and position of whites exasperates the confusion of whites when they encounter otherness. Children will begin to recognize physiological differences in others, but they can be socialized to respond to that difference in an appropriate manner. A warped theology of racism interprets difference, not through the lens of God’s wisdom and creativity, but perceives difference in the other as “less than.” The elevation of a personal human emotional reaction over God’s standard of declaring created order as good reveals the assumption of white superiority.

The diseased imagination would perform intellectual gymnastics to accommodate this assumption. The effort to explain difference did not result in a biblical account of creation that would acknowledge the power of God to create difference, but rather an account that would denigrate non-whites and relegate them to inferior status. Todd Vogel observes that scientific racism sought to establish black inferiority. He reveals the assumption that "the shape of African American heads made them not only inferior in reasoning and thus deficient in linguistic capital, but it rendered them a people with different sentences and words that separated them from whites." The assumption of physical proximity of whiteness to original humanity (fully endowed with the Creator’s image and closer to the original intention of God) leads to the assumption of physical and intellectual superiority. The problem with the Western imagination is that a culturally captive theology furthers these positions rather than confront them.

---

Whiteness is perceived to be closer to original humanity. Whiteness is more fully endowed with the Creator’s image and closer to the original intention of God. A warped understanding of the creation story and a warped application of the doctrine of the image of God had become the justification for white supremacy. This diseased imagination springs from misappropriation of the doctrine of the *imago Dei*. A human standard based upon physical characteristics have replaced God’s pronouncement over creation. It is the human attempt to take God’s place in creation.

The manipulation of Scripture and Biblical doctrine to fit one’s biases is the sin and failure of theology to provide truthful insight from God’s word. In both the monogenic and polygenic accounts, there was an attempt to justify the warped perspective that the value of human life could have gradations. The pseudo-science of racial categorization that emerged prior to the onset of Darwin’s theories arose from the context of white American Christianity. The unfortunate positions held by those that purported to provide scientific evidence of the superiority of whites over against other races is even more tragic given the deeply rooted influence of Christianity within the culture.

The pseudo-science of racial gradation occurs at a time of “the dominance of theology in the [academic / college] curriculum, which obliged scholars in every field to align their work with Christian orthodoxy. Theology was the academic trump card.”\textsuperscript{35} The proponents of these positions acquiesced to an existing sinful framework of understanding races and failed to apply proper theological imagination that would prophetically challenge racist ideas. Instead, the ideas of white supremacy originated out

\textsuperscript{35} Menand, *The Metaphysical Club*, 100.
of the context of the Christian imagination. The heretical positions that buttress the
categorization and the subsequent gradation of the races as possessing differing levels of
humanity emerge from a catastrophic theological failure. Rather than confronting sinful
racist perspectives, theology became the tool of ongoing oppression. A warped
understanding of the creation story and a warped application of the doctrine of the image
of God becomes the justification for white supremacy. The assumption that the image of
God could be found exclusively in the body of the white American allows the rejection of
those who differ from the body image of the Anglo-American. This belief reflects a
fundamental violation of the image of God found in all human flesh.

3.4 The Exceptionalism of the White Mind

The establishment of white superiority was not limited to the categories of body
and skin but extends to the mind as well. The assumption of the superiority of white
bodies moves towards the assumption of the superiority of white minds and the product
of white minds (such as language and culture) with the corresponding deprecation of
black minds and the product of black minds. With an assumption of mental superiority,
whites have the authority to determine appropriate roles for the African. Because whites
possess a superior mind, blacks will be relegated to menial, physical labor and not have
access to a life of the mind.

Todd Vogel finds that black writers and orators would be under the assumptions of
deficiency when it came to their intellectual, linguistic, and cultural capacity. "More
useful for understanding the white supremacy that writers and orators of color faced is to
look at how these ideas of black inferiority affected cultural capital or, more specifically,
the power to deploy language.” These positions held by majority culture were often left unchallenged by the Christian community. Theology was employed to further these positions rather than to confront them. The sin of Western theology was the affirmation of a faulty theological position that affirmed the superiority of white over non-white, even in the face of contradictory Biblical material.

The superiority of the white mind would be extended on the assumption of the superiority of the product of the white mind such as language and culture. Correspondingly, there would be the deprecation of black minds and the product of black minds. The assumption of the superiority of the white mind would lead to the primacy of European languages. John Willinsky notes that “English is not taught as a second language but as the only medium of intelligible communication.” He observes that “to acquire the English language is to have a stake in its claim as a world language; it is to be a party to a history that runs from the colonial past that first planted English across the globe . . . the linguistic chauvinism embodied in this notion of the native speaker sustains a colonizing division of the world”

The assumed superiority of the English language is evident in the twentieth-century phenomena of sending missionaries under the guise of being English teachers, particularly to Asian countries. The mission of taking the gospel into Asia has become conflated with the teaching of the English language. In Evangelical missions (as well as in the Christian academy), there is the assumption of English as the lingua franca of theological discourse.

---

European languages, in general, are considered central to theological study and the important works in Evangelical theology are presumed to be in English. English is biased as a more important and central language for ministry. An Asian-American pastor revealed that during an interview process, a denominational official mentioned that his knowledge of Mandarin could actually work against him as a viable pastoral candidate. It was suggested that he only state his proficiency in English to improve his ministry job prospects.

In addition to the use of language to elevate white minds over non-white minds, there is the elevation of white culture over non-white culture. Cultural relativism and the elevation of whiteness is confirmed by a warped theological imagination. In an Evangelical theology text titled, *All God’s Children and Blue Suede Shoes*, Ken Myers makes the claim that there are gradations of culture in the world. He associates “high” culture (by implication a culture that is closer to God) with Western forms of cultures, such as Rembrandt, Bach, Greek philosophy and contrasts “high” culture with “low” culture, which he equates with pop culture, represented by Bon Jovi, TV sitcoms, and Andy Warhol.

To Myers, “High culture has its roots in antiquity, in an age of conviction about absolutes, about truth, about virtue. . . . its essential features make it capable of maintaining and transmitting more about human experiences in creation, and about God’s redemptive intervention in history, than its alternatives.”

Myers proceeds to create a third category that he labels “folk” culture, which describes such cultural expressions as

---

Native American regalia, Korean drumming, and African dancing. Myers claims that folk culture is “simpler in nature and less communicable from one folk to another.” The text asserts that classical Western culture holds a superior position to non-Western culture.

Virginia Dominguez notes that "any positive reference to culture almost always implies a European and Eurocentric culture." Myers’ bias towards Western white culture reveals the underlying assumption of the superiority of the white mind. Dominguez notes that this type of assumption "buys too unproblematically into an elite Eurocentric view of culture that would ignore issues of language, public rhetoric, immigration policy, education, class, race, and ethnicity that provide both support and challenges to that elite sense of culture as refinement and aesthetic achievement."

The Biblical account can be manipulated to reflect the superiority of the exceptional white mind and the exceptional product of the white mind. In the Evangelical reading of Genesis 11, the Tower of Babel is portrayed as the human attempt to usurp God’s power and will. The curse that is introduced at the tower of Babel is often seen as the introduction of different languages and cultures. This interpretation offers a variation of the polygenic perspective on the origin of culture. Because human disobedience results in cultural variation, the formation of culture is susceptible to the intellectual capacity of different peoples. Culture is perceived to be of human origin rather than an expression of God’s image and spirit working through all cultures. Certain cultures, therefore, are superior based upon the superior intellect of those who have created that culture.

Furthermore, because there is one people prior to the tower of Babel, a diseased

---

40 Myers, *All God’s Children and Blue Suede Shoes*, 59.
theological imagination would assume that Western, white culture is the closest approximation to the “original” language and culture.

Western Christianity often fails to see how non-Western expressions of Christianity could actually contribute to the theological imagination in positive ways. Because European culture has been the container for orthodoxy and culturally acceptable Christianity, white Western identity is associated with a Christian identity. What is normative in theology arises from the Western context. For example, while non-white, non-Western theology usually requires an adjectival marker (Black Theology, Liberation Theology, *Minjung* Theology), Western theology does not require an adjectival marker since it is considered central and normative. The presence of non-white culture in the United States, specifically in the expression of African-American culture results not in the embracing of God’s presence in variant cultures, but the establishment of a cultural hierarchy that reinforces white supremacy and exceptionalism, even in the arena of theology.

The assumption that Western Evangelical theology holds a central and normative theological position emerges from the self-perception of exceptionalism. Theology that emerges from the superior white mind provides a superior theology. The formation of Evangelical theology assumes a level of perspicuity and rationality. This elevated self-perception finds its roots in the early stages of the formation of Evangelical theology, through the impact of Scottish Common Sense philosophy on the Evangelical theological imagination.

---

Scottish Common Sense philosophy operates under pre-suppositional assumptions. As George Marsden summarizes that “according to Common Sense philosophy, one can intuitively know the first principles of morality as certainly as one can apprehend other essential aspects of reality.” A theology that relies upon Common Sense philosophy gestures towards a bias towards one’s own point-of-view. If Evangelicals assume that a divinely sanctioned “common sense” shapes one’s point-of-view, then there is an underlying assumption that one’s point-of-view is intuitively and correctly derived. Therefore, the perspective arising out of the exceptional rational mindset stands as the most accurate one.

The danger of Common Sense philosophy is to attribute non-negotiable status to enlightenment assumptions. If Common Sense becomes the measure of Biblical faith, then rational assumptions can take the place of God’s ordering of creation. This enlightenment approach favors the dominant culture’s narrative within the Evangelical church and does not allow for a contextualized interpretation of theology. In other words, the dominant culture within Evangelicalism has the authority to gauge and determine theology through the lens of personal common sense assumptions more than Scripture.

The individual that follows the line of reasoning offered by Evangelical doctrine could deduce that their perspective (presumably obtained using reason and logic) produces the definitive position for the entire community that perfectly mirrors the biblical perspective. Since the individual gained this understanding through reason and logic, all other options can be eliminated. If the Evangelical understanding of a particular doctrine is derived from following the Evangelical line of reasoning, then that particular

theological conclusion would hold a greater primacy. There is minimal consideration to
the possibility of an intrinsic bias because of the assumption that the exceptional
reasoning capacity of the white mind trumps all bias.44

The assumption of the perspicuity of Evangelical theology is compounded by an
Evangelical sociology that seeks to preserve the faith in a secular culture. Christian
apologist Francis Schaeffer’s assertion of a Christian worldview that would take a stand
against the onslaught of a secular worldview would form a sociological motivation for
the culture wars (See Chapter 1). Schaeffer held an assumption that a Christian
worldview could be deduced through reason and logic and that Evangelicals could
construct this worldview to present clear boundaries to defend against the secular
worldview.

Molly Worthen summarizes Schaeffer’s perspective: “The thesis of his thought
proposes that a line of desperation exists between the last generation and this. Modern
man has created a massive chasm, best demonstrated in his philosophy and art. This “line
of despair” represented the boundary between the happy faith of earlier Christians and the
existential angst of modern man, who tried to rely on reason alone.”45 Schaeffer’s
philosophical descriptions would shape the imagination of the Evangelical mind. The
Evangelical mind needed to be rooted in the Christian worldview, otherwise, it would be
susceptible to the fallen nature of the secular worldview. The boundaries of the Christian
worldview would need to be preserved at all costs. Schaeffer’s adamant assertion of the
Christian worldview aligns with a bounded set approach to theology.

44 Molly Worthen, Apostles of Reason (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), 3, 6-11,
220-222.
Missiologist Paul Hiebert distinguishes between two different approaches to the Christian gospel: the bounded set versus the centered set. Evangelical theology would operate with bounded set assumptions that would assert the importance of doctrinal boundaries in determining insider or outsider status in the Christian faith. Certain doctrinal positions that have been derived using rational though provide hard boundaries for Evangelicals. While a centered set approach would emphasize the direction of the individual in relation to Christ, a bounded set approach would emphasize the boundaries that would exclude individuals from insider status.\textsuperscript{46}

The formation of Evangelical theology relies on the ability of the white mind to produce a rational, Christian worldview that serves as authoritative theological boundaries. This bounded set serves as impenetrable doctrine that does not allow for the introduction of other perspectives. Other perspectives emerging from other experiences and other cultures would be deemed inferior to the bounded set theology of white Evangelicalism. The white Evangelical theological worldview, therefore, is elevated to a position of authority on level with the Word of God. The power of God to express God’s revelation is denied to a significant portion of God’s people.

The superior and exceptional nature of the dominant culture, therefore, would extend to the physical, intellectual, cultural, and theological realm. The purity of the exceptional product of white bodies and white minds would be incompatible with the inferior product of non-white bodies and minds. For example, anti-Chinese and Japanese sentiment was based on the assumption that their otherness would be incompatible with

\begin{flushright}
45 Worthen, \textit{Apostles of Reason}, 211.
\end{flushright}
American life and that the Asian “cannot be Americanized.” In *How the Other Half Lives*, nineteenth century journalist, Jacob Riis presents a negative account of life in Chinatown in stating that “the inhabitants of Chinatown likewise seemed well beyond the moral reach of Christian civilization: ‘All attempts to make an effective Christian of John Chinaman will remain abortive in this generation; of the next I have, if anything, less hope.”

The sin of the church was the inability to present a contrasting perspective to the prevailing notion of Anglo-American, Protestant superiority. Jacobson alludes to the connection between missionary effort and the expansion of commerce. Jacobson notes that “the notion of American grandeur entailed not only establishing a global presence by reaching out to other regions and peoples of the world, but fully transforming the ways in which those people lived.” Jacobson cites Josiah Strong’s statement that “The world is to be Christianized and civilized . . . What is the process of civilizing but the creating of more and higher wants? . . . The millions of Africa and Asia are someday to have the wants of a Christian civilization.” Jacobson argues that “commerce would follow the missionary.” Jacobson sees the Christian perspective in America as being both the “spiritual savior and industrial supplier.” The Christian imagination sought to replicate the rightness and exceptionalism of white American Christianity throughout the world.

---

3.5 The Warping of Human Community

Another expression of the manipulation of the Creation account and the doctrine of the image of God arises from the misapplication of the cultural mandate. A diseased imagination allows for the dysfunctional belief that one people group holds a higher standing before God than another people group. This assumption of superiority and exceptionalism slots easily into a dominion theology reading of Genesis 1. Because whites were created in the image of God and possess greater proximity to God, certain rights of ownership and dominance can be attributed to whites. While the Scriptural account seems to indicate that dominion should be expressed as the responsibility of human beings to properly care for creation; in the United States, concepts of dominion have focused on the right to land ownership and a God-given right to possess the land, over and against the original inhabitants of the land who would typically be seen as the owners of the land.

As stated above, the Doctrine of Discovery shapes the dysfunctional theological imagination of the European mind. The subsequent principle of *terra nullius* implemented by the English monarchs would assert that “lands that were not occupied by any person or nation, or which were occupied but not being used in a fashion that European legal systems approved, were considered to be empty and waste and available for Discovery.”51 These concepts would judge the indigenous inhabitants of the New World as possessing less wisdom, civilization, and value than the European settlers. Non-white bodies would be judged as less endowed with the image of God. African bodies,

---

therefore, would be counted as 3/5 of a white human life in the founding documents of
the United States. Native bodies would be identified as savages in the documents that
declares independence for white bodies in the New World.

Co-opting Biblical anthropology and applying the image of God strictly to white
bodies allows white Europeans to discover and colonize the New World and to take what
is assumed to be a God-ordained dominion over North America. The American
expression of the Doctrine of Discovery and the principle of *terra nullius* would be
Manifest Destiny, which would allow white Americans to view the entire continent as
their property, even as millions already resided on these lands. Manifest Destiny was the
extension of theological dysfunction rooted in white exceptionalism and superiority.
“Manifest Destiny was also a matter of faith to millions of white Americans who believed
themselves racially and culturally superior to nonwhites.”52 That sense of superiority
would allow white Americans to take possession of the land that did not belong to them.

Stuart Banner in *How the Indians Lost Their Land* explores the question of
whether the English colonists viewed the Native Americans as the actual owners of North
America. If the land rights of Native Americans were recognized, the colonists would
have to purchase the land. Banner argues that there was a general understanding among
the colonists that Native Americans owned the land. Even beginning with the baseline
assumption that recognized “the Indians as owners of the whole continent,” and the land
was believed to be “disproportionately large to the Indians' small numbers.” Banner notes
that “there were always some English colonists, and sometimes even some colonial
governments, willing to take land from the Indians without paying for it. All laws are
violated sometimes, and this one was probably violated more than most." 53 Acquisition of Native lands, therefore, was often in violation of the colonists’ own laws and certainly of the numerous treaties. Ironically, one of the key American mediating narratives is the right to own property. This illegal action of an unjust usurping of land from the rightful owners would need some sort of theological justification.

The diseased imagination would need to assert the political, social, spiritual and moral superiority of the European colonialists over the Native inhabitants. The diseased theological imagination of the European colonialists in the Americas would further the myth of a privileged position of dominion for exceptional whites in the creation order. Native Americans would be deemed inferior to whites. According to the Doctrine of Discovery, they would be deemed as pagans who were less endowed with the image of God. This theological assumption would now be embedded as a legal precedent that would give justification for the illegal usurping of Native lands and even justify the accompanying genocide of Natives. 54 A self-perception of exceptionalism would allow these assumptions and decisions.

American Christians believed in America as the Promised Land for white Americans. The land was *tabula rasa* and the colonists’ ambition was to help establish a city set on a hill. The warped Christian imagination of the European colonists who landed on the shores of the North American continent projected whiteness as exceptional. It was the standard by which all other humans were to be measured. The white colonists had the

---

authority to determine the worth of the Native population in the Americas as well as the black population in Africa. The diseased imagination gave power to white Christianity to project a defining negative image of the other. Once that image is established, the actions of the white settler colonialists find theological justification.

The diseased imagination, that asserts the dominance and authority of one group over another, stands in stark contrast to God’s intention in the creation of humanity in His image. Part of the intent of humanity being created image of God was to reveal a sense of unity and community beyond the reality of potential human division. Emil Brunner notes that Biblical human nature means that “God…creates me in and for community with others…the isolated individual is an abstraction…the other, the others, are interwoven with my nature. I am not ‘I’ apart from the ‘Thou’.”\textsuperscript{55} Brunner affirms the equality of human worth and offers a shared story of the image of God that should yield a sense of community and human unity. Instead, a diseased theological imagination misapplies the doctrine of the image of God to further the dividing walls of hostility. The problem of an elevated and exceptional community is the rejection and exclusion of the other, who are defined as those who differ from the standard of whiteness.

A misapplication of the doctrine of the image of God, therefore, leads to broken fellowship and community. The diseased imagination also warps the role of humanity in creation. Part of the theological challenge emerges with the idea from Genesis 1 that since people are created in God’s image, they have dominion over the rest of creation. The authority, however, should be applied as the responsibility of human beings to

properly care for creation. This authority is not license to rule over other human beings in the name of God.

In the Old Testament, there are frequent references to a covenant agreement between God and His people that lead to the granting of land. The Bible seems to indicate a close connection between a people and their land. The Creator is responsible for the establishment of a people upon the land. Still, the people do not own the land, God does. Humanity, therefore, cannot be understood in isolation. Human identity arises out of one’s connection to the land and to the surrounding environment. As Calvin Luther Martin asserts, "only a fool would imagine himself as somehow exclusively a human being. Through language and artifice one could recall and vivify the primal linkage (we might call it an evolutionary connection) to other forms of life, animal and plant."56

The formation of a people and the formation of a culture are not so easily separated from land and one’s natural context. Given the importance of the connection of a people to the environment, the absence of that connection between the English colonists and the North American continent results in a growing insecurity by the white inhabitants of North America. If the land was improperly obtained, then that land is tenuously held. Jennings asserts that “it is a truism to say that humans are all bound to the earth. However, that articulated connection to the earth comes under profound and devastating alteration with the age of discovery and colonialism. . . .It was a theological form – an inverted, distorted vision of creation that reduced theological anthropology to commodified bodies. In this inversion, whiteness replaced the earth as the signifier of

56 Calvin Luther Martin, In the Spirit of the Earth: Rethinking History and Time (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1992), 18.
identities. . . . With the emergence of whiteness, identity was calibrated through possession of, not possession by specific land.**

One of the defining characteristics by which Americans can identify themselves as Americans is the ability to own the land. The American mythos of land acquisition and ownership stands in contrast to a people of a land that has been granted to them by God. Our insecurity regarding our rights to the land is a result of the elevation of land ownership on an economic level, without a deep understanding of the theological value of land.

The acquisition of Native lands, therefore, was often in violation of the colonists’ own laws and revealed an unjust usurping of land from the rightful owners. This usurping of land was often accomplished under the guise of a political, social, spiritual and moral superiority over the indigenous population. Because this land was acquired under less than ideal and less than moral circumstances, there is an underlying insecurity of those whose possession of the land does not arise out of a theological justification.

To the people whose claim to the land is based upon conquest and possession rather than a deep connection to the land, there is an implicit insecurity. The dominant culture’s rights to the land can be called into question. For Christians, there should be the awareness that usurping native lands would be considered a notable sin in the eyes of God.

The accompanying acts of genocide would also be a place of significant insecurity before God. Given this insecurity, would the current occupants of the land feel the fullness of anxiety and fear when the original owners of the land return? Would that

---

anxiety extend towards any new people group that would arrive in North America? A lack of a prophetic imagination results in the need to preserve one’s standing, however tenuous, as the masters and owners of the land. Despite what may be a false claim to that land, there is the fear of being brought down from a self-anointed space of superiority when the other is brought into the midst of them.

The sin of white supremacy is the sin of pride. Pride is misdirected love towards the self that places an individual or a race of individuals to exalt themselves over others. The object of their love becomes, not God or others, but their own physical appearance or their own race. This kind of pride alienates people from another. Pride leads to the elevation of whites to a position closest to God. The image of the white person, therefore, becomes the norm by which other races are judged and measured. This elevation of whiteness to the level of godliness is explained by Lillian Smith:

We were taught in this way to love God, to love our white skin, and to believe in the sanctity of both. We learned at the same time to fear God and to think of Him as having complete power over our lives. As we were beginning to feel this power and to see it reflected in our parents, we were learning also to fear a power that was in our body and to fear dark people who were everywhere around us.58

God’s sovereign endowment of certain glory and privilege to humanity is replaced by the human attempt at dominion over another. In denying the image of God and in some instances placing certain human beings at the level of beasts, the racist exerts unjust dominion over the out-races and racist man displaces the order of God’s creation.

4. The Problem of Triumphalism in Evangelical Christianity

The breadth of Evangelical theology, including Christology, soteriology, and ecclesiology are affected by the diseased theological imagination. A warped Christology arises from a supersessionism that strips Jesus of his Jewish roots. Christology and soteriology are linked in how white supremacy and cultural captivity shapes the Evangelical perspective on these areas of doctrine. White supremacy results in the assumption that salvific viability is rooted in approximation to whiteness. With the assertion of Jesus as a white male, approximation to a white Jesus becomes the expression of redemption. The normative value of whiteness generates a narrative of white triumphalism.

Social and historical atrocities, therefore, can find justification in the salvation narrative of Christianity. African-American expressions of faith, therefore, would be considered as sub-optimal. The ecclesial life of the church also pointed towards white supremacy. The worship life of the Evangelical church tilts towards a celebratory praise narrative of triumphalism but with a corresponding neglect of lament. In each of these three theological categories, a warped narrative of triumphalism rooted in white exceptionalism emerges from the diseased imagination. The narrative of white exceptionalism and triumphalism hinders the genuine intersection of black evangelicals with the dominant stream of U.S. Evangelicalism.

The establishment of white supremacy and exceptionalism leads to the diminishing of certain narratives. The dysfunctional U.S. Evangelical response to alternative narratives emerging from the context of suffering is evident in the stunted ecclesial and liturgical life of the American church. In *Journey Through the Psalms*, Denise Hopkins...
examines the liturgy of Lutherans, Episcopalians, Catholics, the United Church of Christ and the United Methodists. She “found that the majority of psalms omitted from liturgical use are the laments.”¹ This trend is found not only in the mainline traditions but in less liturgical traditions as well. In Hurtling with God, Glenn Pemberton notes that lament constitutes 40 percent of all psalms, but only 13 percent of the hymnal for the Churches of Christ, 19 percent of the Presbyterian hymnal and 13 percent of the Baptist hymnal.²

Christian Copyright Licensing International (CCLI) licenses local churches in the use of contemporary worship songs and tracks the songs that are most frequently sung in local congregations. CCLI’s list of the top one hundred worship songs in August of 2012 reveals that only five of the songs would qualify as a lament. Most of the songs reflect themes of praise: “How Great Is Our God,” “Happy Day,” “Indescribable,” “Friend of God,” “Glorious Day,” “Marvelous Light” and “Victory in Jesus.” The American church avoids lament. The power of lament is minimized and the underlying narrative of suffering that requires lament is lost. The absence of lament in the liturgy of the American church results in the loss of memory. The necessity of lamenting over a very real suffering and pain is lost.

The absence of lament may be attributable to a triumphalistic narrative endemic to American Christianity. The self-perception of exceptionalism evident in the Evangelical co-opting of the Imago Dei to elevate whiteness leads to the assumption that white

American Christian exceptionalism should expand into a triumphalistic narrative. Because white American Christians are exceptional, they should also be victorious. The triumphant march of white Christianity becomes evident in how Christology and soteriology are understood and applied. Furthermore, this triumphalism does not allow for alternative narratives of lament that could provide a corrective to a dysfunctional narrative. The diseased imagination that generated a self-perception of exceptionalism for the white Evangelical community now extends to a dysfunctional triumphalism.

4.1 Dysfunctional Christology

The misappropriation of creation by the diseased theological imagination extends into a dysfunctional Christology. Dysfunctional Christology impacts and shapes a dysfunctional soteriology. The diseased imagination formulates a racialized Christology rooted white supremacy and exceptionalism rather than the actual person of Jesus. This racialized Christology harkens back to first-century heresies now expressed in the twenty-first-century context. Two different heresies in early church history, the docetic heresy, and the adoptionist heresy, have found application in the diseased imagination of the twenty-first-century Evangelical.

The docetic perspective is the theological heresy that Jesus was not human at all. There were strains of the gnostic heresy in the docetic perspective. Flesh and matter were evil. Jesus could not have been encased in flesh since flesh is evil. Therefore, Jesus was fully spirit and his physical body was an illusion. The docetic perspective stems from the inability to deal with differences. Human limitations and differences were a problem to overcome and to be eradicated rather than something to be renewed. The docetic antagonism towards the flesh yields an antagonism towards anything of the flesh. Racial
and cultural identity (arising from the material world) should be obliterated, rather than affirmed.

The adoptionist perspective is the theological heresy that Jesus was born fully human and was later adopted by God as His son by virtue of Jesus’ supernatural devotion to God. The awareness of this adoption occurred at the moment of Jesus’ baptism. Declared a heresy in the second century, adoptionism was refuted by the First Nicean Council – hence the Nicean Creeds assertion that Jesus was eternally-begotten of the Father. Adoptionism places a priority on one’s social location and identity and places a high emphasis on one’s context. Because one’s social location and identity are centralized, Christianity gets added on as an extra ingredient. Christianity is subservient to one’s culture, race, and ethnicity that holds a primary, central position.

Adoptionism has the possibility of idolizing culture while docetism can diminish culture. Both perspectives are heretical. Evangelical Christians in their current struggle of dealing with cultural diversity, tilt towards the docetic heresy, particularly in the perception of other cultures. The colorblind approach to cross-racial and cross-cultural relationships reveals the underlying impact of the docetic perspective in Evangelical Christianity. The variety of cultures should be eliminated rather than embraced. The elevation of a modified docetic perspective among Evangelicals reveals a deficient theological imagination that has difficulties in dealing with racial and cultural differences. The limited Evangelical theological imagination could continue to prove a hindrance to participation in the current expression of God’s work through a diverse global Christianity.
The docetic heresy is an affront to the identity of Jesus. The Gnostic heresy asserting the evil of human flesh leads to the rejection of Jesus’ humanity and all that comes with that humanity. J. Kameron Carter recognizes this problem as the loss of Jesus’ Jewish identity. In making Christ non-Jewish, he was made a figure of the Occident. “For at the genealogical taproot of modern racial reasoning is the process by which Christ was abstracted from Jesus, and thus from his Jewish body, thereby severing Christianity from its Jewish roots. . . . In making Christ non-Jewish in this moment, he was made a figure of the Occident. He became white, even if Jesus as a historical figure remained Jewish or racially a figure of the Orient.” Carter argues that Jesus had to be abstracted into only his divine identity to appease a racialized perspective that would reject the “blackness” of Jesus’ Jewish identity. A form of docetism develops which elevates Jesus’ divine identity at the expense of Jesus’ human identity.

The docetic heresy still finds expression in contemporary American Christian theology. Jesus’ humanity does not find full expression in lieu of Jesus’ divine identity. Jesus is understood as the embodiment of particular ideas, values and doctrines and diminishes the humanity of Jesus Christ. This dysfunctional Christology changes the real person of Jesus into an ideal man, a symbol of divinity. Through this process, the fullness of both Jesus’ humanity and divinity is compromised.

Prioritizing Jesus’ divinity over his humanity determines what Christians strive after in the Christian life. For example, when American Christians sing a song like “to be like Jesus,” does it reveal a longing to be like Jesus in his human characteristics? Does it reflect a longing to be a 33-year-old Jewish male with carpentry skills? Or does the

---

ambition to be like Jesus reveal an identification with Jesus in his divine attributes? The desire for divine perfection, a semi-God-like status, and the ability to perform some feats of wonder would spur Christians to reject the humanity of Jesus and embrace the divinity of Christ. The strong identification with the divinity of Christ allows Evangelical Christology to get reduced to the realm of divine abstraction. As an abstraction, Jesus can be reimagined into any form that suits the culture. Jesus, therefore, is no longer a Jewish Messiah but reflects instead the American popular image of Jesus offered by the Warner Sallman painting. The portrait asserts a wavy blonde haired, blue-eyed GQ model, reflecting the aesthetics of an idealized white male.

The idealized physical image of Jesus as a white male also allows for a cultural bias in Christology. Racial and cultural idealism is found not in the true humanity of Jesus in cultural specificity, but in cultural ambiguity, which lends itself to the elevation of whiteness and the power of whiteness to encompass all expressions. Because Jesus is culturally neutral, we should also strive to be culturally neutral. However, in a racialized society that elevates whiteness, cultural neutrality is an impossibility and we revert to whiteness as the closest approximation to the divine.

A diseased theological imagination, therefore, does violence to the Jesus of the Bible. It reformulates Jesus in the image of the dominant culture to fit the narrative of white supremacy. The role of the German state church in Nazi Germany provides a negative example of the manipulation of the identity of Jesus. The law and order platform expressed by the Nazi party proved to be attractive to a church wanting order so that the church could focus on the tasks of the church. “Hitler attracted Christians by criticizing the liberalism of democratic government and by advocating a tougher, law-and-order
approach to German society. . . . This appeal to traditional values, coupled with the militaristic nationalism that Hitler offered in response to the national humiliation of the Versailles Treaty, made National Socialism an attractive option to many, even most Christians in Germany."

Seen as weak and effeminate, the German church needed to recover its place in the German social imaginary. "What could the German Christians do to win the attention of Hitler and earn more important places for themselves within the regime? In 1938, they hit upon a plan -- a concerted effort to produce antisemitic propaganda from a Christian perspective." Claudia Koonz notes that “with little encouragement from party or state, Protestant leaders sponsored The Institute for the Study and Eradication of Jewish Influence in German Religious Life. Given Hitler's and Himmler’s contempt for organized Christianity, it is not surprising that antisemitic theologians received relatively little recognition despite their efforts. The scholarly initiative to purge the 'Jewish spirit' from the Christian Volk offered a chance for Protestant theologians to demonstrate their usefulness to a regime that spurned their collaboration. One of their major projects demonstrated that Jesus had been born to Armenian, not Jewish, parents." The church would now serve the state by offering a theology that worked within the Nazi imagination. By separating Jesus from his Jewish identity, the German church would provide additional fodder for Nazi racism. The dissolution of Jesus’ Jewish identity by German theologians could now lead to the formation of Jesus as an Aryan.

---

Because Jesus no longer needed to be a material reality, the German ideal could be defined outside of material reality. The German theologian could now re-imagine Jesus as abstracted out of the ancient near Eastern context and out of his Jewish heritage and context. The intellectual practice of analyzing Jesus as an abstract concept rather than a material reality manifested in the theology of the German church. The German church, therefore, adopted a fluid approach to their theology. There was no need to adhere to Biblical truths, but theological truths could be adapted to fit the German masculine expectation. The specific elements of Jesus had no relevance. Instead, abstract principles and German ideology would define the theology of the German church.

When the Nazi party began its persecution of the Jews, a theology that abstracted Jesus from the Jewish context and made into the image of the Aryan was already in place. The rending of Jesus’ Jewish identity served as support for the establishment of the Aryan male identity. By assigning Jesus a white masculine identity, the narrative of white supremacy could be established theologically in the Nazi conscience. With the establishment of Aryan superiority, the Jewish other could be defined as the common enemy. Nazi Germany was able to pull the church into the sphere of influence and synthesized the German church’s dysfunctional theology arising from its desire for acceptance in the new regime. The German church identified with being a good German more than being true to the Scriptures. A civic theology based on intellectual abstraction replaced theological depth.

One prominent dissenter to the German church was Dietrich Bonhoeffer. Bonhoeffer’s encounter with the African-American community in Harlem would serve as the key connection to an embodied and lived theology that would become the hallmark of
Bonhoeffer’s theology. Bonhoeffer attended Abyssinian Baptist Church in Harlem, where he encountered a suffering people who were living out a real, embodied theology. This encounter impacts Bonhoeffer to such an extent, that he would claim that he had become a Christian rather than simply being a theologian.⁷ Bonhoeffer’s stoic intellectualism encountered a faith rooted in material reality. Christianity moved beyond abstract philosophy towards an authentic faith expression. "The black Baptist experience not only introduced him to an entirely new form of Christianity, but also provided the possibility for balancing the probably tensions in his own life and in his central European Christianity: between emotion and reason between thought and action, between individual and group needs. Bonhoeffer's special genius in the years that followed lay in his ability to lead a life of balanced tensions."⁸

Most of Bonhoeffer’s experiences to this point had been in the context of German exceptionalism and triumphalism. Bonhoeffer’s experience of dealing with suffering would have been the expression of frustration and angst of post-World War I Germany. The triumphalism of the German ethos would not have had the ability to deal with suffering. Triumphalism would seek to restore Germany’s former glory rather than embrace the reality of the present suffering. Bonhoeffer’s experiences in the United States would provide balance to his worldview. The German theological approach of an abstracted faith would be challenged by a lived expression of faith. Abyssinian provided an example of an embodied Christology and ecclesiology. “Bonhoeffer observed closely models of Christian lives capable of bridging the gap between spontaneous individual

action and the needs of disciplined community life. His friends at Union Seminary and in the black Baptist community provided such paradigms of balance between faith and action and between the individual and the group.⁹ The Gentile existence of the black church would stand in stark contrast to German exceptionalism emerging in Nazi Germany.

Bonhoeffer would begin to further examine his Christology with the question: “Who is Jesus?” He begins to realize that a real, robust theology requires a real Jesus embodied in a real community in the real world. This Jesus moves against simplified, abstract concepts. Bonhoeffer’s theological imagination comes up against the theological trajectory of German academic theology that not only severed Jesus from his Jewish roots but also read through scientific, abstracted terms. Jesus’ Jewishness was a material reality that needed to be overcome. Human limitation was to be challenged in the face of exceptionalism and triumphalism. Jesus’ Jewishness, therefore, needed to be overcome to bring Christian faith into the modern, scientific world. This project fell perfectly in line with Nazi ideology which sought to elevate the Aryan at the expense of the Jew. Bonhoeffer’s theological imagination would challenge an abstract Christology that sought to eradicate Jesus’ Jewishness.

Bonhoeffer challenged the abstract theology of the German church by offering an alternative approach to creation. In his analysis of the Creation narrative, he offered the possibility of a faith rooted in present reality, in contrast to the German church’s emphasis on the larger promise of a coming kingdom that transcended current reality.

---

Bonhoeffer revealed an understanding of God’s presence in the earthly kingdom. The eschatology of the German church reflected the perspective that separated the spiritual and material reality. The two realms of the Kingdom of God and the Kingdom of Man were separated. The government had free reign to govern the earthly material kingdom while the church would be concerned with the spiritual kingdom.

In contrast, Bonhoeffer finds fulfillment in the material. The body and earthly material reality are not inherently evil. Man’s “body belongs to his essential being. Man's body is not his prison, his shell his exterior, but man himself. Man does not 'have' a body; he does not 'have' a soul; rather, he 'is' body and soul. Man in the beginning is really his body. He is one. He is his body, as Christ is completely his body, as the Church is the body of Christ. The man who renounces his body renounces his existence before God the Creator."\(^\text{10}\) Christ sets the example of an authentic embodiment in the flesh. The incarnation provides the counter-narrative of one’s relationship with the flesh. This example calls us to find the fullness of our humanity in our own embodiment.

Biblical anthropology and Christology must take into account bodily existence. Bodily existence is not to be rejected as wholly evil. "Adam is created as body, and therefore he is also redeemed as body, in Jesus Christ and in the Sacrament. Man thus created is man as the image of God. He is the image of God not in spite of but just because of his bodiliness. For in his bodiliness he is related to the earth and to other bodies, he is there for others, he is dependent upon others."\(^\text{11}\) Humanity was created to be human and to live within the limit.

\(^{10}\) Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Creation and Fall / Temptation* (New York: Touchstone, 1959), 51.
\(^{11}\) Bonhoeffer, *Creation Fall*, 52.
The approach of Nazi Germany would have been to remove the limits by establishing the nation-state in the place of God’s created order. Just as Jesus could be removed from the body limitation of his Jewish flesh, Nazi Germany would advance by removing the limitation of Jewish flesh. The formation of community would be to move the individuals towards obedience to the state. A triumphal narrative would define Nazism. Individuals could move towards a higher place in history beyond human limitation through the triumph of the community through the nation-state. The Nazi mindset would have approached the German nation-state as a part of the order of creation that should be upheld at all cost. German exceptionalism would foster this high view of the place of the German state in creation order.

Bonhoeffer challenges these assumptions on the orders of creation. "At the Berlin Youth Conference in April 1932, the young Bonhoeffer denounced the appeal to 'orders of creation' in a discussion of war and peace. He saw the danger of declaring that anything was good because it was made good. The appeal to Genesis I, with which he had just been wrestling in the lectures that later became Creation and Fall, seemed to him specious and dangerous."12 Bonhoeffer challenged the notion of German exceptionalism found in orders of creation. "For 'orders of creation' he substituted 'orders of preservation'. . . . Any order is only to be regarded as an order of preservation so long as it is still open for the proclamation of the Gospel. Where an order is basically closed to this proclamation, be it apparently the most original -- marriage, nation, etc. -- it must be surrendered. The solution of general ethical problems . . . must be sought only in the

---

revelation of God in Christ, and not from orders of creation. A misinterpretation of the orders of creation would lead to state abuses without limit. The limit would be rejected.

Bonhoeffer, in contrast, would call for an embracing of that limit. Community is expressed through the common bearing of the limit by the members of the community. As Bonhoeffer explains the male-female relationships, he observes that “in this common bearing of the limit by the first two human beings in community is tested the character of this community as the Church. . . . The grace of the other person, who is our helper because he helps us to bear our limit, i.e. he helps us to live before God, in community with whom we alone can live before God.” Community helps us to enter into a sense of identity in God’s creation. Community should not be manipulated to transcend the limit on humanity that is a natural part of God’s created order.

In the same way that humanity’s transgression in the Creation narrative transcended the limit and attempted to move beyond creatureliness, the German theological mindset assumed the privilege of being able to move Jesus beyond his creatureliness as a Jewish man. In Christ the Center, Bonhoeffer visits the centrality of Jesus and reflects on Jesus’ identity as interrupting the triumphal march of the Aryan narrative.

Bonhoeffer grapples with Christology in order to confront the abstraction offered by the German church that would submit itself to the Nazis. Bonhoeffer states the reality of the incarnation of Jesus over and above the abstraction of Christ. “If we speak of Jesus Christ as God, we may not say of him that he is the representative of an idea of God, which possesses the characteristics of omniscience and omnipotence (there is no such

---

13 Bonhoeffer, Christ the Center, 10.
thing as this abstract divine nature!); rather, we must speak of his weakness, his manger, his cross. This man is no abstract God. Strictly speaking, we should not talk of the incarnation, but of the incarnate one." Abstraction allowed for a diminishing of Christology. Jesus could be manipulated to represent Nazi ideals rather than reflecting his identity as both the Son of God and as a Jew. By invoking the centrality of Christ, Bonhoeffer offers a material theology in contrast to the abstraction that would allow for the twisting of theology to meet the philosophical needs of Nazi Germany.

Bonhoeffer directly challenges the abstraction of Christ in *Christ the Center*. "If Christ is understood from his historical influence, he is essentially power, *dynamis*, but not a person. The *dynamis* can be thought of in different ways. . . . Christ is then thought of basically, not as Person, but as non-personal power." Bonhoeffer challenges the depersonalization of Christ. This challenge would also address the separation of the spiritual Christ from the material reality of a Jewish Jesus. The Nazi attempt to separate Jesus from his Jewish roots reflects J. Kameron Carter’s contention that “the Jews were a mirror in which the European and eventually the Euro-American Occident could religiously and thus racially conceive itself through the difference of Orientalism.” The inability of Nazi Germany to contend with a Jewish Messiah and the subsequent attempt to remove Jesus from his Jewish reality results in the violent genocide of what is now considered a no-longer essential Judaism. Jesus is a divine abstract that can be reshaped into a more fitting image for Nazi Germany.

15 Bonhoeffer, *Christ the Center*, 104.
16 Bonhoeffer, *Christ the Center*, 43-44.
Bonhoeffer offers the corrective of not limiting Jesus in abstract, philosophical form. Jesus is not only divine but also human. “If Christ is present, not only as power, but in his person, how are we to think of this presence so that it does not violate this person? To be present means a particular time and place, i.e. to be there. . . Because Jesus Christ is man, he is present in time and space; because Jesus Christ is God, he is eternally present.”

Bonhoeffer grapples with the dominant docetism of his time. Docetism understands Jesus’ manhood as “a cloak and a veil . . . It does not belong to the essence of the matter.” “An abstract idea of God” generates docetism. “When God is thought of as an idea, Christ must be understood as an appearance of this idea, but not as an individual. This heresy disregards the humanity in Christ.”

The docetic perspective stems from the inability to deal with differences. Human limitations and differences were a problem to overcome and to be eradicated rather than something to be renewed. The docetic antagonism towards the flesh yields an antagonism towards anything of the flesh. Racial and cultural identity (arising from the material world) should be obliterated, rather than affirmed.

Bonhoeffer challenges the separation of Jesus’ humanity (Jewish Messiah) from Jesus’ divine expression. “The whole of liberal theology should be seen in the light of docetic Christology. It understands Jesus as the support or embodiment of particular ideas, values and doctrines. Basically, it does not take the humanity of Jesus Christ seriously, even though it is in this theology that so much is said about man. It passes over his humanity, and discussion about Jesus gets mainly into the field of speculation and reconstruction. The understanding of the man as the bearer of a particular idea ignores his

---

18 Bonhoeffer, *Christ the Center*, 45.
reality. It changes the real man into an ideal man and makes him into a symbol. This
docetism has its most congenial expression in Hegel's *philosophia sacra* (sacred
philosophy). Here the relationship of idea to phenomenon is brought to its fullest
development."^20 Bonhoeffer recognizes that the tendency towards abstraction at the root
of the docetic heresy will lead to numerous abuses. The separating of Jesus from his
humanity now allows Jesus to be reframed in any material form of one’s own choosing.
The Aryan primacy has been made possible by the docetic heresy.

The material reality of Jesus leads Bonhoeffer to assert the presence of Jesus not
only in the historical past but in the present context as well, namely through the church.
"The Church is the body of Christ. Here body is not only a symbol. The Church is the
body of Christ, it does not signify the body of Christ. . . . It is a comprehensive and
central concept of the mode of existence of the one who is present in his exaltation and
humiliation."^21 Christ is not merely a symbol, he is present in his body as the Church.
Community embodies Christ. Jesus is no longer a transcendent and abstract concept, he is
a material reality expressed through the Church.

The negative example of Nazi Germany provides a challenge to the dysfunctional
Christology embraced by 21st century Evangelicals. The abstraction of Christ and the
severance of Jesus from his Jewish roots reveal a sense of white exceptionalism. Jesus
could not be Jewish because that identity does not fit the ideal of an exceptional white
savior. The triumph of witness would find full expression in a white Jesus. The
triumphant narrative of whiteness would stumble over a Jewish Messiah. The ideal man

---

^19 Bonhoeffer, *Christ the Center*, 76.
^20 Bonhoeffer, *Christ the Center*, 80-81.
^21 Bonhoeffer, *Christ the Center*, 59.
in the person of Jesus provides a theological challenge to the diseased theological imagination of Evangelicalism.

4.2 The Soteriology of Whiteness

The Christological problem in Evangelical theology that abstracts the person of Jesus and elevates an abstracted idea of Christ is a racialized problem. The Jewish Jesus is replaced with a Europeanized idea of Christ. Bonhoeffer’s experience as an outsider who encountered an alternative narrative expressed through Abyssinian Baptist Church provided a corrective for the diseased imagination emerging in Nazi Germany. In the same way, Evangelical Christianity needs to encounter an alternative vision of soteriology that offers a challenge to the dominant culture’s theological narrative. One of the contributing factors to the diseased imagination of Evangelicals is the assumption of exceptionalism that leads to an assumption of the triumphalism of the dominant culture’s perspective. Soteriology, therefore, is driven by the assumption of insider status for the dominant culture and the movement of others towards the spiritual culture of the dominant group.

The doctrine of soteriology needs to redeem the theological imagination and assert that one’s relationship with God begins with Gentile status. Gentiles do not begin with exceptional status before God. The Western mind that perceives itself with exceptional status must realize the implication of one’s Gentile identity. A redeemed theological imagination can offer the possibility of a relationship between God’s chosen people and outsiders, the Gentiles. The book of Ruth offers an example of how an outsider and immigrant steeped in a Gentile identity can be grafted onto the tree of the chosen people. Ruth’s salvation narrative challenges a soteriology that centralizes
Western culture as a means of salvation. Ruth, a Moabite woman and an outsider, does not belong to the Jewish people. In Deuteronomy 23:3, Moabites were barred from approaching God’s holy sanctuary. The power of the story of Ruth is that a Gentile has become a part of the story of the Jews. Ruth becomes an expression of God’s grace grafted into the ancestry of King David and eventually of Jesus the Jewish Messiah. Ruth is accepted as one of the chosen people. Ruth’s journey to a new land and her identification with her new home resulted in her encounter with God’s salvation. God is a God of gracious inclusion. God is willing to include a Gentile outsider with the chosen people.

For Christians, the image of God finds its complete fulfillment in the person of Jesus. Colossians 1:15 states that “the Son is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn over all creation.” Jesus is the ultimate expression of God’s image. Central to understanding Jesus as the fulfillment of God’s image is recognizing the Jewish identity of Jesus the Messiah. The tendency to separate Jesus the Christ from his Jewish Messianic identity results in an incomplete understanding of salvation. In other words, the inability to see Christian identity through the lens of the Jewish story yields the elevation of the Gentile identity, in contrast to the Biblical account.

Gentiles are invited into the salvation story through the incarnation of Jesus as the Jewish Messiah. The fulfillment of God’s promise through Jesus presupposes that God’s plan for salvation does not change. God’s does not change His mind about offering His grace through the human venue and context of the Jews. As David Novak explains, "if God broke his original promise to Israel . . . then how could the Church -- as the branch
grafted onto the tree -- possibly believe God's ultimate promise to her?"22 The understanding of the undeserved grace of God that anchors the Christian view of salvation should be consistent with God’s grace at work among God’s chosen people. The Christian doctrine of grace should not be distanced from God’s interaction of grace with the Jewish people.

Michael Wyschogrod makes the argument that Gentile existence should lead to a greater sense of humility. He asserts that “Judaism has rarely understood the depth of the gentiles' feeling of exclusion. Because Jews have experienced persecution and rejection for so long, it has been difficult for them to understand that there are gentiles, and not a few, who wish to become members of the family that is the Jewish people.”23 Inclusion in the narrative of salvation should be understood as the gracious act of God to allow Gentiles into the family faith. Gentiles do not set the boundaries of faith but rather God has marked the parameters through the establishment of the Jewish people.

Understanding the nature of God’s salvific action to the Jews should deepen the Gentile understanding of the depth of God’s salvific movement towards the Gentiles. Thomas Torrance notes that “the covenant between God and Israel was not a covenant between God and a holy people, but precisely the reverse. It was a covenant established out of pure grace between God and Israel in its sinful, rebellious and estranged existence. Hence, no matter how rebellious or sinful Israel was, it could not escape from the

---


covenant love and faithfulness of God”\textsuperscript{24} God’s move towards salvation for humanity should take into account the pattern of grace that was enacted towards the Jewish people and expanded to include Gentiles. God’s movement of grace is not fickle and dependent on the whims of a sinful people.

The disconnect between between God’s acting of grace towards the Jewish people and the extension of grace towards the Gentiles has meant that Christianity could become disembodied from a particular context. The removal of the Jewish story from the salvation story means that God’s grace no longer requires a human context, which allows the expression of Christian faith from the perspective of the dominant power, namely European identity. The abstracted identity formed around an idealized whiteness can imagine itself as the standard through which salvation is enacted. As J. Kameron Carter states, that "the loss of a Jewish-inflected account – and thus a covenantal, nonracial account – of Christian identity cleared the way for whiteness to function as a replacement doctrine of creation. Hence, the world was re-created from the colonial conquests from the late fifteenth century forward in the image of white dominance, where ‘white’ signifies not merely pigmentation but a regime of political and economic power for arranging . . . the world”\textsuperscript{25} Carter finds that the severing of Christianity from her Jewish roots allows Christianity to become embedded in Western culture. “Behind the modern problem of race is the problem of how Christianity and Western civilization came to be thoroughly identified with each other, a problem linked to the severance of Christianity

\footnotesize{\textsuperscript{24} Thomas Torrance, \textit{The Mediation of Christ} (Colorado Springs, CO: Helmers & Howard, 1992), 27. \\
\textsuperscript{25} Carter, \textit{Race}, 35.}
from its Jewish roots.”26 The Western Christian account of a path to redemption separated from the Jewish narrative results in a dysfunctional imagination. This dysfunctional imagination results in the elevation of white identity as the force for salvation in American society, above the actual salvation work of God. The grounded narrative of Jewish salvation would be lost.

Christianity and the Christian narrative of salvation would become embedded in Western, white cultural expression and could now be reduced to a white American form. As Carter explains, “Christology . . . was problematically deployed to found the modern racial imagination.”27 The capitalistic and cultural triumph and hegemony of whiteness meant that American society would feel the authority to define itself as the height of creation order. “Whiteness came to function as a substitute for the Christian doctrine of creation, thus producing a reality into which all else must enter.”28 With the theological elevation of whiteness as normative, the way was cleared for a new salvation narrative to emerge.

For the European colonists, movement towards the North American continent and conquest of that continent would become a part of the salvation narrative. Lacking any actual connection to the land, the European colonists could imagine, through the application of the Doctrine of Discovery, that the land was being saved by the advent of the European presence in North America. They achieved “salvation” via human effort fulfilling the will of God. Salvation is by achievement rather than by invitation. White American exceptionalism that viewed conquest of the New World as a salvific act and as

26 Carter, Race, 229.
27 Carter, Race, 6.
28 Carter, Race, 5.
a fulfillment of a unique salvation narrative arises as a product of a failed Christian imagination.

As the white Western narrative of salvation replaced the Jewish account, the self-perception of exceptionalism was extended into a sense of authority that comes with salvation for an exceptional people. Taking this level of authority over the other arises out of a deep sense of insecurity of one’s precarious position in created order. In order to justify the taking of another’s land, there had to be an assertion of one’s own worth tied to one’s success and accomplishments. It is a position achieved by the white American, rather than endowed by their Creator.

The European colonial mindset, therefore, resulted in conquest and not inclusion. European colonists move towards North America and Africa meant conquest of the land and of the people. The diseased European mind saw the North American continent and the African people as being saved by European presence. “Salvation” is via human effort rather than through the grace of God. This salvation comes to be defined as proximity to whiteness, in contrast to the Biblical narrative. Soteriology, as revealed in the book of Ruth, is not an approximation to an abstract concept but to the concrete reality of an accepting mother-in-law and a kinsman redeemer. Salvation is not achieved by approximating whiteness, but as a gift offered to the outsider. But in the theological imagination of the white Western Christian, they were the insider who would determine how salvation would be enacted towards outsiders.

The elevation of whiteness as the goal of the salvation narrative would require a reordering of the creation order. Jennings captures this theological failure by revealing that
white indicates high salvific viability, rooted in the signs of movement toward God (for example, cleanliness, intelligence, obedience, social hierarchy, and advancement in civilization). Europeans reconfigured Christian social space around white and black bodies. If existence between Christian and non-Christian, saved and lost, elect and reprobate was a fluid reality that could be grasped only by detecting the spiritual and material marks, then the racial scale aided this complex optical operation.29

How an individual moved towards God’s salvation became linked to a physical capacity rooted in the white body, skin, and mind. This warped soteriology is built on the faulty theological assumption of white superiority in all matters.

A unique endowment of God’s image is assumed to be upon whites. Salvation for the African, therefore, is the movement towards the white world. The diseased imagination would even interpret the horrors of the slave trade as a movement towards whiteness and, therefore, salvation. The slave trade would proceed to strip the African of all identity, moving away from ancestral lands, disconnecting them to a central aspect of their identity. The imprisonment of the African in the castle and the passage of the African on the slave ship would reflect death and entombment to life in Africa. This grave like existence and passage would indicate the loss of identity to the former life and identity. Salvation for the African slave is the process of dying to one’s black identity and the transportation to the white world. Death to self and the images of death in the middle passage would be the process of salvation. As T.F. Torrance points out, “there is a logical relation between the death of Jesus on the cross and the forgiveness of our sins.” Salvation is related to the death of Christ, maybe even to the exclusion of Jesus’ incarnation, life, and resurrection.

29 Jennings, The Christian Imagination, 35.
Jennings notes the central role of death in the slave narrative, particularly as it relates to the Christian narrative of the death of Jesus. “Christ takes on death to overcome it, while slaves are bound to death by being killed and through its use as a threat in order to subdue them. This is a reversal of the reversal, a christological deformation. That is, the body of Jesus will ultimately indicate the victory of God over death, but in this horrific scene the African’s body indicates the ultimate victory of death.”

The death narrative tied to the slave trade would be dysfunctionally applied as a salvation narrative. In explaining the theological metrics of the slave trade, Jennings notes that Zurara, who presents an eyewitness historical account of the slave trade, places soteriological hope in the person of Prince Henry. Henry “emerges . . . as the stabilizing focal point. . . . He will lead them into the light of salvation. . . . we, the Portuguese, will save them. They will become Christians, . . . Zurara joins the slave body to the body of Jesus. . . .” Zurara prays, he cries, he speaks to those who do the dirty work of mutilating the black body.” By putting the black body to death, the slave traders seek to move these bodies towards the New World and towards redemption. The slave trade, therefore, was not merely an economic act that brought labor to North America. It was a theological act of the denial of the image of God and the assertion of white supremacy as the primary expression of God’s image in humanity, and ultimately salvation.

In Western soteriology, death plays a central role in the process of salvation. The power of Jesus’ death is embraced. The powerful narrative of Jesus’ crucifixion, however, has become the means of oppression for the African slave and the justification of slavery. If death is a necessary step towards salvation, and if that salvation is defined as the

---

approximation of whiteness, then the putting to death of blackness would be a necessary act for the salvation of the African. As has been repeated throughout American mission history, the Christian can now find just reason for injustice as long as it leads an individual person to Christ.

The diseased imagination has resulted in a horrific expression of salvation as accessed through death, not of the Savior, but of the black body, mind and soul, to be resurrected by proximity to the redeeming attributes of whiteness. The African-American experience reveals this severe theological dysfunction. Warped theological assumptions about the image of God and the elevation of whiteness to exceptional status contribute to a dysfunctional soteriology. The diseased theological imagination of whiteness would diminish Jesus’ human Jewish identity and elevate his abstract divine characteristics thereby completing the triumph of whiteness in Christology. In turn, soteriology would be co-opted by a dysfunctional application of white supremacy that would ignore Gentile existence to assert the primacy of whiteness in the achievement of salvation. Not even the theologically essential topic of soteriology escapes the dysfunctional theological imagination and oppression of white supremacy.

4.3 The Necessity of Lament in a Reconciled Ecclesiology

The expected triumph of an exceptional community prevents the humility necessary to engage an ecclesiology that crosses racial boundaries. An ecclesiology with a foundation in white supremacy will be unable to engage the full narrative of the American church. As stated above, the absence of lament in the American church reveals a theological deficiency rooted in the exceptionalism and triumphalism. The white

American church is unable to enter into lament because of deficient ecclesiology. The triumphant praise of God from an exceptional people replaces the fullness of worship found in Scripture, that would incorporate the use of laments.

The Old Testament is comprised of multiple genres, such as poetry and the subgenera of lament. Old Testament scholar Claus Westermann situates the Hebrew poetic material into two broad categories: hymns of praise and lament. Westermann asserts that “the two modes of calling on God are praise and petition. As the two poles, they determine the nature of all speaking to God.” Psalms that express worship for the good things that God has done are categorized as praise hymns. Laments are prayers of petition arising out of need. Lament is not simply the presentation of a list of complaints, nor merely the expression of sadness over difficult circumstances. Lament in the Bible is a liturgical response to the reality of suffering and engages God in the context of pain and trouble. The hope of lament is that God would respond to the human suffering that is wholeheartedly communicated through lament.

To Westermann, praise and lament work together to serve Israel’s worship. They form discrete categories that operate to comprise the Hebrew Psalter. Even as Westermann draws clear lines of distinction between praise and lament, he recognizes the possibility of movement from lament to praise. Westermann writes that “the beginnings and transitions to praise of God are seen even in the laments of the people and of the individual. Thus the confession of confidence, which is in Israel such a meaningful and richly developed part, is not to be sharply separated from praise of God. Thus the vow of

---

praise directly points the way to the Psalm of praise."\textsuperscript{33} Because lament is petitioning God, the answering of that petition leads to psalms of praise. Psalms of praise arise from the acknowledgment of lament.

"In the Psalms the lament is consistently followed by a petition, i.e., a supplication for help. In the late period the petition is separated from the lament, and an associated phenomenon is the gradual disintegration of the Psalm of lament as a whole."\textsuperscript{34} As Westermann sees the distinction between the two poles, the Psalms tilt towards praise. The natural move from lament to praise is reflected in the arrangement of psalms that reflect this movement. Brueggemann summarizes Westermann’s move. The power of lament is found in “that these psalms move from plea to praise. . . . The intervention of God in some way permits the move from plea to praise [and] . . . the proper setting of praise is as lament resolved.”\textsuperscript{35} The movement from lament to praise can occur both within the psalm itself or the movement from one psalm to the next.

Psalm 22 begins with “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me? Why are you so far from saving me?” The psalm moves towards a plea that the LORD “be not far off; O my Strength, come quickly to help me. Deliver my life.” The lament psalms end on a hopeful note of trust that “dominion belongs to the LORD and he rules over the nations. . . . They will proclaim his righteousness to a people yet unborn — for he has done it.” Even towards the end of Psalm 22, there has been a movement from profound lament to profound praise. Psalm 23 follows with a strong sense of confidence in God. The images of God’s provision dominates the familiar, “The Lord is my Shepherd” psalm.

\textsuperscript{33} Westermann, \textit{Praise and Lament in the Psalms}, 155.
\textsuperscript{34} Westermann, \textit{Praise and Lament in the Psalms}, 213.
In similar fashion, Psalm 130, which begins with “Out of the depths, I cry to you;” moves towards “therefore you are feared;” and culminates with “in his word I put my hope. My soul waits for the Lord” and “He himself will redeem Israel from all their sins.” Psalm 131, a psalm of trust and a song of ascent, follows with images of contentment, “I have stilled and quieted my soul” moving towards a call to worship from the entire community, “O Israel, put your hope in the LORD both now and forever.” Both the internal (within the psalm itself) content of the lament psalm and the external structure and the arrangement of the psalms shows an expectation of trust and hope that leads to praise following the presentation of a plea arising out of lament. Praise, therefore, follows lament.

The diseased imagination of U.S. Evangelicalism, however, that arises from the assumption of triumphalism and exceptionalism results in an imbalanced emphasis on praise over and against lament. Praise replaces lament. Walter Brueggemann asks the question:

What happens when appreciation of the lament as a form of speech and faith is lost, as I think it is largely lost in contemporary usage? What happens when the speech forms that redress power distribution have been silenced and eliminated? The answer, I believe, is that a theological monopoly is reinforced, docility and submissiveness are engendered, and the outcome in terms of social practice is to reinforce and consolidate the political-economic monopoly of the status quo.36

A triumphalistic narrative will rush towards praise, but without lament. Rather than elevating one narrative over the other, both praise and lament are needed. The primacy of the triumphalistic praise narrative arises from a dominant culture resting on the

---

assumptions of supremacy. Praise and lament are both essential narratives for the fullness of theology.

Walter Brueggemann asserts the necessity for both the narrative of praise of the dominant triumphant culture and the narrative of lament of the suffering to be present in the theological imagination. In *Peace*, Bruggemann attempts to address the difference between shalom for the haves and the have-nots: 'A theology of blessing [celebration] for the well off 'haves' is very different from a theology of salvation [suffering] for the precarious 'have-nots.'" The tension between the theology of celebration and the theology of suffering is the tension between the now and the not yet.' In the same way that a proper kingdom theology demands the intersection between the now and the not yet, a proper shalom theology dictates that there is an intersection between suffering and celebration.

The “haves” develop a theology of celebration. Those who live in celebration “are concerned with questions of proper management and joyous celebration.” Instead of deliverance, “the well-off do not expect their faith to begin in a cry but rather, in a song. They do not expect or need intrusion, but they rejoice in stability.” Praise marks the story of celebration.  

The theology of celebration, which emerges out of the context of affluence and abundance, focuses on the proper management and stewardship of the abundant resources that God has provided. Because there is abundance, the world is viewed as generally good and accommodating to those who are living under the theology of celebration. Life is already healthy, complete and whole. God, therefore, takes on the role of a nurturer and caregiver with more feminine attributes. In the theology of

---

celebration, maintaining and preserving the status quo becomes a central priority. The theology of celebration is a theology of the resurrection.

The “have-nots” develop a theology of suffering and survival. Those who live under suffering live “their lives aware of the acute precariousness of their situation.” Worship that arises out of suffering cries out for deliverance. “Their notion of themselves is that of a dependent people crying out for a vision of survival and salvation.” Lament marks the story of suffering. Theology of suffering emerges out of the context text of scarcity and oppression and, therefore, focuses on the need for salvation and survival. Because of the reality of oppression, the world is generally considered to be evil and hostile to those who are living under the theology of suffering. Life is precarious, needing a deliverer. God, therefore, takes on the image of a warrior and conqueror and assumes more masculine attributes. In the theology of suffering, fighting injustice becomes the central priority. The theology of suffering is a theology of the cross.

In examining the seemingly polar extremes presented by Brueggemann, it is essential to reflect how we can connect the two seemingly disparate theologies. In *Flesh and Stone*, Richard Sennett states the central question of our striving to understand the intersection between the theology of celebration and the theology of suffering: "How will we exit from our own bodily passivity . . . For without a disturbed sense of ourselves, what will prompt most of us — who are not heroic figures knocking on the doors of crackhouses — to turn outward toward each other, to experience the Other?" How can

---

those of us who operate under the theology of celebration connect with those who live under the theology of suffering?\textsuperscript{40}

American Christians that flourish under the existing system seek to maintain the existing dynamics of inequality and remain in the theology of celebration over and against the theology of suffering. Promoting one perspective over the other, however, diminishes theological discourse. The intersection of the two threads provides the opportunity to engage in the fullness of theology. Lament and praise must go hand in hand. For U.S. Evangelicals riding the fumes of a previous generation’s assumptions, a triumphalistic theology of celebration and privilege rooted in a praise-only narrative is perpetuated by the absence of lament and the underlying narrative of suffering that informs lament. The theological imagination of U.S. Evangelicalism needs the prophetic disruption of lament and the voice of the suffering.

The legitimation of the voice of the suffering offers the very real possibility of justice being called out. For Brueggemann, the power of the lament is that the oppressed are given the right to speak and by speaking, offered the possibility of redressing injustice. “The lament form thus concerns a redistribution of power.”\textsuperscript{41} The power of lament is that the covenant relationship operates in both directions, from the powerful to the powerless as well as from the powerless to the powerful. Lament offers a mutual dynamic to the covenant relationship. “One loss that results from the absence of lament is the loss of genuine covenant interaction, since the second party to the covenant (the

\textsuperscript{40} Adapted from Soong-Chan Rah, \textit{The Next Evangelicalism} (Downer Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2008), 143-163 and Rah, \textit{Prophetic Lament} (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2015), 21-24.

\textsuperscript{41} Brueggemann, \textit{Psalms and the Life of Faith}, Kindle loc. 1177 of 4119.
petitioner) has become voiceless or has a voice that is permitted to speak only praise and doxology.”  

Walter Brueggemann in *The Psalms and the Life of Faith* expands the role lament as the place of protest. The lament “shifts the calculus and redresses the distribution of power between the two parties, so that the petitionary party is taken seriously and the God who is addressed is newly engaged in the crisis in a way that puts God at risk.”  

“In the Old Testament, from beginning to end, the 'call to distress,' the 'cry out of the depths,' that is, the lament, is an inevitable part of what happens between God and man.” The lament form expressed in a worship setting gives voice to the sufferer. “The basis for the conclusion that the petitioner is taken seriously and legitimately granted power in the relation is that the speech of the petitioner is heard, valued, and transmitted as serious speech. Cultically, we may assume that such speech is taken seriously by God.”

This dialogue moves the theology of suffering into interaction with the theology of celebration. “In the West, God-talk is characterized by objective thinking about God. In theology God becomes an object. But in the Old Testament, talk of God is characterized by dialogical thinking.” A theology of celebration has the luxury of being able to objectify God. Because suffering is a distant reality, it is not necessary for the presence of God to be immanent. God can be a distant abstraction whose praise is expected. Lament

---

47 For example, Westermann notes that “when Western theology speaks of God's salvation or of a God who saves, God thereby becomes objectively tied to an event, and thus emerges a 'soteriology.' The Old Testament cannot pin God down to a single soteriology. It can only speak of God's saving acts within a whole series of events, and that necessarily involves some kind of verbal exchange between God and man.” Westermann, *Praise and Lament*, 261.
as dialogue challenges this abstraction. A theology of suffering must acknowledge the cry of distress and suffering in lament before moving to the psalms of praise. Lament requires us to stay in the dialogue as the suffering offer the relentless truth of suffering.

Lament offers the very real suffering of God’s people in vivid, even gory details for the world to hear. But in the process of expressing that suffering, hope is offered. “The suffering is, as it were, an affirmation that God is still there and still concerned with the fate of Israel.”48 Even if the explicit promise is not offered, the freedom to voice despair portends hope. Lament’s "bitter accusations reveal profound yearning for God, even as God appears deeply untrustworthy and remote. It voices truth without which relationships cannot prosper.”49 The hope is in the relationship. Not merely words spoken or promises made, but in the reality that God offers reconciliation to even his most bitter enemies (which Jerusalem has now become). The hope of reconciliation rests in a relationship with God. The necessity of relationship to bring hope could also extend to the horizontal component of relationship. Bridging the disconnect between suffering and celebration may offer the hope of authentic human relationships that offers the fullness of shalom.

The problem with Western ecclesiology is a self-perceived exceptionalism and triumphalism that prevents the practice of lament that is rooted in humility. The fullness of shalom is denied to a community that sees shalom from one angle and does not embrace the full scope of worship. Pain and suffering are not allowed to be expressed because it would interrupt the triumphalistic narrative. A theology of lament could

reintroduce a worship practice that provides hope, even for those that do not realize how much they need hope.

*Tish B’Av* is the day in the Jewish calendar that commemorates the destruction of both the first temple in 586 BCE and the second temple in 70 CE. Marked by fasting, the special liturgy offers the time “to contemplate the disasters of their history, to mourn over them, and to resolve to help bring the redemption so that the sufferings would cease.”

The ancient liturgy of Lamentations provides the frame by which suffering can be engaged. In the same way that the acrostic form allowed the mourners to express the fullness of their pain, sorrow, and grief without completely losing their sanity, the liturgy of *Tish B’Av* allows God’s people to express pain without succumbing to total despair.

The responsive reading for the *Tish B’Av* liturgy ultimately concludes with reflections on the holocaust. “Alas [an exclamation of despair], no generation has known a catastrophe so vast and tragic! . . . Countless cities of slaughter from which six million of our people were driven into a ghastly crematoria where they perished. . . . We have witnessed the darkest chapter of Jewish history”

The immense suffering of the holocaust meant the destruction of not just one city, but multiple cities of Jews. The level of grief and pain related to the holocaust requires the pattern of liturgy to be able to express it.

In the United States, grief and pain related to race are often suppressed. The stories of suffering are often untold. The slave trade that brought Africans to the Western hemisphere brutally stripped them all identity, resulting in the complete obliteration of

---

kinship, family, identity, and history. The subsequent history of the progeny of the African slaves in the United States has been one of a stifling of their story. In the church, there is a particular absence of knowledge about the stories of the African-American church. Western theological history dominates while the stories of slave religion are left untold. Lament calls the church to make room for the stories of suffering. Space is created for racial healing to arise from the power of stories, particularly stories of suffering.

The depth of pain endemic to racial hostility requires boundaries and guidelines for complete healing. The church should become the place where the fullness of suffering is expressed in a safe environment. The life of the church, whether expressed as liturgy, worship, leadership, small groups, or other aspects of church life, should provide the safe place where the fullness of suffering can be set free. In *The Sacrifice of Africa*, Emmanuel Katongole presents three stories of the church that exemplify a type of insanity that arises out of a deep-seated suffering but leads to profound reconciliation and healing. Each story reveals a type of revolutionary madness that arises out of a deep history of suffering. Yet this revolutionary madness finds expression in the narrative of the church and provides an “interruption of the social history shaped by tribalism, poverty, violence, and hatred.” The madness of suffering has found expression, not for further destruction but for reconciliation.

The church has the power to bring healing in a racially fragmented society. That power is not found in strength but in suffering and weakness. The difficult topic of racial reconciliation requires the intersection of celebration and suffering. In a triumphalistic
world, lament makes no sense. The theology of celebration will always be more attractive than the theology of suffering. But if lament were offered to a suffering world, the hope that is woven into lament could offer the possibility of genuine reconciliation.

4.4 Analysis

The exceptionalistic and triumphalistic tendency of a cultural captive Evangelicalism helps to form the diseased theological imagination. The bounded set of an Evangelical theology believed to be achieved by reason by virtue of an exceptional mind, has difficulty engaging with alternative Christian narratives. The theological boundary of the creation account is transgressed by white American Christian taking the place of God in created order and asserting white supremacy and exceptionalism. A misappropriated creation account reveals a biblical anthropology that would solely elevate whiteness to the level of God’s image. The exceptionalism that leads to a dysfunctional creation account would also transgress Evangelical christology. The supersessionism that centralizes whiteness through the removal of the Jewish roots of Christianity would go so far as to sever Jesus from his Jewish identity. The Jewish Jesus is then remade into a white Christ. This dysfunctional Christology would yield a dysfunctional soteriology that would define salvific viability and the salvation narrative through the approximation of whiteness. The triumph of the white Evangelical theological framework is evident in the triumphant narrative of Christology and soteriology and consequently finds expression in ecclesiology. The worshipping community of the church finds itself unable to engage the full expression of worship as they celebrate a triumphant theology of celebration and

---

diminish the theology of suffering marked by lament. The diseased imagination of white
supremacy, exceptionalism, and inevitable triumph has successfully captured Evangelical
theology.

The diseased theological imagination of the U.S. Evangelical church requires a
challenge that cannot arise from within its own community. In the same way, that
Evangelicals believe that individual salvation requires redemption to come from an
external source, redemption for a diseased theological imagination will also require an
external source. The interaction with an otherness that challenges the status quo would be
a necessary precondition to the salvation of the soul of Evangelicalism. African-American
Christianity and theology is a profound and essential theological marker that has been
ignored by U.S. evangelical Christianity. The story of African-American evangelicalism
confronts categories found in U.S. evangelical theology that need the intersection of the
African-American experience. The possibility of this intersection is the formation of a
prophetic imagination that moves us beyond cultural captivity.
PART III
The Story of African-American Evangelicals
1960s and 1970s
5. The National Black Evangelical Association

The initial failure to see the Black Church as an expression of evangelical faith has yielded an unnecessary gulf between white and black evangelicals. From the very beginning, the Black Church reflected an evangelical ethos. (See Chapter 2) William Pannell notes that “the origins of the black Christian experience in American were evangelical in nature. Some elements of evangelicalism could be found in the early attempts of the Church of England to convert and baptize blacks.”¹ Even during the formation of fundamentalist Christianity in the United States, many African-Americans would find affinity with their white counterparts but would not be included within the boundaries of the emerging fundamentalism.

Matthew Sutton in exploring the rise of fundamentalist Christianity as well as apocalyptic Christianity in the early part of the twentieth century notes that “while many African-American Protestants embraced the ‘fundamentals’ of the faith, they mostly remained on the sidelines as public debate raged in the leading white religious denominations and periodicals. At no point did white evangelicals consider reaching out to the nation’s black churches. Despite fundamentalists’ talk of doctrinal purity as the foundation for Christian fellowship, the color line always trumped theology.”² The lack of inclusion of African-Americans in mainstream white conservative Protestant expressions of U.S. Christianity can be attributed to the active exclusion of blacks by whites. The historical exclusion of blacks from white assemblies would be a painful

reminder of the rejection of black humanity by white Christians. The historical rejection of African-American Christianity would necessitate the formation of structures and systems outside of the control of dominant culture.

5.1 The Advent of the NBEA

The black church of the early twentieth century would recognize their own distinctive characteristics vis-a-vis the white church. The black church while holding to an evangelical theology, developed a particular expression that served the specific cultural context of African-Americans. “African American Protestantism evolved as a special hybrid of black culture and international evangelicalism. Rooted deeply in the Bible and empowered by the Spirit, black faith was facilitated initially by evangelical witness.”

The exclusion of the traditional and historical Black Church from the larger evangelical movement meant that in the latter half of the twentieth century, a new category would need to emerge to intersect with white Evangelicalism. The 1960s and 1970s began to see an increasing involvement of black evangelicals in the context of white Evangelical institutions. However, there would be increasing frustration by these black evangelicals facing racism in the context of white Evangelicalism.

As James Massey notes in a Christianity Today article, the National Black Evangelical Association (NBEA) was formed “when it became clear that social concerns were being excluded from the agenda of the National Association of Evangelicals.” The emergence of the NBEA would give black evangelicals the opportunity to connect with

---

one another and to develop an evangelical theology that incorporated greater sensitivity to the African-American community. “While Black Evangelicalism is certainly not limited to the membership of the NBEA, the NBEA is paradigmatic of the religious movement that we refer to as contemporary black Evangelicalism.”5 The inaugural conference was held in 1963 in Los Angeles6 and originally known as the National Negro Evangelical Association (NNEA), the NBEA’s beginnings reveal four key threads of influence and formation. Many of these threads overlapped in various individuals but provided four different influences on the formation of the NBEA.

First, the fundamentalist thread was represented by the Nottage brothers of the Plymouth Black Brethren. African-American Pentecostals, specifically, the Trinitarian Pentecostal tradition such as the United Pentecostal Council of the Assemblies of God comprised the second thread. The third thread emerged out of the growing number of African-Americans graduating from Evangelical educational institutions. After World War II, a number of African-Americans attended Evangelical colleges and seminaries. They were influenced by these schools in relatively small numbers but they provided a base of leadership for black evangelicalism. The connection between black evangelicals and predominantly white institutions extended into African-American involvement in para-church organizations which provided the fourth thread. Black evangelicals served in organizations such as Youth for Christ, InterVarsity Christian Fellowship, Campus Crusade for Christ and the Billy Graham Evangelistic Association (BGEA). The BGEA

---


and the African-American-led Tom Skinner Associates would contribute evangelism-minded African-Americans who worked independently as well as within Evangelical evangelistic organizations.

First, there was the fundamentalist thread exemplified by the influence of the Nottage brothers of the Plymouth Black Brethren: Whitfield, Talbot (TB), and Berlin Martin (BM) Nottage (1889-1966). BM Nottage was the more prolific and well-known of the Nottage brothers. The Nottages became Christians in their native island of Eleuthera in the Bahamas. After immigrating to the United States in 1910, the Nottage Brothers were aggressive about evangelistic efforts in the urban African-American community and established a number of churches in various cities throughout the United States. These churches formed a cluster of churches separate from the association of white Plymouth Brethren.

The Nottage brothers were prolific church planters as they would establish assemblies in St. Louis, Muskegon, Terre Haute, Birmingham, Philadelphia, Richmond, and Chicago. TB Nottage would eventually plant a church in Cleveland while BM Nottage would plant a church in Detroit, eventually leading to five assemblies in the Detroit area under his leadership. These assemblies would establish a noticeable African-American Christian presence in the Midwest, particularly in urban areas.

The impact of the Nottage brothers was seemingly limited to the African-American community in the United States. While theologically in alignment, the “black Brethren” would remain separated from the larger movement of the Plymouth Brethren. B.M. Nottage (in a privately published sermon cited by Miller) asserts that “the ‘all welcome’

sign of the doors of most evangelical churches does not include the Negro. . . . Usually he isn’t welcome and is not allowed to enjoy such fellowship.”

Despite a lack of connection to the Plymouth Brethren, the Black Brethren would continue to reflect the conservative fundamentalism of their white counterparts in the middle of the twentieth century. The theology of the Nottages “was representative of the pre-millennial dispensationalist theology of the early twentieth century, which emerged among the Plymouth Brethren and other fundamentalist groups. . . . This body of black Christians clearly identified with the early fundamentalist groups.”

Miller notes that “Nottage’s sermons and speeches show the development of an early theological fundamentalism and criticism of the traditional black church. They reveal classic rationalistic or propositional Christian doctrine.” Initially influenced by the teachings of John Nelson Darby, B.M. Nottage would teach a dispensationalism that would involve eschatological charts and murals. William Pannell notes, however, that B.M. Nottage would eventually move beyond dispensationalism the more he studied Scripture. Pannell who emerged from the Black Brethren movement would often travel with B.M. Nottage to various stops in the Midwest for revivals and crusades. Pannell recalls that B.M. would carry around a well-worn Bible and demonstrate a deep love and proficiency with Scripture.

The Nottages would reflect a staunch conservatism in their theology and would shape the Black Brethren with a fundamentalist-evangelical theology. In practice, the Black

---

Brethren and in particular, B.M. Nottage demonstrated an evangelistic zeal. Nottage would lead revival meetings and crusades in many venues throughout the Midwest states. These venues would include Christian colleges such as Moody Bible Institute, Goshen (a Mennonite institution) as well as Brethren churches, Mennonite Churches, and other churches with a theologically conservative African-American constituency. Nottage’s conservative views on Scripture and his evangelistic zeal would provide the evangelical flavor for those he would influence and would eventually come to influence the NBEA.

Also included in the fundamentalist thread would be the contribution of Howard Jones and John Davis Bell of the Christian and Missionary Alliance. The fundamentalist strain of the NBEA (having emerged out of the context of the black church in the Caribbean rather than the historical Black Church in the United States) would also provide a contrast to the influence of the historic black church, oftentimes resulting in conflict and suspicion.

The modern black evangelical movement, as it developed, placed more emphasis on the propositional aspects of faith than on experiential and ecstatic elements. This caused some strains between the black evangelical movement and the traditional black church, leading some black evangelicals to characterize the historic black church as "apostate" and unbiblical" Conversely, some in mainline black churches labeled black evangelicals as doctrinaire and schismatic 'fanatics'.

The significant role of the fundamentalist thread, particularly the Plymouth Black Brethren, was the influence of B.M. Nottage on future NBEA leaders such as “Marvin Printis [Prentis], the first president of the NBEA; William Pannell, the professor of

---

12 Pannell, interview.
evangelism at Fuller Theological Seminary; and Howard Jones, the first black associate of Billy Graham.”

The second thread was comprised of African-American Pentecostals; specifically, “the Trinitarian Pentecostal tradition as exemplified in the Church of God in Christ. The best representative of this movement is William H. Bentley.” Bentley would go on to become the most prominent, articulate, and consensus-building voice within and for the NBEA. He served as the President of the NBEA from 1970 to 1976 and self-published the NBEA’s only self-reported historical document, *National Black Evangelical Association: Evolution of a Concept of Ministry*. The Pentecostal thread differed from the first thread in that many of the black Pentecostals emerged from traditionally black denominations free of white control. The Pentecostal thread of the NBEA “saw itself somewhere between the fundamentalist variety of black evangelicals and the traditional black churches.” Because of the ability to develop in a distinct cultural and ecclesial context, the Pentecostal thread would exhibit greater autonomy and agency from other African-American evangelicals.

Bentley’s own denomination, the United Pentecostal Council of the Assemblies of God (UPCAG) was formed by a cluster of independent Pentecostal churches in Cambridge, MA. The denomination would send their founder as their first missionary to Liberia, revealing the missionary activist zeal in its early stages. The UPCAG would be influenced and shaped by black Christians from the Caribbean as well as from the United States. The UPCAG would extend their denominational reach to Aruba, Barbados,

---

Trinidad and other areas of the West Indies. The Caribbean influence on the UPCAG would mirror the influence of the Bahamian-born Nottage brothers. Black churches in the Caribbean would exhibit more independence than their counterparts in the United States. John Catron notes that “Caribbean evangelicals were some of the first black Christians to demand separation from white Protestants.” The UPCAG that helped to form Bill Bentley would exhibit significant independence from majority culture Christianity in its freedom from white control and dominance.

A.G. Miller points out that the level of independence exhibited by black Pentecostals would help their development of a uniquely black Evangelical perspective. "It is noteworthy that it was the Pentecostals, such as Bentley, who challenged he NBEA in areas of black theology, black culture, social action, and rethinking black evangelical's relationship with the African-American church. This came about partly as a result of the Pentecostals' encounter with broader and more liberal theological thinking and their rootedness in a black church tradition." At the same time, the Pentecostals in the NBEA would assert their commitment to the evangelical gospel message. Bentley counters the “condescending attitudes which many a white evangelical has toward the Black church. . . . And the worst cut of all was the very inaccurate accusation: ‘He doesn’t preach the Gospel.’ . . . Pentecostals in particular take exception to the last charge, since we at that time feel that hardly anyone other than

---
ourselves ‘preached the Gospel’.”

In the white Evangelical community, Pentecostals would not be accepted in the early stages of the founding of the NAE, but eventually, the NAE would embrace Pentecostalism with one of the more prominent recent Presidents being a Pentecostal pastor. The NBEA would adapt quickly to the growth and influence of Pentecostalism as it embraced Pentecostal pastors with evangelical convictions at an early stage of its history.

The third thread emerged out of the growing number of African-Americans graduating from Evangelical institutions. In the latter half of the twentieth century, a number of African-Americans attended Evangelical schools such as Wheaton College, Nyack College, Moody Bible Institute, Trinity Evangelical Divinity School, Dallas Theological Seminary and Fuller Theological Seminary. The first president of the NBEA, Marvin Prentis was a graduate of Fuller Seminary. The second president, Howard Jones graduated from Nyack College. Tony Evans was a graduate of Dallas Theological Seminary. Carl Ellis completed his M.A.R. at Westminster Theological Seminary, and Bill Pannell would eventually teach at Fuller Theological Seminary. Evangelical educational institutions would serve as an important hub and a source of theological input for Black evangelicals.

This small but influential group of black Evangelicals would provide insight into the white Evangelical world and provided a base of leadership for black evangelicalism.

"Black evangelical leadership of the early and middle sixties was part and parcel product of the institutions in which they received their training. It was hardly likely then that as a group, they could be expected to articulate a Black ethnic viewpoint. The standards we

---


189
were taught to emulate were indigenous to white Christianity, not reflective of Black social and racial reality." Part of the role of the NBEA was the opportunity to develop a uniquely black theological reflection in addition to the conservative theological framework they received in Evangelical educational institutions.

African-Americans attending these Evangelical institutions would face an additional burden. They would face the challenges and opportunities of a society rife with racial tension while attending an Evangelical school that would often have no categories to address racial tension. Instead, the institutions would seek to minimize racial injustice to get to the important work of personal evangelism. In the fall of 1968, following the assassination of Martin Luther King, Jr., Wheaton received its largest group of minority students to date. That experience of being part of a large incoming class of minority (mostly black and Puerto Rican) would be paired with the social turmoil of that time period.

Ron Potter matriculated with that incoming class in the fall of 1968. In May of 1970 at a conference held at Eastern Nazarene College (ENC) geared towards African American students at Evangelical institutions, Potter would explicitly express his discontent with his experience at Wheaton College. Potter would assert:

Christianity, as it is expressed in American society, has been neocolonialist, oppressive, and racist. This has taken its most blatant form on evangelical Christian campuses. We talk a lot about peace on our Christian campuses, we talk a lot about the bringing together of people, black people and white people, on evangelical Christian campuses; yet, many times this as been primarily based upon the norms of white evangelicals. . . . We have associated Biblical Christianity with the norms and mores of evangelical subculture. We have had a

---

21 Russ Knight, interview by author, 23 March 2010 and 20 April 2010, Chicago, IL.
22 Bentley, *National Black Evangelical Association*, 16.
wedding between Christianity as expressed in the Bible and cultural evangelicalism and the two have been so closely knit together that on can hardly differentiate them. Therefore, a student in his junior and senior year at these institutions will say, “If that is Christianity, I want no part of it.”

Potter would point out the hypocrisy of white Evangelicalism. His time at Wheaton College revealed to him the high level of cultural captivity that was not self-evident to the white Evangelical community. Potter’s perspective would indicate a sense of discontent by African-Americans in these Evangelical institutions.

The proceedings of the conference at ENC would appear in Inside Magazine in September of 1970. Potter’s rebuke of the hostile environment at Evangelical educational institutions would be read by the Wheaton administration. The Dean of Wheaton College would call Potter to his office at the beginning of the following fall semester. The dean demanded that Potter retract his comments and when Potter refused he would subsequently be expelled from Wheaton.

Potter left Wheaton and transferred to Rutgers University. He would then attend seminary at International Theological Center (ITC) in Atlanta which served a more mainline and theologically liberal African-American population. Potter would leave the Evangelical fold for more than a decade but return under the positive influence of Bill Bentley. Potter’s negative experience with an Evangelical college would be mirrored by others, necessitating outreach by the NBEA towards black students at white institutions. The NBEA would become a safe place of gathering and a place to decompress the pressures faced by blacks in overwhelmingly white Evangelical educational institutions.

---

24 Ron Potter, interview by author, 20 February 2016, Jackson, MS, tape recording.
The fourth thread would include African-Americans involved in Evangelical parachurch ministries such as Youth for Christ, InterVarsity Christian Fellowship, and the BGEA. In particular, African-American involvement with the work of evangelism through parachurch organizations would come to represent this thread. Because of the emphasis on personal evangelism, many black evangelists received sponsorship and support from white fundamentalists and evangelicals. Howard Jones, Ralph Bell, and the musician Jimmy McDonald, all served with the BGEA. Jones would frequently appear on the radio and it was noted that he would sound just like Billy Graham.25

Howard Jones would provide an important voice in the early stages of the NBEA as a fundamentalist-evangelical who would emphasize evangelism in line with his affiliation with the BGEA. Howard Jones lineage follows the trajectory of the Great Migration. His great-grandmother left the south and arrived in Ohio in April 1881 with Jones’ father eventually growing up in Oberlin. Jones, himself, would grow up in “lovely middle-class community [and] an integrated neighborhood” in Cleveland, Ohio. Jones would note that his friends “were a united group — black, Italian, German, Bohemian . . . Our social contract didn’t allow much room for racial ugliness.”26 Jones’ father was a Baptist while his mother was a member of a St. James A.M.E. Church in Cleveland. Eventually, the family would settle at East Mount Zion Baptist Church. Despite his upbringing in the historic black church tradition, Howard Jones would end up attending Nyack College, a Christian and Missionary Alliance institution.

25 Peter Sjoblom, interview by author, 23 March 2010 and 20 April 2010, Chicago, IL.
Jones had fallen in love with Wanda who was a member of Oberlin Alliance Church. Wanda would have a conversion experience and would eventually influence Howard towards a conversion experience. Howard Jones would acknowledge: “I was a sinner before a holy God. My life had been spent trying to make myself happy, but now I understood true happiness could come only from surrendering myself to Christ and allowing Him to have His way with me.”

Jones would feel the call the ministry and would attend Nyack College with his future wife in the summer of 1941. His father would push back at Howard’s choice believing that Nyack and the C&MA represented white Christianity.

After graduating from Nyack, Jones would move to Harlem with his new bride Wanda. He would pastor Bethany Alliance Church and launch a local radio broadcast. However, Jones quickly recognized that “my color presented a major obstacle when it came to attracting supporters for the radio program. Indeed, many times after we’d send ministry materials to someone who had written us to give us a nice donation, we ended up never hearing from those people again. It got so bad that I told Wanda that I wasn’t sending out any more literature with our pictures on it. It was too costly.”

Jones’ ministry would lead him back to Cleveland to pastor Smoot Memorial Alliance Church and onto Liberia, Ghana, and Nigeria in 1957 to hold evangelistic crusades. Jones demonstrated an activistic evangelistic zeal in local church ministry and also in global missionary efforts.

---

In 1957, Howard Jones would also experience a significant elevation of his ministry to a national level by joining the ministry of the Billy Graham Evangelistic Association (BGEA). In conducting evangelistic crusades in Madison Square Garden, Graham recognized “that the audience was overwhelmingly white but the city was not. . . [Graham would invite] the Reverend Howard Jones . . . to come to New York to counsel the Team. Jones told him to take the crusade to blacks, not wait for them to come to him. Shortly afterward, Graham conducted meetings in Harlem and in Brooklyn with audiences of 8,000 and of 10,000, respectively.”

Graham would invite Jones to join the team as the first African-American associate for BGEA. Jones recognized that Graham was looking for an African-American associate “who could transcend racial boundaries, someone whose theology was sound and whose approach was non-threatening; someone who understood the subtle intricacies, the manner and vernacular of white evangelical culture. In short, someone who was safe.”

Jones recognized that as an African-American in the overwhelmingly white world of Evangelicalism, he would face numerous challenges. “I remember sitting on the crusade platform on various occasions with empty seats next to me because some white crusade participants had decided to sit on the other side of the stage. At other times, I would go down to counsel new believers during the altar calls only to see white counselors move in the other direction.” Jones would write positively about his overall experiences at the BGEA and of Billy Graham in particular. Jones would honor Graham’s attempt to integrate his crusades. “What Billy did was radical. There’s no getting around it. He

---

weathered the barrage of angry letters and criticism.” Jones would assert that “no other white evangelical leader of his prominence put himself on the line for civil rights as much as Billy, even if he did not pass each and every litmus test of the black establishment.”

Jones would work for BGEA in multiple capacities until his retirement in 2010.

Jones’ experience would reflect the experience of many African-Americans involved in white Evangelical ministries. While their presence may be deemed necessary, they would experience isolation and deal with a sense of rejection from the very community they had shown commitment and loyalty. African-American evangelicals would toe the theological line and express sound theological grounding, but would still be viewed as outsiders. The NBEA would provide the venue through which black evangelicals could gather for a community of common experience. Most of the participants would not waver in their evangelical convictions and commitments, but the fellowship of the NBEA would provide a respite from the hostile world they lived in.

In addition to African-American evangelists in the BGEA like Howard Jones and Ralph Bell, there were African-American evangelists who operated with Evangelical practices when it came to evangelism. The most notable African-American evangelist was Tom Skinner. Skinner would embark on evangelistic efforts in the African-American community, initially through the Harlem Evangelistic Association and eventually through Tom Skinner Associates. Skinner’s ministry represented African-American evangelists whose model of ministry mirrored those of white evangelicals, such as crusades, altar calls, and the prioritizing of personal salvation, but with an emphasis on the black community.

32 Jones. *Gospel Trailblazer*, 141,144.
5.2 Fellowship and Ministry

The NBEA would need to serve a two-fold function. Members of the NBEA would seek a community where they could find respite from the stresses of being an outsider in the white Evangelical world that should have embraced them. The NBEA also provided a safe space to explore methods of contextualized ministry for the black community. The NBEA, therefore, had a two-pronged emphasis of fellowship and ministry. Bill Bentley points out the “deeply felt need for meaningful fellowship among Blacks of evangelical persuasion across denominational affiliation.” The NBEA would provide the opportunity for individuals with similar experiences and challenges to gather in community. Bentley would also point out that the “NBEA soon expanded its horizons and its self-conception to include ministry. Fellowship and Ministry — these are the poles around which the Association revolves.” The common calling of an activist conversionist evangelical faith would draw members to explore effective practices of ministry.

Bentley acknowledged the need for Black evangelicals to fellowship outside of white Evangelicalism. The NBEA would provide a community of theologically like-minded individuals, oftentimes attempting to work within white Evangelical circles. The NBEA would need to serve as a safe haven for those individuals facing a hostile environment based upon racial differences rather than theological differences. Black evangelicals would experience the pain of racism in white Evangelical institutions despite possessing Evangelical credentials and firm Evangelical theological convictions.

33 Bentley, National Black Evangelical Association, 10.
This sense of alienation from the larger Evangelical movement would also necessitate the NBEA’s support of ministry efforts by Black Evangelicals. Often, this support would reflect a desire to reach African Africans with an evangelical gospel, while simultaneously understanding the social-cultural challenges faced by evangelistic efforts among African Americans. Bill Bentley would write that “the idea among us that the ‘best’ and ‘proper’ method for reaching our people, indeed all people — were those we had learned in the Bible Schools and theological seminaries of white evangelicalism.”

Many in the NBEA who would emerge from white Evangelical institutions would seek contextualization of the gospel message that would be relevant to their own communities. The activist conversions impulse would remain, but the members of the NBEA would seek ways to learn and practice more effective contextualization of the gospel.

An example of meeting the fellowship and ministry need of a liminal community would be expressed in a handbook edited by Ruth Bentley titled, *A Handbook for Black Christian Students*. The subtitle revealed the true intent of the book: *How to Remain Sane and Grow in a White College Setting*. Ruth Bentley points to “the need to provide resources for black Christian students as they struggle to understand themselves and how best to prepare to serve the black community.” The book reveals how the fellowship of the NBEA would better understand the ministry context and ministry resource needs of black Christians. Recognizing the challenges in higher education for black students, the NBEA would sponsor the National Black Christian Students Conference that would seek

---


ways to minister to the needs of young African Americans in white dominated academic contexts.

The burden of double consciousness experienced by African Americans in Evangelical educational institutions extended into African American involvement in parachurch organizations. While there would be increasing involvement in white Evangelical parachurch organizations, there would also be increasing frustration by these black evangelicals facing racism in the context of white Evangelicalism. The emergence of the NBEA provided a context for black evangelicals to engage with one another as they faced these challenges as one of a few ethnic minority leaders in predominantly white evangelical institutions.

During the early stage, many black evangelicals were frustrated with the white evangelical movement. This tension primarily sprang from what blacks perceived as white evangelicals’ indifference and lack of sympathy for the evangelistic needs of African Americans. This eventually led some black evangelicals to charge their white counterparts with a spiritual ‘benign neglect.’ Eventually the charge of neglect evolved into a stronger allegation of racism.  

The NBEA gave black evangelicals the opportunity to connect with one another and to develop an evangelical theology that incorporated greater sensitivity to the African-American community.

5.3 Conflict and Contest

The common experience and shared theological fundamentals of black Evangelicals would not always result in unity. Even within the boundary markers of evangelical theology, many members of the NBEA often found themselves at odds with one another. The first sign of contention arose from the difference between the fundamentalist-
evangelical adherents and their more socially progressive adherents. Many of the early members of the NBEA emerged from deeply theologically conservative fundamentalist backgrounds. Many of the early NBEA membership had Christian and Missionary Alliance background, in particular, Howard Jones and Ralph Bell who were the first and second black associates of the Billy Graham Evangelistic Association. African-American evangelicals who identified with the more fundamentalist brand of the emerging Evangelicalism would clash with African-American evangelicals who would draw from a black nationalist perspective on Christianity.

The more theologically fundamentalist establishment African-American members of the NBEA would encounter opposition from the influx of younger black evangelicals. Tom Skinner’s involvement in the NBEA meant the introduction of the “young turks” into the NBEA. The “young turks” included Tom Skinner, Carl Ellis, Bill Pannell, Ron Potter, Columbus Salley and others who were more holistic in their approach to evangelism. At times, even Tom Skinners’ early work, Black and Free, was considered too mild for some of the young turks. Skinners’ first book was considered to have a more moderate tone that appeased white Evangelicals. Columbus Salley would emerge as the more explicit expression of the early young turks’ perspective.

Columbus Salley coauthored the book, Your God is Too White with a white author, Ronald Behm, Pastor of South Shore Bible Church in Chicago. Salley would be representative of the voice of African-American evangelicals who would seek to elevate social justice issues alongside the emphasis on evangelism. In the book published by

---

37 Carl Ellis Jr., interview by author, 27 June 2010, Chattanooga, TN.
38 Knight, interview.
InterVarsity Press in 1970, Salley would make strong assertions that would challenge Evangelical status quo assumptions about evangelism.

During a time of significant nervousness, particularly around the more vocal and militant aspects of the Civil Rights movement, Salley would use positive language in describing Black Power. Salley understood the Black Power movement to be a necessary corrective for that time. Salley writes:

The tragedy of the black experience in relation to “Christianity” is that “Christianity” (as manifested through its association with dehumanizing institutions and their values) was and is unable to provide blacks with the necessary basis to free themselves from white oppression and a sense of inferiority. Thus, there has crystallized within the black community a black consciousness and sensitivity to their own humanity and to their own past and future. This new awareness and its social expression is called Black Power.  

Salley writes these words in a chapter titled, “The Emergence of Black Power: The Basis of a New Religion.” Rather than explicitly condemning the Black Power movement, Salley called for a greater understanding of the movement and even learning from the movement. Salley’s thought process would reflect the perspective of some of his colleagues in the NBEA. Bill Pannell would also write about the need to learn from the Black Power movement and the Black pride that the movement would generate. “Black people, for instance, have learned, or think they have learned, that when Rap Brown and Stokely Carmichael and some of the brothers talk about black people building this country, this is not mere rhetoric. Black people did build this country!”

---

39 Potter, interview.
40 Columbus Salley and Ronald Behm, Your God is Too White (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1970), 63-64.
Salley wrote that “Black Power is the bold assertion of the fact that the humanity of blacks is a non-negotiable, indisputable, non-compromising reality. . . . Black Power is initially the psychological realization that white oppressive, dehumanizing institutions are only capable of making blacks insensitive to their humanity; that no man or institutional form has the power to destroy the basic humming of black people.”

Salley would assert human agency and value to African Americans. Seeing that theological worth and value compelled Salley towards agreement with some of the assertions of the Black Power movement. In order to identify with the African American community for greater witness and ministry, “God must become black. He must become the God not of the ‘sweet by and by’ but of the bitter here and now.”

Salley’s identification with the African American community would mean a strong critique of Western Christianity. Salley states that “the enslavement of blacks was justified in the name of Christianity. Blacks were made to feel cursed in the name of Christianity. Blacks were excluded from white churches in the name of Christianity. Blacks were (and are) excluded from the benefits of American life in the name of Christianity which blesses the status quo.”

As Salley challenged the status quo of American life, Pannell would challenge the exceptional assumption of white Christians. He writes in *My Friend, The Enemy*: “Amazing how white people who have owned black people have a way of demanding that we love everybody. What right as the oppressor to demand that his victim be saved from sin? You may be scripturally and evangelistically correct, but you are ethically wrong. You have the right message, but your timing is

---

42 Salley and Behm, *Your God is Too White*, 65.
43 Salley and Behm, *Your God is Too White*, 73.
44 Salley and Behm, *Your God is Too White*, 13.
Pannell’s critique of Evangelical Christianity would extend towards the existing systems and hierarchy. "My feeling is that the church today, especially that section called evangelical, is being judged not only for what it has done against the Negro, but also by what it has not done for and with the Negro. Through we are displaying some indications of guilt over the sins of our fathers, we have yet to show appreciable evidence of assuming responsibility for the future. This is especially true of the evangelical power structure." The voice of the “young turks” in the NBEA would generate a significant source of contention in the early stages of the NBEA.

Some of the fundamentalist roots of the early expressions of the NBEA would come into conflict with the social justice emphasis of the younger black evangelicals. Howard Jones of the BGEA, who would exemplify the fundamentalist strand that would seek to emulate the personal evangelism emphasis of the white establishment, served as the second President of the NBEA after Prentis’ initial term. Jones would rotate out of the NBEA presidency after two years in 1967. He would claim that the Black Power movement emerged as a dominant voice in the black community. I had always been a strong supporter of civil rights in the vein of Dr. King; however, the Black Power movement demanded a more aggressive and nationalistic stand on issues of racial justice — and a black man who worked for Billy Graham clearly seemed out of step with the direction the movement was going. Not everyone in the NBEA looked down upon my affiliation with Graham. But the small number of folks who did made a lot of noise, and I decided to leave that post in 1967.

———
46 Pannell, My Friend, The Enemy, 121.
47 Jones. Gospel Trailblazer, 216.
Jones’ departure from the NBEA would be the first expression of internal concern by those in the NBEA who followed a more traditional fundamentalist perspective on the relationship between social justice and personal evangelism.

At the 1969 NBEA conference held in Atlanta, Bentley notes that “the lines were clearly drawn between those Blacks who were identified with a more socially conservative bent, and who, on account, some felt, enjoyed close relationships with the white evangelical establishment, and those Blacks who felt that more conscious efforts ought to be made to actively accept our own culture and carefully relate the Gospel claims within that context.”

The question of the church’s relationship with the culture would have to be addressed by the NBEA. In 1970, Columbus Salley gave a plenary address at the NBEA National Conference in New York drawing from the content of his book. Potter describes the event as when “the lid was blown off many previously Negro evangelicals.” He would identify the conferences during this time period as a time when “this new form of black consciousness began to permeate black evangelical thinking.”

African-American evangelicals would need to deal with white Evangelical opposition to black culture. They would also need to discern the best way that African-American evangelicals would engage with the oppressive nature of the dominant Evangelical culture. One of the key cultural battlegrounds was the imbalanced perspective of white Evangelicals who over-emphasized personal evangelism over and against social justice. This divorce did not apply to African-American evangelicals whose perspective would

---

not only differ from the dominant culture perspective but would provide a source of conflict for white Evangelicals.

The emergence of this social justice emphasis and a strong black identity provided a balance to the strongly personal evangelism emphasis in the early years of the NBEA. “As a result, for the first time in the history of the organization, the position was unequivocally expressed that white methods to reach Black people had been historically proven to be inadequate.”50 There was an increasing awareness of the shortcomings of white Evangelicalism applied to the African-American context. The NBEA, therefore, became the safe place for African-American evangelicals to explore issues specific to their own community and to develop their own theological framework and evangelical identity. However, the formation of a unique black evangelical identity meant the diminishing support of the white evangelical community.

In subsequent years, the NBEA would experience a slow but steady decline. The initial departure of the more conservative African-Americans would also mean the departure of most of the whites who were involved with the NBEA. For reasons that are not quite clear, the Afro-centric Christianity that emerged after the numerous skirmishes failed to draw in the subsequent generation of black evangelicals. The NBEA still stands as an important place of historic connection for black evangelicals. Many significant leaders would pass through NBEA, but an organization that has promoted the intersection between evangelical theology and African-American identity has received minimal recognition from the larger Evangelical community.

50 Bentley, National Black Evangelical Association, 20.
6. The Particular Voice of Tom Skinner

Tom Skinner’s story emerges as a critical narrative lens through which one understands twentieth-century African-American evangelicalism. Skinner’s story was evangelical through and through. Yet his message would eventually be considered outside of the mainstream of dominant culture’s evangelical expressions. His initial foray into U.S. Evangelicalism was rooted in his ability to share his personal conversion story and to speak about his individual salvation journey. His ability to effectively communicate an evangelical gospel message caused many in both the white and black communities to sit up and take notice. However, when his message shifted towards plumbing the depth of racial injustice in America, the white Evangelical community would alter their receptivity to his message.

Bill Bentley, one of the key leaders of the National Black Evangelical Association (NBEA) observes about the emergence of Tom Skinner: “Young and captivating, charismatic and capable, Tom expanded the mental and spiritual horizons of what Black ministry could be. His rare gifts of communication made him, even then, a figure to be reckoned with. . . . With [his first book], Black and Free, he became an overnight sensation and to many, ”the” major voice of Black evangelicalism.”¹ Skinner would provide the best of black evangelicalism sought by white U.S. Evangelicals but also exemplify their inability to deal with black evangelicalism.

6.1 From Harlem

Skinner was the son of a Baptist preacher in Harlem, New York. His father, Alester Jerry Skinner and his mother Georgia Robinson Skinner were part of the Great Migration moving from South Carolina to the north, arriving in New York during World War II. Tom Skinner was born in Harlem on June 6, 1942, in the middle of the war when air raid drills were common place. Electricity would be shut off during air raid drills, plunging the city into total darkness. Skinner would claim that “I was born in darkness and my mother said I've been in darkness ever since.”

Skinner described his early years in Harlem as a time when he became aware that he lived in a violent society. “The earliest clearest memory that I have . . . is sitting on a fire escape at age three watching a man on . . . 153rd Street and 8th Avenue in Harlem being stabbed to death. It was the first clear recollection that I can remember, three years old watching a man being put to death.” Skinner recalled the preponderance of drug addiction in his neighborhood. He would recall moments when a mother would awaken the neighborhood with her screams because her “two-week old baby [had been] bitten all to death by a vicious rat.”

In contrast to his self-reported experience of violence, his family pushed Skinner towards an intellectual engagement with the world around him. Skinner stated that “my mother was a very gentle, hard-working woman who took seriously her responsibility as a mother, as a wife. . . . My father placed a strong emphasis on the mind. He believed that you win in the world with your mind. I can hear him very early in our lives telling us

---

3 Skinner, interview.
about the barriers that would be erected in from [front] of us because we were black. And that you have to be twice as good in order to compete. You can't be equal. ‘There are no equal black people,’ he would say. . . .he said that you have to beat that system by being twice as good.”

Skinner would be aware of the obstacles facing African-Americans in the middle of the twentieth century. The social context of his Harlem upbringing would remind him of the challenges of living in an underserved neighborhood. Skinner would also be made aware of how American society was not structured for the social uplift of African-Americans.

Tom Skinner’s father would be influential in confronting these issues through education. “So my father urged us to read very early. . . . By the time I was twelve, thirteen years old I had read five or six of Shakespeare's plays. I had read Othello and Macbeth and Hamlet, Julius Caesar. He required us to memorize long passages of great statements, . . . speech[es] by Frederick Douglass or Abraham Lincoln. . . . He believed that the way black people overcome is that you just have to be educated.”

His father’s emphasis on education would arise from his own experiences of encountering injustice and inequality in American society. Skinner notes that

in New York City, city jobs were based on what was called civil service. You took civil service exams and how you placed on the exams determined your placement in job opportunities. And if you wanted to be an assistant foreman there was a civil service test for that. And if you wanted to be a foreman there was civil service test for that. And he would score very high and they would tell him that he was in the top five percentile. But the job was never forthcoming, the promotion never happened, . . . he talked about the fact that in this society white people do not believe that you are their equal, . . . You don't accept that you're not

4 Skinner, interview.
5 Skinner, interview.
6 Skinner, interview.
their equal, but you must accept that that is how they feel. You must . . . understand that it is ingrained in the culture to believe there are certain things that you are not capable of doing. They do not have visions of you being president of the United States or running a Fortune 500 company. They don't have visions of you doing great things.7

Skinner was a good student, “president of his high-school student body, a member of the basketball team, president of the Shakespearean Club, and an active member of his church’s youth department.”8 By his own recollection, Skinner was all city in fencing, baseball, and in football.9 At school, the narrative of needing to be better than their white counterparts would be reiterated. The world was not a friendly, safe, nor affirming place for African-Americans and they would need to fight for survival. Skinner would recall the influence of one particular teacher, Miss Mickins. “Miss Mickins told us outright in the class every day that the deck was stacked against us. She said, ‘The world out there is not ready for you. You have to make the world ready for you, and therefore you have to be the best in whatever you do.’ . . . she believed her job was to prepare us for the world.”10 Despite the obstacles and challenges facing African-Americans, many people in his life would reiterate the value of education, leading Skinner to take his education seriously.

At the same time that Skinner was excelling at school, he was also the leader of one of the most feared street gangs in New York City. “I became the leader of one of the largest gangs in Harlem called the Harlem Lords. I joined the gang, passed the initiation, couple of months later I challenged the leader, became the leader and began to lead a

---

7 Skinner, interview.
9 Skinner, interview.
very violent life."\textsuperscript{11} Skinner lived a childhood of contradictions. His success in school and in athletics would seemingly contrast sharply with his leadership in the street gang. In all areas of his life, he exhibited leadership flourishing in the multiple worlds in which he lived, even if one area of his world resided in a violent street gang.

Skinner also expressed frustration with being labeled a preacher’s kid. “I think that's one of the major reasons that led me to join a gang, . . . I felt [it] boxed me in and raised people's expectations for me. . . . Adults even had a different standard for me from other kids, . . . so there were these disadvantages of being a preacher's kid.”\textsuperscript{12} Skinner learned the pressures of expectations at an early age but also learned to navigate those expectations.

In his faith development, he would struggle with what he perceived as failures with the traditional church.

Always had a problem with God. [pauses] I guess that I began associating God with church because in our culture there was almost no other way you could relate to God except you had to tie into a religious institution. And religious institutions didn't seem to be very relevant to me with the things of everyday life, you know, living in a slum community with all the attendant problems and difficulties. . . . Since I did not see the church responding to those problems I figured God wasn't responding and since God . . . being God could not be who they say He is because He's not responding, therefore He's probably not even there and therefore people just simply need a god in order to be able get by in life. They need a God because they have nothing else to lean on. \textsuperscript{13}

Disgruntled with a seemingly distant God removed from the sufferings of his community, disenchanted with white Christianity’s inadequate gospel, and disappointed

\textsuperscript{10} Skinner, interview.  
\textsuperscript{11} Skinner, interview.  
\textsuperscript{12} Skinner, interview.  
\textsuperscript{13} Skinner, interview.
with the black church of his father’s generation, Skinner lived a double life of the good church kid and the violent gang leader. In *Black and Free*, Skinner writes, “As a teenager, I looked around and asked my father where God was in all this? I couldn’t for the life of me see how God, if He cared for humanity at all, could allow the conditions that existed in Harlem.”¹⁴ His father’s expression of Christianity did not satisfy Skinner. Skinner claims that his father “believed that Jesus was a good philosopher. You should study the life of Jesus if you really wanted to know what a good man is like. But the stuff that Jesus was the Son of God and that Christ died on the cross for our sins and stuff like that, he wasn't there then.”¹⁵

Skinner’s early years, therefore, reveals a clear disenchantment with organized religion. “I thought that it was necessary for me to disavow religion, Christianity. I could not reconcile the things that I was hearing in church with what was going on in the street. The violence, the hunger, the poverty, the oppression.”¹⁶ Skinner also expressed misgivings about white churches. "There were whites who made a lot of noise about how God was the answer to all our problems and how the Bible was our hope. . . . 'Well, what those people up there need is a good dose of salvation.'”¹⁷ This analysis would first appear in his first book, *Black and Free*, and would reappear in his Urbana ’70 plenary address. His analysis speaks to his observation of white apathy and hypocrisy that he would encounter in his early years, but would also be found later as he engaged the white Evangelical establishment. In his early years, neither the traditional black church of his

---

¹⁵ Skinner, interview.
¹⁶ Skinner, interview.
parents nor the white fundamentalist-evangelical churches would provide adequate answers to what Skinner saw as the profound spiritual and social needs of his community.

In Harlem, Skinner would first encounter black nationalists in his school. His social studies teacher would challenge him that “you've been brainwashed, you've been educated, trained, and brought up under the Christian religion, which is really a white man's religion given to black people in order to keep them in their place.”

18 Skinner would note the strong neighborhood presence of the black nationalist movement.

On 122nd Street and 7th Avenue there was a black nationalist bookstore in Harlem owned by a man by the name of Mitchell, Mitchell. Now Lee Mitchell was very interesting because he was the . . . he was the brother of Elder Mitchell who was a Pentecostal leader in Washington D.C. and bishop of a group of Pentecostal churches on the eastern seaboard. They were tremendous influences in my political views as a teenager. You could come by there after school on any day and Malcolm X would be in there, Louis Farrakhan would be in there, and . . . Adam [Clayton] Powell would come by, be in there and they would have great debates and stuff. So I grew up under that.

19 Black nationalism would have been a significant cultural force in Skinner’s childhood neighborhood. In a sermon delivered in the late 1960s, Skinner would explain the corrective offered by black nationalist teaching. “They would argue, for instance, that in your school you are taught white nationalism from a white man’s point of view. They would tell you that you are told in your history book that Christopher Columbus discovered America, and they would answer that could only be absurd in view of the fact that when Christopher Columbus landed here he found thousands of Indians already occupying the land. So actually it was an Indian who discovered America, but the history

18 Skinner, interview.
19 Skinner, interview.
book will not write that because the Indians weren’t white.”

Skinner’s childhood in Harlem would allow him to intersect with significant expressions of black nationalism as well as the emerging movement of the Nation of Islam. Henry Greenidge, who would later serve as a worship leader for Tom Skinner Associates, but who also befriended Skinner in his teenage years, notes that Malcolm X would captivate the audience of their Harlem neighborhood. At community gatherings, Malcolm X’s bold confrontations against the powers would be heard by the resident’s of the Harlem neighborhood. Skinner’s social, cultural context of Harlem, therefore, would contribute significantly to his theological milieu.

Skinner would also engage with the larger Civil Rights movement. Against his parent’s wishes, at the age of 16, Skinner would participate in the Freedom Bus Rides. Skinner’s world was a deep and varied one that intersected with the breadth of the African-American world that included the urban churches. Skinner would express frustration with the established churches but would also be challenged by the teachings of black nationalists and the Nation of Islam as they grew in influence in a community racked by social injustice.

6.2 Tom Skinner’s Evangelical Testimony

The social context of Harlem yielded a rich and complex environment for Tom Skinner as a youth. The seeming incongruity of gang leadership alongside church leadership and excellence at school would reflect the multiple inputs and influences of his childhood. His leadership in the street gang would reveal a form of agency that would

---

later find itself expressed in his Christian ministry. But before embarking on that ministry, Skinner’s life story produced an evangelical testimony that would profoundly shape the early years of his evangelistic career.

The night before a big gang fight\textsuperscript{22} that could establish Skinner as one the major gang leaders in New York, Skinner was converted by an unscheduled gospel radio broadcast. Skinner’s job was to map out the strategy for the gang fight. “If I succeeded in leading the guys to victory in this fight I would have emerged as a leader of an alliance of gangs that would have made me the most powerful leader in the area.”\textsuperscript{23}

While preparing for the fight, Skinner had the radio tuned to his favorite rock program which was interrupted by an unscheduled broadcast. The broadcast featured a preacher, whom Skinner characterizes as emotional, uncouth, and uneducated, but Skinner “got a spooky feeling this guy was talking right to me.”\textsuperscript{24} Preaching from 2 Corinthians 5:17, the radio preacher redefined sin. Skinner recalls that the preacher emphasized that “every person born into the human race is born without the life of God and that it is the absence of God's life in a person that causes a person to be what the Bible defines as a sinner.” Skinner was struck that the preacher defined a sinner as “a person whose life is independent from the life of God.” This approach to sin allowed Skinner to see sin not as committing sinful acts but as independence from God. That

\begin{footnotes}
\footnotetext[1]{Henry Greenidge, interview by author, 20 February 2016, Jackson, MS, tape recording.}
\footnotetext[2]{Skinner notes that five gangs would have been involved: the Harlem Lords, the Imperials, the Crowns, the Sportsman, and the Jesters.}
\footnotetext[3]{Skinner, interview.}
\footnotetext[4]{Skinner, \textit{Black and Free}, 56.}
\end{footnotes}
independence would be challenged by Jesus who came to bring dependency on Christ and a right relationship with God.\textsuperscript{25}

Skinner experienced a profound personal, spiritual conversion. Upon his conversion at the age of 15, Skinner left the street gang. Ed Gilbreath notes the supernatural experience of Skinner’s departure from the street gang. “Few had voluntarily left the Harlem Lords without losing their lives. So when Skinner went to his 129 fellow gang members to announce he was quitting, he knew he would probably not leave the room alive. Terrified, Skinner informed the gangbangers that he had accepted Christ into his life and that he could no longer be a member of the Harlem Lords. Not one sound came from the bewildered gang. Skinner turned to leave the room. Still, no response. To his astonishment, Skinner left the room a free- and unharmed-man.”\textsuperscript{26}

Two nights later, Skinner’s second-in-command would stop and address Skinner: "The other night when you got up and walked out, I was going to come with you and put my blade right in your back. . . But I couldn't move. It was like something or somebody glued my to my seat."\textsuperscript{27} This fellow gang member and several others from his former gang would eventually make commitments to Christ. As Skinner left the street gang, he would exhibit the gift of evangelism, launching him towards the path of becoming an effective public evangelist.

Skinner experienced what he identified as a positive expression of Christianity in a small group gathering upon his conversion. He discovered a Scripture study group that had been meeting in Harlem. Skinner identified this group as comprised of a hair dresser,

\textsuperscript{25} Skinner, interview.
\textsuperscript{26} Gilbreath, “A Prophet Out of Harlem.”
\textsuperscript{27} Skinner, interview.
a plumber, a truck driver, a cab driver, and other everyday hard working people. The group would welcome Skinner as they studied Watchman Nee’s *The Normal Christian Life*. Skinner would claim that his very first understanding of the person of Christ came from Nee and that his writings had discipled him.28

Shortly after his conversion, Skinner would meet Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. in 1958 at a national oratorical contest in Omaha, Nebraska. Skinner was not only impressed by King’s preaching but also from his persona.

It was very clear to me that there was something very unique about this man and I wanted to know him. But anyway, a group of us were able to meet with him and stuff and talk to [him] and he began to share with us his philosophy of nonviolence. And so I got involved in the Freedom Rides in those days and began to become a very avid student of nonviolence and to see very clearly a certain behavior that was based on the Scriptures for resolving social conflict.29

Upon his conversion, Skinner’s spiritual formation would find multiple inputs from various social contexts. This pattern would continue throughout the remainder of his high school years.

In 1959, Skinner matriculated at Wagner College on Staten Island as an undergrad where he would study history and philosophy and played baseball, football and basketball. Upon graduation, he would proceed to the Manhattan Bible Institute in 1963. At the Manhattan Bible Institute, he would be influenced by Dr. Edward H. Boyce, who Skinner described as “a Pentecostal who approached the scholarship of Scripture in the tradition of those old Dutch Reformed theologians.”30 An immigrant from Barbados, Dr. Boyce possessed a staunchly conservative education, having studied at “Moody Bible

---

28 Skinner, interview.
29 Skinner, interview.
Institute of Chicago, the Bible Institute of Los Angeles and the Biblical Seminary in New York.”

During his years in school, Skinner would begin to preach on the streets of Harlem attracting crowds and winning converts. In 1962 during his last year in college, Skinner worked alongside eleven others to help form the Harlem Evangelistic Association. The formation of the Harlem Evangelistic Association led Skinner to schedule a major crusade at the world-renowned Apollo Theater in Harlem, an entertainment venue where some of the most renowned acts from the African-American community would perform. By their own count, there were 10,000 attendees at the first major crusade held in Harlem. “By the crusade’s end, more than 2,200 people had responded to Skinner’s presentation of the gospel, and the 20-year-old evangelist was hailed as a preaching phenomenon.” In 1963, Skinner would conduct the first set of crusades outside of the U.S. in Guyana with over 25,000 in attendance. In that same year, he would speak at Drew University, have an article published about him in the New York Times, and he would make his first appearance on a major television network. Skinner’s impact would continue to grow through the decade of the 1960s as he would speak at various college settings, including secular schools such as Grand Valley State College (1964) and Howard University (1965). Tom Skinner Radio Crusades would be established with the first radio broadcast aired in New York City in 1965.

30 Skinner, interview.
32 Gilbreath, “A Prophet Out of Harlem.”
33 Tom Skinner Associates, “15th Anniversary Booklet,” Box 1, Folder 2, Papers of Tom Skinner – Collection 430, Billy Graham Center Archives, Wheaton College, Wheaton, IL.
Skinner’s oratory gifts were recognized by all who heard him preach, including prominent white evangelists. In the early years of his ministry, Skinner worked with white evangelist, Jack Wyrtzen, who would set aside one night out of the seven nights of crusades for Tom Skinner to preach. Oftentimes, Skinner’s night would turn out to be the most popular.34 Skinner’s profile rose with the backing and endorsement of many white Evangelicals. He began making appearances on Moody Radio and would have his own program in the late 1960s. He would continue to speak at large venue evangelistic crusades around the country, including Philadelphia, Savannah GA, Paterson NJ, and Flint MI. He even made inroads into international missions in conducting crusades in Canada, Barbados, the Bahamas, and Kenya.35

Skinner’s appeal to the broader spectrum of Evangelicals came from his telling of his powerful personal testimony. The story of a tough street gang member converting to become a crusade evangelist was irresistible for many white Evangelicals. In a July 1966 article in Christian Life magazine, Tom Skinner (as told to Jim Adair) authors an article titled, “I Preach the White Man’s Religion.” In the article, Skinner provides a glimpse of what made his stump speech so effective. “Ten years ago I led gang wars for one of New York City’s most notorious Negro teen gangs, the Lords. Today I am telling people that my faith in Jesus Christ — not violence — is our only hope.”36 Skinner would present his previous life as one affected by violence on the evil city streets. He would then offer the

34 Peter Sjoblom, interview by author, 23 March 2010, Chicago, IL, tape recording.
36 Tom Skinner (as told to Jim Adair), “I Preach the White Man’s Religion,” Christian Life (July 1966), Box 1, Folder 1, Articles By: 1966-1974; n.d., Papers of Tom Skinner – Collection 430, Billy Graham Center Archives, Wheaton College, Wheaton, IL.
power of conversion as the central expression of his testimony. Personal evangelism and conversion would drive Skinner’s early evangelistic efforts.

The editor’s note to the article proves instructive as it frames Skinner’s ministry as the following: “In the past five years, 24-year-old Tom Skinner has conducted evangelistic meeting among Negroes in the Northeast U.S. and in the Caribbean area. He has developed a radio ministry aimed at Negro listeners.”37 The editors would point towards the need among African-Americans and would emphasize the role of Tom Skinner in preaching the gospel to that community. Evangelicals would look towards Skinner to solve the problem of urban ministry.

In the April 1968 issue of Moody Monthly, Skinner writes an article titled: “Why We Must Win the American Negro.” Skinner opens the article with a discussion on white flight from the cities with accompanying statistics on the growing Negro population in major urban centers. He points to the need for revival in the city among African-Americans and states, “I believe that if revival breaks out among the American Negro in the United States we will see a moving of God throughout the nation. I believe the American Negro is the key to revival in the United States.”38 Skinner’s Evangelical testimony would now provide hope for the lost in the urban centers.

Evangelicals would resonate with the conversionist emphasis of Skinner. His story would serve as an exemplar testimony to the possibility that the inner city that needed to hear the gospel could be reached. Skinner’s testimony would become the optimistic Evangelical paradigm of ministry to African-Americans. The power of the Evangelical

37 Editor’s Note, “I Preach the White Man’s Religion,” Christian Life (July 1966), Box 1, Folder 1, Articles By: 1966-1974; n.d., Papers of Tom Skinner – Collection 430, Billy Graham Center Archives, Wheaton College, Wheaton, IL.
gospel would be spoken by someone from the unreached community, proving the exceptional power of the Evangelical message. The Evangelical gospel would be proven correct without contextualization and without actually going into the community.

But Skinner’s story and testimony did not emerge out of a vacuum. His evangelistic efforts were in the shadow of a growing black nationalism and the Civil Rights Movement. As Skinner’s standard testimony about his life story became wide-spread, he began to move his message beyond the simple story of personal salvation that appealed to white Evangelicals. White Evangelicals would be skittish about the growing black national movement and would look for a safer voice for the Evangelical audience. Christianity Today would offer an endorsement of Tom Skinner with the following statement: “ Skinner preached a solid biblical sermon with only one reference to social issues.” Evangelical comfort with Skinner’s message would change, however, as Skinner’s message began to change.

6.3 From Testimony to Confrontation

By the end of the decade of the 1960s and the advent of the 1970s, Skinner was still gaining larger venues to speak his message to the Evangelical world. Skinner was invited in 1969 to address Wheaton College, recognized as the academic vanguard of Evangelical thought and orthodoxy. The previous year Wheaton College had admitted the largest class of non-white students, mostly black and Puerto Rican students from Chicago and New York. Skinner’s series of sermons in 1968 followed by talks in 1969 and 1970 signaled a shift in the focus of his sermons. Skinner began to incorporate more teachings

on the Kingdom of God and the necessity of social concern, responsibility, and action. Racial justice would need to become an important expression of a more justice-oriented message.

White Evangelical eschewing of justice issues would hold up in the narrative of twentieth century white U.S. Evangelicalism. From the fundamentalist-modernist controversy, white flight to the suburbs, and the advent of the culture wars, most white contemporaries of Tom Skinner would emphasize the priority of personal evangelism over against social justice. Black evangelicals, however, would have a different set of experiences. Many would face significant challenges within the world of white Evangelicalism that would sublimate justice to the cause of evangelism. Skinner’s awareness of the challenges experienced by African-American evangelicals in Evangelical institutions would contribute to a shift in message in the late 1960s and early 1970s. The safe and acceptable story of a Damascus road-like conversion experience would no longer be the main message of Tom Skinner.

In 1970, Tom Skinner was asked to address InterVarsity Christian Fellowships’ Urbana Mission Conference. The previous Urbana Conference in 1967 witnessed several African-American students protesting the lack of diverse representation at the mission conference. InterVarsity responded with an invitation to the most significant African-American evangelist of that time: Tom Skinner. Skinner’s talk at the Urbana 1970 Mission Conference would be the national culmination of a changing rhetoric offered by Skinner. In 1967, Tom Skinner had addressed the National Association of Evangelicals for the first time and in 1969, he would address the National Congress on Evangelism.
where he would be introduced by Billy Graham. Most of the 1960s would have witnessed Skinner’s emphasis on personal evangelism and conversion which would appeal to the white Evangelical audiences that would dominate these gatherings.

But as early as 1968, Tom Skinner’s chapel address at Wheaton College would indicate a shift in tone and content of his message. The chapel sermon at Wheaton would include Skinner’s discussion about the slave system and how it had been maintained by the political system — systems that were set up to keep African-Americans down. While still incorporating the message of his conversion experience from the violence of gang life, Skinner would challenge the tenets of white Evangelical intellectualism. He would speak against the history that had silenced African-American and Native-American voices and experiences. In 1969, Skinner would return to Wheaton for four sermons to assert that Jesus “was no soft effeminate Jesus, no Anglo-Saxon, middle class, Protestant Republican, no effeminate, soft individual.” Skinner would confront the cultural captivity of Evangelicalism:

I thought that to commit myself to Jesus Christ also meant that I had to buy the whole subcultural evangelical bag, and I wasn’t about to do that. I thought that to commit myself to Jesus Christ meant that I had to become a flag waving, patriotic evangelical, defending Mama, apple pie and the girl back home. I thought that it would be involved in this whole subcultural, militaristic concept of Americanism.

Skinner’s extended series of talks in 1969 would challenge the fundamentalist leanings of Evangelicalism that had become increasingly irrelevant in a complex world. The bounded set Christianity of Evangelicalism was unable to communicate the gospel. Skinner stated

---

that “the impression we have given is that God is against mini-skirts, dancing, smoking, and drinking — but that God isn’t against racism, segregation and poverty and all the rest that dehumanizes man, and refuses to give man the right to be what God intended him to be.”

Skinner seemed to recognize that the turn in his message would mean rejection from certain corners of American Christianity and that there would be a cost to his shift in message. He admits that “many of the Lord’s people are bound up in there ultra-conservative, fundamental bags. . . . They do not understand that in the kind of community to which I am communicating I cannot use conventional, Anglo-Saxon, fundamental, cultural Christianity. And many of them have threatened, and numbers of them do withdraw their support because they say, ‘Tom Skinner is becoming the Stokely Carmichael of the evangelical world.’ But I must decide whether I will take my orders from God, or whether I will become bound by that individual’s check.”

The series of talks given by Skinner would signal the movement towards a more justice-oriented stump speech offered by Skinner. His typical evangelistic messages were not the topic of his talks at Wheaton. Wayne Gordon (who would go on to pastor Lawndale Christian Church and would serve as a future President of the Christian Community Development Association) matriculated as a student in 1971 and remembers meeting with the President of Wheaton College. Wheaton had just hosted Tom Skinner

---

the previous year. Gordon had missed the previous year’s talk and asked the President when the school would have Tom Skinner at chapel. The President replied to Gordon that as long as he was President of Wheaton, Tom Skinner would not speak at the Wheaton Chapel. Skinner would eventually be asked to address the chapel in 1975, but clearly his initial talks at Wheaton had the President of Wheaton nervous about a repeat invitation. Skinner’s sermons at Wheaton would preview what would be a forceful message on racial and social justice that would be raised at the Urbana Mission Conference.

Probably the most significant student mission conference in North America, Skinner would be asked to address an overwhelmingly white evangelical college student audience. In this landmark sermon, preached during a time of great turmoil in American society, Skinner would preach a sermon titled, “The U.S. Racial Crisis and World Evangelism.” The sermon would strike at the heart of Evangelicalism with a prophetic challenge to confront aspects of racism found in American society and in American Christianity.

He challenged white Evangelicalism’s failure to address the social sin of slavery, as well as addressing white Evangelicalism’s over-emphasis on individual salvation and piety over and above social justice.

You must keep in mind that, during this period of time, in general (there were some notable exceptions, but in general) the evangelical, Bible-believing, fundamental, orthodox, conservative church in this country was strangely silent. In fact, there were those people who during slavery argued, "It is not our business to become involved in slavery. Those are social issues. We have been called to

44 Wayne Gordon, interview by author, 1 March 2016, Chicago, IL.
preach the gospel. We must deliver the Word. We must save people's souls. We must not get involved in the issues of liberating people from the chains of slavery. If they accept Jesus Christ as their Savior, by and by they will be free -- over there.\textsuperscript{46}

Skinner addressed the history of white racism from slavery to Jim Crow laws and used examples from the White Evangelical churches. He would call out the historical sin of racism that emerged from the self-perception that white Evangelical approaches to salvation proved to be the exceptional approach.

Skinner was no longer satisfied with the theological product of white minds that would continue to serve the status quo but not address social injustices that minorities were dealing with.

To a great extent, the evangelical church in America supported the status quo. It supported slavery; it supported segregation; it preached against any attempt of the black man to stand on his own two feet. And where there were those who sought to communicate the gospel to black people, it was always done in a way to make sure that they stayed cool. "We will preach the gospel to those folks so they won't riot; we will preach the gospel to them so that we can keep the lid on the garbage pail."\textsuperscript{47}

Very similar in tone to the King’s Litters from a Birmingham Jail, Skinner blasted white Evangelicalism’s absence on issues of racial justice, while still pontificating the dominant culture’s position from afar. Skinner confronted the apathy of White Evangelicals who ignored social problems, going so far as to call them cowards.

But on the opposite extreme was another coward. He was what I called the hyper-Christian. He called himself, and I quote, "a Bible-believing, fundamental, orthodox, conservative, evangelical Christian," whatever that meant. He had half a dozen Bible verses for every social problem that existed. But, if you asked him

\textsuperscript{46} Skinner, “The U.S. Racial Crisis and World Evangelism.”
\textsuperscript{47} Skinner, “The U.S. Racial Crisis and World Evangelism.”
to get involved, he couldn't do it. If you went to him and told him about the problems of Harlem, he would come back with a typical cliché: "What those people up there need is a good dose of salvation." And while that might have been true, I never saw that cat in Harlem administering that dose.\(^48\)

Skinner refused to hold back on his understanding of the intersection between racial justice, social justice, and the gospel of Jesus Christ. He masterfully wove together multiple themes in raising a challenge to the status quo.

When Skinner closed out his sermon with a resounding proclamation that “The Liberator has come!” the gathering erupted into thunderous and sustained ovation. Carl Ellis -- who had been one of the key African-American InterVarsity student leaders at Urbana ’67 who had staged a protest and subsequently negotiated for Skinner’s inclusion in Urbana ’70 -- recalls the prophetic power of Skinner’s words and the sense that people were shaken to their foundations.\(^49\) William Pannell, who was on the platform that evening describe the evening as “dynamite”. “I have never seen such an explosion of joy and acceptance in response to a sermon.”\(^50\)

The Urbana ’70 Missions Conference became a benchmark event for African-American evangelicals in positive and negative ways. Skinner’s presentation at Urbana signaled the increasing prominence of black evangelicalism and the fresh prophetic voice offered by black evangelicalism. However, Skinner also represented a prophetic voice that would make many white Evangelicals nervous. “Skinner’s speech that night was the climax to a conference that was being refocused. . . . This made some IV leaders very nervous. What would become of ‘foreign’ missions if students’ attention was redirected to

\(^{48}\) Skinner, “The U.S. Racial Crisis and World Evangelism.”  
\(^{49}\) Ellis, interview and Gilbreath, “A Prophet Out of Harlem.”  
\(^{50}\) Pannell, interview.
the USA and its urban challenges?” Other concerns also emerged as Skinner rose to greater prominence in the white evangelical community. Pannell recalls that as Skinner began to speak more about the Kingdom of God, he began to be perceived as having a political agenda. Pannell, who was Tom Skinner’s first associate, recalls conversations with Tom Skinner after a series of crusades in 1968 in Newark, NJ, which was still smoking from race riots. Pannell and Skinner began to develop a deeper theological reflection on the kingdom of God that would become the focus of Skinner’s sermons. “Just as Skinner’s ministry was attracting more attention from whites, his outspoken views on issues of social injustice facing the black community intensified (a fact that would lead many Christian radio stations to drop his program due to its ‘political’ content).”

Pannell recalls that as the crusades focus began to shift towards a kingdom theology and a more holistic understanding of evangelism, white Evangelicals became increasingly suspicious. Skinner’s radio program on Moody Radio that had been running for three and a half years was abruptly canceled. E. Brandt Gustavson, the Director of Broadcasting for Moody Radio would write a letter to Skinner on April 14, 1971, stating, “We note that the broadcast has become increasingly political with less emphasis on God’s message to all men. We are therefore terminating the program immediately.”

Moody Radio became nervous about Skinner’s content. He had moved away from the

51 Pannell, interview.
52 Pannell, interview
53 Gilbreath, “A Prophet Out of Harlem.”
54 Pannell, interview
message beloved by fundamentalists that would point towards the fundamentalist gospel changing individual lives towards a message deemed “political.” Skinner would respond that “we have been expecting this for some time, . . . It is unfortunate that you believe when God’s Word is being applied to the issues of our day it is being political. . . .

Regrettably, in a time when some of us are risking our lives to communicate Jesus Christ, the people who should be our brothers misunderstand us the most.” For Skinner, he was continuing to preach the gospel. He was now addressing issues of racial justice as an expression of the gospel. However, the fundamentalist-evangelical community would not tolerate this message. The turn he had taken in the late 60s and early 70s that was evident in the Urbana talk would now win him disfavor and rejection from the Evangelicals. Skinner would repeatedly face similar scenarios and experience a gradual edging out from the Evangelical community in subsequent years.

Skinner’s increasingly frequent rejection by the broader white evangelical community came to a head when he divorced his first wife in 1977. “In the early 1970’s, Tom’s ever-growing ministry began to put a strain on his marriage. Tom and Vivian’s marital problems eventually led to divorce. His divorce caused many friends to withdraw their support. Now with the rejection from much of the white evangelical

---


57 Johnny Skinner, Tom’s brother recalls that he served Vivian with divorce papers a year after the death of their mother, putting the divorce in the late 1970s. Their separation probably occurred at an earlier time. (John Skinner, interview by author, 9 March 2016, by phone from Knoxville, TN).
community compounded by his divorce, Tom’s life went through what can be described as a ‘wilderness experience.’”  

Many would point towards his divorce as the reason for his seemingly forced departure from the Evangelical fold. However, his divorce was kept secret from the general population for a number of years. Stan Long, a Vice-President for Tom Skinner Associates for most of the 1970s notes that the invitations to Christian colleges and conferences were still coming for Tom in the 1970s and noted that many did not yet know about the divorce. Since his divorce was finalized in 1977 and it was kept quiet for some time after the divorce, the exclusion of Tom Skinner from Evangelical circles was based on the changing content of his message. Long observed that while Skinner would receive initial invitations to Christian colleges, he would not receive invitations to return to the campus. The lack of a repeat invitation would not have been based upon knowledge of his divorce, but based upon the shifting of his message from the standard conversion testimony towards greater discussion about the Kingdom of God, particularly as it related to race issues.

Skinner would continue in ministry, but in a different form after his divorce – opting to focus on Christian leadership training, including a ministry that still bears his name: the Skinner Leadership Institute. He continued his work among the urban poor, particularly working with inner city youth in Newark, NJ. He would increase in his influence with African-American leadership in other segments of society, including serving as the chaplain for the Washington Redskins and working with the black

---

59 Stan Long, interview by author, 11 February 2016, Calumet City, IL, tape recording.
Congressional leadership – through which he would meet his second wife, Barbara Williams-Skinner.

The website of Skinner Leadership Institute which Tom Skinner would start in 1992, reveals the impact of Barbara Williams-Skinner in the latter part of Tom Skinner’s life.

“In 1981, Tom married Barbara Williams, an attorney and Congressional Black Caucus staffer. A leader and dynamic speaker in her own right, many credit Barbara with broadening Tom’s behind-the-scenes discipleship ministry, especially to politicians, but also to entertainers, and professional athletes.” Tom would lead Barbara to Christ and eventually become her husband, but it would be Barbara who would provide Tom with entry into the political world of Washington D.C.

Tom would broaden his chaplaincy with the Washington Redskins to work with the New York Jets, the Mets, and the Yankees. Tom Skinner Associates would eventually move to the Washington D.C. area and would morph into the Skinner Leadership Institute (SLI) on a farm in Tracy’s Landing, Maryland. Johnny Skinner, his brother, remembers that Tom would insist that he would never leave New York as a home base, but SLI’s work would necessitate a move to the Washington D.C. area. SLI would reach across various boundaries to draw many different leaders together, including Louis Farrakhan and numerous black political leaders. Tom and Barbara’s work with the Congressional Black Caucus led to the organization of a prayer breakfast, which would evolve into a signature event that would draw several thousand participants. In his obituary for Christianity Today, James Massey notes that “Tom and his wife, Barbara

60 Gilbreath, “A Prophet Out of Harlem.”
Williams-Skinner, hosted African-American leaders in twice-a-year meetings to strengthen togetherness and shape plans to handle the challenges African-Americans will face in the next century." His impact had expanded significantly beyond Evangelical circles.

The SLI website upholds the impactful ministry of Tom Skinner expressed through TSA and SLI:

Throughout the life of the ministry; millions have heard the gospel through radio; evangelistic campaigns have been conducted in major cities; collegians have been witnessed to; thousands of inmates in jails and other institutions have heard the gospel; and more than 5 million books and pieces of literature have been distributed . . . . The ministry has seen professional athletes, entertainers, and business and political leaders commit their lives to Christ. Thousands of current and emerging leaders have been trained in technical and morally excellent leadership. Although we may never know exactly how many thousands of lives have been impacted as a result of the ministry, over the years many have written or otherwise told us they have. . . . Those who have experienced the transforming power of love, through over thirty years of the ministry of Skinner Leadership Institute, have become agents of God’s love in communities throughout this nation.

Skinner’s ministry impact continued until his untimely and early death in 1994 at the age of 52, but by that time, Skinner’s voice in the larger Evangelical community could be considered negligible.

---

62 Skinner Leadership Institute, “History.”
64 Skinner Leadership Institute, “History.”
7. John Perkins and the Power of Story

John Perkins offers an example of an African-American evangelical who was able to maintain a strong and visible presence in Evangelical circles over several decades. Perkins’ prominent role among Evangelicals arose from his ability to engage his constituents with a gripping narrative of emerging from poverty into prominence. Through his personal story, Perkins points towards the failure of twentieth-century Evangelicalism, which had forsaken the poor and the marginalized in order to build Christian empires among the privileged.

Perkins also represents a different narrative of the poor black man who, despite limited education, could impact and transform the broader Evangelical community. He exemplifies a counter-narrative from the white Evangelical narrative of either withdrawal from the places of suffering or the narrative of the white savior sent to the city to save the poor blacks. His ability to speak a prophetic challenge to mainstream Evangelical Christianity arose from his own evangelical conversion story, a story of spiritual triumph that called apathetic Evangelicals to an activist faith.

Perkins’s story is familiar to many. A quick survey of those who have met John Perkins reveals how a one-time meeting, hearing John’s story and his real presence and engagement, irrevocably changed them. An important aspect of John Perkins’s impact is his ability to communicate a powerful story of evangelical conviction. Ron Sider notes that “John is a great storyteller. Anyone who has listened to him speak knows how he weaves his own personal story into a call to empower the marginalized and overcome

---

1 This chapter is adapted from Soong-Chan Rah, “Moving toward the Next Evangelicalism,” in Mobilizing for the Common Good.
racism. That his own story is so powerful and compelling certainly helps. But he tells it in a way that wins hearts and minds—even donors to a great ministry.”

7.1 Out of Poverty

One of John Perkins’s key theological contributions is the power of his story lived out in the face of great trials and tribulations. While other Evangelical leaders may possess a great testimony, few rival the embodied story of Jesus’s redemptive power in the life of John Perkins. Among twentieth-century Evangelical leaders, few have done more with less and few have overcome as many obstacles. His story takes the classic American success story and infuses it with an Evangelical spirituality that affirms the power of the gospel while simultaneously challenging existing paradigms of active Christian faith.

Poverty was a consistent presence in the early years of John Perkins. When asked about his earliest memories, Perkins responded: “I guess what I remember was more or less the poverty, the coldness. I can remember cold days. I can remember cold nights. And today I sort of hate cold weather because of never being warm and always having a cold . . . as a little boy growing up. That was the thing that I can remember the most.” Perkins would describe his early environment as a plantation. “We lived on a plantation, and we knew we lived on that plantation. We knew who was the boss. We knew his kids. And so we knew that our aunts worked in the kitchen and cooked. We knew that we went around to the back door for any conversation we had. That was just a revelation that came 

with you as you grew up and you knew it was there and you knew it was unjust.”

Perkins was acutely aware of the poverty that was endemic to his environment and to the reality of the racialized power dynamics at work in the deep south.

The racist society of Mississippi would serve a significant influence upon John Perkins. One of the earliest lessons for Perkins was the necessity of restraint in a world where responding to racism could result in violence and harm. Perkins relates a story from his childhood:

I remember one day, a little white boy had a BB gun. And he was going along, and he was just calling us nigger. That was always a bad word. That was always an inflammatory word for a white person to say, although they said it all the time. You know, they said it all the time. . . . This little boy . . . aimed that BB gun at us and was shooting us with it, not up in the eye or nowhere, but at the body. . . . And we really wanted to get him and tear him apart. But we felt he was on his yard, this big brick house, and was on his yard. And stuff like that really bring the privilege home to you.  

Perkins would observe his elders also having to yield to the rampant racism in southern society. Older black men would have to step off the curb to let a white lady pass by.

“When a white person would come and talk to your uncles or someone, an older black person, that black person would start saying, "Yes sir, yes sir," even before they knew what the person was gonna say.” Southern society established a rigid racial hierarchy, but there would be different and more subversive ways that the African-American community would address racism.

---

4 Perkins, interview.
5 Perkins, interview.
John Perkins’ family consisted of sharecroppers, bootleggers, and gamblers. Historian A. G. Miller notes that “much of Mississippi black culture in which John Perkins grew up was a world in which blacks were redefining their worldview against the prevailing white and Christian values. The blues reflected the black counterculture within which Perkins identified himself (gamblers, bootleggers, and lawbreakers)—those folk who were not afraid of southern white people and struggled to control their own destiny.”

Miller recognizes that despite the reality of poverty and marginalization, Perkins’s cultural context reveals a high degree of yearning for self-determination, even if that desire surfaced in ways that skirted the law.

W. E. B. DuBois in The Souls of Black Folk discusses the reality of "double-consciousness" experienced by African-Americans. African-Americans see themselves as both an insider and an outsider in American society. As DuBois writes, "It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. One ever feels his twoness-an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strings." Double consciousness helps explain Perkins’ developing ideas on power dynamics between blacks and whites in the deep south. Perkins observed that “on one hand, our old people would be so submissive, and then on the other hand, we were doing all these things under the table and was doing them very well.” In his interview with the Wheaton Archives, Perkins struggles with this concept:

---

8 Perkins, interview.
“Because those same white folks, who my uncles and things would honor so much, we was really in terms, exploiting them in selling them whiskey at the exalted price that we was selling it for. But they didn't know it.”

Perkins experienced the duality necessary for survival in the dichotomy of rural Mississippi. While understanding the dominant Southern white culture in which he lived, Perkins engaged that culture with a deep-seated desire to assert human agency.

Southern society would present a further challenge to Perkins in dealing with the constant threat of violence, which would eventually be found close to home. The murder of his brother (who had served in the military) by the local police was another assault on Perkins’s understanding of power and powerlessness. Watching his older brother shot down as he stood up to the police revealed a cultural reality that attempted to instill fear and deprive African-Americans of self-determination. Perkins experienced the conflict felt by many blacks in the Deep South—the constant barrage against self-determination and identity. That sense of agency (established in his early upbringing) led Perkins toward an interaction with the dominant culture that defied typical categorization.

In order to embrace Christian faith, however, Perkins needed to leave not only the cultural trappings of the South but also the unhealthy expression of Christian identity that was conflated with white supremacy. A. G. Miller notes, “Perkins’s openness to the exploration of faith came in stages after he left the South, joined the army, and eventually settled in the Los Angeles area after his discharge from the military. Perkins’s conversion to Christianity was not an immediate process. He had to leave the South and its extreme environment, racial hatred, prejudice, and oppression in order to find enough mental and

---

9 Perkins, interview.
physical space to explore more social and spiritual matters.” In *Southern Cross*, Christine Heyrman explores the historical development of Evangelicalism in the South and asserts that the 19th century witnessed the capitulation of Evangelicalism to the dominant values of southern culture. Evangelicalism retreated from promises of liberation and invested in upholding the equality and honor of white men above African-Americans and women. Adaptation to the norms of southern society laid the groundwork for much of Evangelicalism’s subsequent success and formation in the South. Perkins needed distance from the strictures of the South and Southern Christianity to experience a conversion that affirmed his human agency and worth.

Perkins’s description of his own conversion demonstrates a deeply evangelical experience and the roots of an Evangelical identity. John Perkins began to attend church after he saw “something beautiful develop” in his son, who was attending the Bethlehem Church of Christ Holiness. His son, Spencer Perkins’ zeal would influence John Perkins. Later, Spencer Perkins would emerge as a leader among Evangelicals alongside his ministry partner Chris Rice. Together they would author a book, *More Than Equals* that would serve as one of the earlier text’s on racial reconciliation for Evangelicals. Spencer Perkins would have his life and ministry cut short at the age of 43. Spencer’s conversion experience would pave John Perkins’ path towards conversion.

### 7.2 A Conversion Narrative and an Activist Faith

While initially motivated by his son’s burgeoning faith, John Perkins’s conversion would be described as occurring as a result of an encounter with Scripture. He became

---

fascinated with the writings of Paul. As Perkins writes, “I began to enjoy the Bible because of what I was learning about the Apostle Paul, how he endured so much for religion. . . . When I learned that the Apostle Paul was the writer of most of the New Testament books of the Bible, I began to study the Bible myself for the first time.”¹³ Even before his conversion, he had become a biblicist.

Perkins’s conversion also required a Christocentric experience. As he writes in his first book, Let Justice Roll Down:

> For the first time I understood that my sin was not necessarily and altogether against myself and against my neighbor. My sin was against a holy God who loved me, who had already paid for my sins. I was sinning in the face of His love. I didn’t want to sin anymore. I wanted to give my life to Christ, so He could take care of my sin. I sensed the beginning of a whole new life, a new structure of life, a life that could fill that emptiness I had even on payday. God for a black man? Yes, God for a black man! This black man! Me! That morning I said yes to Jesus Christ.¹⁴

In this passage, Perkins unabashedly proclaims his Christocentric understanding of the gospel that led him to new birth. There is also a clear expression of an individual and personal commitment to Christ as Perkins emphatically tells the story in the first person singular. Perkins’s foundational understanding of the gospel stresses that an individual is in need of God because of sins committed against God and that Christ is the only answer for sin. At the same time, he reveals how this experience emerges from his identity as a black man. Christ as savior transcends the barrier of race for Perkins. Social norms that diminished the worth of the black man would be shattered by the words of Scripture.

¹³ Perkins, A Quiet Revolution, 19.
Perkins’ proclamation of his worth as a black man would confront cultural values that claimed the opposite.

Perkins’s conversion experience takes on greater significance because he had weighed and rejected other options. He confesses that he explored Christian Science, Father Divine, and Science of the Mind. He even admits, “If I hadn’t become a Christian, I would have become a Black Muslim. Their strict devotion and discipline have always appealed to me.”15 As an adult, Perkins made a cognitive and rational decision to become a Christian. He had read the key biblical texts that pointed him toward Jesus, and he had rejected the non-Christian options. He had moved from being the child of bootleggers and gamblers to someone who rationally and thoughtfully explored other faiths to an evangelist who spoke plainly about his personally experienced salvation. Perkins embodied a conversionist faith.

Upon his conversion, his activist zeal found expression in his evangelistic efforts. “I began to share this inward peace with people in the area where I lived. In about six months’ time I was sharing my life and my testimony in many churches—white and black. . . . And I was teaching children’s Bible classes four or five nights a week.”16 Evangelism, with a particular focus on child evangelism, marked the immediate period after his conversion, and evangelical activism eventually compelled Perkins to seek a return to Mississippi under the auspices of continuing to pursue his evangelistic zeal in his home state. Perkins’s move from California to Mississippi provided an alternative narrative to the phenomenon of white flight. Instead of staying in a growing ministry with potential for financial stability, he returned to Mississippi to minister to the poor and the

marginalized. His actions gave weight to his later teachings on relocation as an expression of Christ’s incarnation in the community.

When Perkins returned to Mississippi in 1960, he continued to focus on evangelism. He would start Voice of Calvary Ministry (VOCM), which would focus on evangelistic efforts in the community, particularly among children. A church, Berean Bible Church would start in 1964, succeeded by Voice of Calvary Fellowship (VOCF), which would start in 1975 to work alongside VOCM. His initial efforts at evangelism stemmed from the fundamentalist roots of his conversion experience: he would change the world by changing individual lives. However, Perkins quickly identified the significant inequity between black kids and white kids in the school system. As a result, Perkins recognized that more was needed than a simple Bible study group for children. According to Perkins, the impact of the gospel needed to extend beyond the simple articulation of the faith. “I knew that if the Bible I was teaching could ever really do something here, it would have to be a visible truth.”

Perkins would later assert that I did not come back to Mississippi with a "wholistic" concept of the Gospel. I think I found it after I got back here.18

While Perkins eventually moved beyond a personal evangelism approach to ministry, he did not abandon the value of personal evangelism altogether. He advocated for the value of holistic evangelism. His approach was not simply to rescue the poor children of Mississippi and move them to the suburbs; instead, it required a whole gospel for the whole person. The context of his ministry—working with the poor—resulted in a different narrative and trajectory for those he was trying to reach with the gospel.

---

16 Perkins, Quiet Revolution, 20.
17 Perkins, Let Justice Roll Down, 93.
18 Perkins, interview.
fundamentalist-evangelical narrative of saving individual souls from the evil world proved insufficient for Perkins’s ministry context.

Perkins’s story of reaching his community with a holistic gospel reached another level of sociocultural engagement in 1970. Living in Mississippi in the 1960s meant that Perkins could not avoid the civil rights movement. In *A Time to Heal*, Stephen Berk claims that “John Perkins and Voice of Calvary eagerly anticipated and even prayed for the coming of the civil rights movement.” Berk notes that “John and his people would be at the center of the action.”¹⁹ Two of Perkins’ children would become the first black students at an all-white school. Perkins attended civil rights rallies and Voice of Calvary would become involved in voter registration drives, affirming the validity of the issues being raised. Perkins recognized the disenfranchisement of the black voter would require civic legislation and he would assert the need for Christians to become involved in the movement to address the needs of the individual that expanded beyond the personal and the individual.

But Perkins expressed concern that “evangelicals had surrendered their leadership in the movement by default to those with either a bankrupt theology or no theology at all. . . . The evangelical church—whose basic theology is the same as mine—had not gone on to preach the whole gospel.”²⁰ Perkins articulated his concern about the civil rights movement but also placed blame on Evangelical passivity. He confirmed that he shared the basic fundamental gospel conviction but that Bible-believing Christians had failed to live up to the whole gospel message.

---

Perkins’ activism in the civil rights movement would reflect the desire for incarnation ministry in Mississippi. Perkins would seek to live out the whole gospel message through involvement in civil rights, even encouraging his Evangelical Christian community to become involved. Perkins even appealed to conservative white donors in California. His activity, however, troubled the white establishment in the area. Perkins writes that “cars began appearing at night. White men—armed, waiting. Watching for hours at a time, but edging closer and closer. Waiting for any incident to excuse a confrontation.”

7.4 A Civil Rights Story

On the evening of February 7, 1970, after a demonstration in Mendenhall, Mississippi, a group of students was arrested as they were returning to Tougaloo College near Jackson. During the Christmas season in 1969, John Perkins had been arrested and released on trumped up charges of public drunkenness and disturbing the peace. Subsequently, John Perkins would originate the idea of a boycott in Mendenhall of all businesses during the Christmas season. The boycott was in full swing when several student protesters were arrested. John Perkins, accompanied by Reverend Curry Brown and Joe Paul Buckley, rushed to post bail for those who had been arrested. At the courthouse and jail, they were met by a dozen Mississippi Highway Patrol officers and placed under arrest. Perkins later testified in court that “when I got in the jail Sheriff Jonathan Edwards came over to me right away and said, this is the smart nigger, and this

---

is a new ballgame. . . . He began to beat me, and from that time on they continued beating me, I was just beat to the floor and just punched and just really beaten.”

One of the protesters, Doug Huemmer recounts the beating in the following sequence:

Sheriff Edwards and Sheriff Edwards’ son and two Highway Patrolman . . . And Officer Thames had a leather blackjack thing and they began beating on Reverend Brown, Reverend Perkins, David Nall and myself and one of the other students, . . . Reverend Perkins was dragged over on the other side and beaten down by about five other officers. I could hear him being beaten . . . I heard them ordering Reverend Perkins to mop up the blood that was on the floor. . . . Reverend Perkins was lying sorta stunned on the floor and they kicked him until he got up . . . The Sheriff Edwards, Sheriff Edwards’ son, and two or three patrol officers would walk by every two or three minutes and kick or hit Reverend Perkins with one of their blackjacks or their feet.

The police would force Perkins to clean up the blood so that there would be no evidence for federal agents in the area should they drop by. Perkins’ wife would come to the police station and Perkins would say to his wife, “Vera Mae, get me out of here. Get me out of here because they gonna kill me first.” Friends would scrap enough money and offer their property to cover bond and Perkins would be released at three o’clock the next day.

Despite the brutality of the beating, Perkins strengthened his Evangelical narrative by extending forgiveness. “I began to see with horror how hate could destroy me. . . . I could try and fight back, as many of my brothers had done. But if I did, how would I be different from the whites who hate? And where would hating get me?” Perkins describes how God’s Spirit worked on his life to blot out that hate with the image of Christ on the cross. Because Jesus had experienced suffering himself, he understood John Perkins’s

suffering. “The Spirit of God kept working on me and in me until I could say with Jesus, ‘I forgive them, too.’”

Perkins provided Evangelicals with a story of an evangelical Christian involved in the Civil Rights movement, who would also proclaim and demonstrate a gospel of grace. It is also important to note that Perkins references Jesus’ suffering. Perkins’ offers a crucicentric perspective that applies to the context of suffering experienced by a human agent. Perkins identifies with Jesus’ suffering presenting an Evangelical explanation for his own suffering.

Perkins would emerge from the experience of his jailhouse beating with a greater resolve to serve his community. Perkins’ missional activism would not be quenched. Perkins’ activism would take on an additional level in Mississippi, even after his brutal beating. Perkins’ legal troubles would finally be settled in 1972. During the interim, he would suffer a physical breakdown as he suffered a heart attack and he would need to be hospitalized. Perkins would state that “the pain in my heart was just as real, just as raw, as the pain in my stomach. Everything added up to the conviction that there was no justice at all.”

The beating would leave deep scars, even beyond the physical scars. His emotional and spiritual recovery would be difficult but a new resolve would emerge upon his recovery. “I think, going through that period, that I needed the forgiveness of sin to enter back into the world with a...with some push to make a difference in society. That was a hard process for me. It was a hard [pauses].... Now I said hard. It was [pauses]...it was a process. It was a process that didn't take place in a day.”

---

27 Perkins, interview.
During his recovery, Perkins would ask whether his efforts were worth it. He began to reflect upon the impact he had made upon the young people in Mississippi and the integration of the local school through his children. Perkins would also talk of additional signs of hope: “I knew there were whites who did care. . . . God was showing me something. . . . There were blacks who had accepted our message. Who had embraced the gospel. . . . And there were whites who believed in justice. Who lived love. Who shared themselves. Who joined our community.”

Perkins would refuse to hate back and perpetuate the cycle of racism. He would claim that the image of Christ on the cross would blot everything else on his mind. Evangelical crucicentric concern for the power of the cross would continue to rule his activist faith, even in the midst of tremendous suffering inflicted on him by white Americans.

Perkins would continue to express his faith in both evangelism and social concerns. Voice of Calvary would become the primary venue through which John Perkins would express his activist faith. In subsequent years, VOC would expand tutoring programs, build a new vocational workshop and gym in a new building. Over the years programs like the Rural Education and Leadership Foundation (REAL), Community Health Education Program (CHEP) and Samaritan's Inn, a ministry for dislocated people, visitors and volunteers would be launched. John Perkins and VOC would demonstrate the work of social concern, activism, and compassionate ministry in the community.

Perkins’s story was not only a story about evangelical conversion, an evangelist’s zeal, and caring for the least of these. His story also engaged the reality of racial and

28 Perkins, Let Justice Roll Down, 204.
29 Perkins, Let Justice Roll Down, 205
30 Perkins, interview.
social injustice. His beating at the hands of the police pointed toward the need for civil 
rights and for social justice in the face of a great injustice. Unlike Martin Luther King Jr.
or Malcolm X, John Perkins expressed a story that Evangelicals could call their own. 
Perkins not only introduced his story to Evangelical Christianity but also sparked a 
movement that helped reimagine Evangelicalism beyond the boundaries of an apocalyptic 
fundamentalism that could remain disengaged with the world around it.

7.4 Translating the Story to a Movement

Perkins’s narrative not only inspired individuals but also sparked a movement. As 
told in his public teaching and through his books, his story drew a number of like-minded 
individuals together. Perkins became the galvanizing force for the formation of the 
Christian Community Development Association (CCDA). The history page of the CCDA 
website explains how John Perkins provided the foundational content for the ministry:

The roots of the Christian Community Development Association (CCDA) stretch 
back to 1960 when CCDA Founder, John Perkins (along with his wife, Vera Mae) 
relocated their family to the struggling community of Mendenhall, Mississippi to 
work with the people there. The Perkinses devoted thirty-five years to living out 
the principles of Christian Community Development in Mississippi and 
California, leaving behind ministries and churches that are now headed by 
indigenous Christian leaders. 31

Perkins’s model of ministry served as one of the exemplar ministries in CCDA. John 
Perkins issued the call to gather like-minded individuals “who were bonded by one 
significant commitment, expressing the love of Jesus in America’s poor communities.” 32

On February 23, 1989, fifty-three people attended the first CCDA meeting at a hotel near Chicago O’Hare International Airport. The first group of attendees was drawn together by their interest in communicating the gospel and serving the poor, oppressed, and needy—through which the group found a common vision and direction. John Perkins emerged as the spiritual and inspirational leader of the group, serving as the chairman of the board. A then-unknown Chicago pastor, Wayne “Coach” Gordon, was appointed president when the first president, Lem Tucker, passed away after the first meeting.

Wayne Gordon is the founding pastor of Lawndale Community Church on the west side of Chicago. From a small Iowa town, Gordon followed an unlikely path to the inner city of Chicago. He felt called to work in the inner city while still a teenager in Iowa, then attended Wheaton College, a Christian college in an affluent Christian community about an hour outside Chicago. While at Wheaton, he spent a summer working in Chicago’s inner city. Upon graduation, he became a teacher and a coach at Farragut High School on the west side of Chicago. He and his wife, Anne, moved into the predominantly African-American neighborhood of Lawndale, which at the time was the fifteenth poorest neighborhood in the United States.

In 1978, Gordon—along with his wife, some high school students, and their parents—established Lawndale Community Church. He eventually attended Trinity Evangelical Divinity School and finished his seminary education at Northern Baptist Seminary after becoming the full-time pastor of Lawndale Community Church. Like Voice of Calvary in Mississippi, Lawndale became an exemplary church for CCDA. Various types of outreach ministries developed out of the church, including sports
programs, educational programs, a medical clinic, a community development center, housing programs and development, and a health and fitness center.

With its urban location in the middle of the country, Lawndale Community Church became the natural incubator for CCDA. Gordon’s story at Lawndale served as an exemplar narrative, but Gordon would intentionally elevate Perkins to the forefront of the movement. Perkins would be more readily identified as the movement’s founder and his teaching would be seen as providing the practical theological framework for CCDA. It could be said that John Perkins served as the prophetic interlocutor and Coach Gordon served as the Evangelical model of how a non-urban, white Evangelical could successfully serve in the urban context. Gordon’s story ran parallel to Perkins’s story in the overarching narrative of CCDA.

The initial small group that gathered in February 1989 convened a conference at Lawndale later that year that attracted about two hundred attendees. In subsequent years, the CCDA national conference has met in different cities throughout the United States and attracted several thousand to the annual meetings. Even more important than the number of attendees, however, was that CCDA became a recognizable brand among Evangelicals as a place of inspiration and teaching for ministry to the poor and the marginalized.

---

John Perkins’s three Rs of Christian community development (CCD) form the core of CCDA teaching. First, the concept of relocation asserts that “the most effective messenger of the gospel to the poor will also live among the poor that God has called the person to.” Relocation calls those who engaged in CCD to have a personal stake in the neighborhood. “Relocation transforms ‘you, them, and theirs’ to ‘we, us, and ours.’” Relocation demands the opposite of white flight. Perkins explains that “people who live in the other parts of . . . the city will then relocate and come here to live. Then folks who are living in other parts of the United States and the world will relocate and come here to live. So that if you look at our staff, our staff reflects that. You look at the health center, you see local people, you see national people.”

Relocation, however, was not simply the expectation that affluent whites from the suburbs would engage in reverse white flight in relocating to the city. Perkins also saw the concept of relocation as the return of individuals to the communities where they grew up. “you've got to have that relocation concept. That is built into our educational program with our young people, that they...we recognize the fact that they cannot get all of the education they need within the community. So the idea is that once they go off to college they got to relocate, they got to come back to the community, they got to come home. That's relocation, coming back home.” Relocation, however, would be embraced by the white Evangelical community from the perspective of the dominant culture. The city was

---

35 Perkins, interview.
36 Perkins, interview.
portrayed as a place of great need with white Evangelicals acting as saviors with their relocation into the city.

Within CCDA circles, relocation became tied to the concept of “incarnational ministry,” which moved into larger Evangelical circles as the main method of reaching the city. Evangelicals seeking to do urban ministry would draw upon the example of Jesus, who emptied himself of the heavenly places and relocated on earth and made his dwelling among the people. White Evangelicals would use this narrative as the motivation and model for urban missions. The Babylonian narrative of the city would compel white Evangelicals to empty themselves of suburban benefits and graciously relocate to the city to minister incarnationally. In other words, the white suburban Evangelical would save the poor black city. The theology of the incarnation, which speaks to God’s presence on earth, would be co-opted to further white exceptionalism. The same underlying imagination that elevated whiteness would now find expression in the relocation of the white saviors into the inner city. Perkins’ concept could be manipulated to further white exceptionalism and triumphalism.

Second, the concept of *reconciliation* challenges the church to move beyond the vertical components of salvation to incorporate the horizontal aspects of salvation. CCDA is clear in advocating for the need for reconciliation with God but also asks, “Can a gospel that reconciles people to God without reconciling people to people be the true gospel of Jesus Christ? A person’s love for Christ should break down every racial, ethnic and economic barrier.” CCDA connects the felt-need concept to the work of reconciliation. The building of trust that moves toward reconciliation requires the privileged to listen to the needs and desires of the poor and to seek to help meet those
needs. This concept can be interpreted and misinterpreted on multiple levels but at its heart is a desire to build trust to work toward reconciled relationships. This concept offers another challenge to white flight and calls for Evangelical engagement on one of the more sensitive issues, the need for racial reconciliation.

The third core concept is redistribution. In recent years, the word “redistribution” has become strongly associated with communism, particularly in the context of the hyperpolarized world of partisan politics, and has been used as a code word to smear economic and political liberals. That CCDA spoke of redistribution on the heels of the Reagan administration is a testament to the ability of John Perkins and CCDA to effectively use language and story to communicate difficult and increasingly controversial concepts. The CCDA website describes “redistribution” in the following way: “When men and women in the body of Christ are visibly present and living among the poor (relocation), and when people are intentionally loving their neighbor and their neighbor’s family the way a person loves him or herself and family (reconciliation), the result is redistribution, or a just distribution of resources.” Redistribution is seen as a natural by-product of the building of relationships across various boundaries. CCDA uses the language of justice in order to assert the need for redistribution. Given the political realities of the twenty-first century, the fact that CCDA continues to use “redistribution” as one of its core principles demonstrates the level of trust garnered by the CCDA movement.

The three Rs of CCD were eventually supplemented by five additional categories—leadership development, listening to the community, church-based, wholistic, and empowerment—to comprise the eight key components. With the introduction of the new
categories, CCDA was able to offer more practical applications to move Christian communities toward the three Rs. By employing language such as such as *listening to the community*, *wholistic ministry*, and *empowerment*—which were expressions not typically used by Evangelical churches in the latter half of the twentieth century—CCDA was able to challenge assumptions about the exceptionalism of the Evangelical suburban church. CCDA would elevate the conversation on how justice integrates with evangelism. In so doing, CCDA provided a biblical, theological, and ecclesial framework to spur Evangelicalism beyond the models of ministry that had been propagated for most of the twentieth century.

Community development was an unfamiliar topic in the early stages of Evangelical history. Because the strength of John Perkins and CCDA is rooted in the ability to communicate a compelling story, they were able to challenge Evangelical presuppositions about the place of the church in the world. The ecclesial heritage of Evangelicalism would need to incorporate the story of John Perkins. As a result, previously ignored aspects of the Evangelical experience—such as domestic ministry to the poor, community development, racial reconciliation, and even civil rights and redistribution of resources—moved into the mainstream of Evangelicalism.

Peter Slade identifies Perkins’s impact as a quiet revolution in the culture wars. “More than forty years after Martin Luther King Jr.’s death, Perkins’s unique life story enables a new generation of evangelicals to relocate themselves as participants in the continuing civil rights movement without rejecting their evangelical heritage. In the latest act of this theological drama, we find a theology of the social gospel alive and well in the most surprising of places—as a grassroots movement within the mainstream of American
The seemingly overwhelming tide of the Great Reversal had turned among Evangelicals, due in no small part to the ministry and testimony of John Perkins.

### 7.5 The Power of Story

For U.S. Evangelicals, stories play a prominent role in evangelism, discipleship, and spiritual formation. From an early age, U.S. Evangelicals are taught to appreciate the stories of biblical heroes, to be moved by the stories of exceptional missionaries, and to be enraptured by the humorous yet poignant stories of our best preachers. These stories, oftentimes triumphalistic and exceptionalistic in nature, provide the overarching ecclesial narrative framework for Evangelicalism.

U.S. Evangelicalism has no shortage of triumphalistic narratives. The power of John Perkins’s impact lies in his ability embrace his humble roots and to direct his narrative toward an engagement with the suffering other rather than simply elevating the popularity of the storyteller. John Perkins raised the level of compassion for domestic poverty. Personal stories have high currency in U.S. Evangelicalism. John Perkins offers the power of a personal story combined with a life that expresses Christian justice and compassion. Perkins’s willingness to speak of his pain and struggle in his testimony demonstrates an Evangelical sensibility. Perkins’s ability to rise above the struggle and speak a strong prophetic word provides U.S. Evangelicals with a triumphalistic narrative that encouraged Evangelical engagement with domestic poverty.

For much of the twentieth century, U.S. Evangelicalism had a dysfunctional relationship with the surrounding culture, whether in the form of antagonism toward the world or an over acquiescence to it. Perkins’s narrative and ministry context necessitated

---

37 Peter Slade, “A Quiet Revolution and the Culture Wars,” in Mobilizing for the Common
his voice being raised against the injustices of society, but his connection with
fundamentalist and evangelical Christianity also gave him a deep passion and
appreciation for the work of personal evangelism.

In the early years of his ministry, John Perkins conducted Bible study outreaches
that would have warmed the hearts of even the most fundamental of fundamentalists.
Perkins’s early formation Christianity was steeped in the personal evangelism emphasis
of fundamentalism and Evangelicalism. These roots, however, did not prevent him from
engaging the social and structural evils of his time. Not only was he an advocate and
practitioner of personal evangelism, but he was also one of the most significant and
articulate voices of social, cultural engagement in the church in the twentieth century.

Perkins’s ministry context and his personal experience as an African-American
allowed him to raise issues that were not broached by Christians from the white majority
culture. Perkins spoke on the need for racial reconciliation even after he lived through a
physical attack by racists. Perkins’s theological expression, therefore, arose out of the
context of the African-American community but had a broader impact on majority-
culture Evangelicalism. In this dual context (growing up as a black man in the South
while connected to the larger context of majority-culture Christianity), Perkins could
speak out of a real-life experience while understanding the language of majority-culture
Christianity.

---

*Good, 60.*
8. Circle Church and the Test of Racial Integration

Our final snapshot of the intersection of black and white Evangelicalism is taken from the story of a Chicago church attempting racial integration. The tenuous relationship between blacks and whites attempting to live out the Christian life in an urban church reveals the difficulties of racial integration and reveals underlying themes of power, fear, and mistrust that characterized much of the experiences of black evangelicals in the context of white Evangelicalism.

Multiple themes converge in the story of Circle Church. The role of white authority and power in the movement towards racial integration and reconciliation would become a major factor. An underlying narrative and assumption of exceptionalism would derail a significant attempt at brining different races together. Circle Church also reveals the potential impact of the NBEA in this ministry, as well as a minor role for Tom Skinner and John Perkins in the story of the church. Circle Church generates theological questions in a microcosm of American Christianity revealing the challenge of the intersection of black and white evangelicalism.

8.1 Noble Intentions

Circle Church began on the first Sunday in February 1967 in Union Hall on the West Side of the city of Chicago. Mains describes the neighborhood as the following:

To the rear of the Union Hall begins Chicago’s famous westside black ghetto with Madison Street, Chicago’s Skid Row, snaking along its inner boundaries and then moving toward its heart. It was in this area that the riots following Dr. Martin Luther King’s assassination erupted, with great clouds of smoke rising from blocks burning about a mile from the Hall. . . . Our immediate neighborhood is 85 percent black, 10 percent Puerto Rican, and 5 percent Appalachian or poor white.
As far as we could tell, there was no existing evangelical church witness in the area.\(^1\)

Circle Church, therefore, went against the norm of American Christianity in the latter half of the twentieth century by being a church in the urban context. Not only was Circle Church moving into the city at a time when most whites were fleeing the city, the church also proved to be an innovative church in many other areas.

The founding pastor of Circle Church, David Mains, viewed this church planting effort as an important and significant event for the church in America. In *Full Circle: The Creative Church for Today’s Society* (Mains’ reflections on the fledgling church published in 1971), he reveals his desire “that the church is once again setting the precedent for society rather than having society set the precedent for her.”\(^2\) The subtitle of the book reveals Mains’ priorities in the church plant. Creativity for the church needed to be the salient characteristic and value of Circle Church. This conviction that Circle Church was plowing new ground compelled Mains to write *Full Circle* after only four years of the church’s existence. *Full Circle* explains Mains’ frustration with his previous church experiences before starting Circle Church. Many of his frustrations center on rigidity in the worship life of the local church. Mains describes his previous church experiences as “indescribably awful. The services were all alike. You knew exactly the ingredients and the order that would be followed even before you looked at the bulletin. . . . All of this tended to make me squirm uneasily during the ensuing hour and a quarter.”\(^3\)

---


\(^3\) Mains, *Full Circle*, 18-19.
Full Circle reveals Mains’ priorities for Circle Church in its nascent stages. Started when he was just 33 years old, Circle Church would become the venue through which Mains could express his vision of the church in the United States. “David Mains was an optimist with God-given gifts which were fully exercised in seeing his dream come true.”\(^4\) The church would become known as a place for innovation and pioneering ministry. Mains had a passion for creative worship and ministry. A key concern for Mains’ founding of Circle Church, therefore, was his desire to see innovative and dynamic worship services.

The urban location of Circle Church was intentional. Mains felt a pull towards urban ministry. This pull, however, would be reflective of the general attitude towards the city held by most white Evangelicals. Mains would state that “my wife and I had balked at the city’s crime, its polluted air, its crush of population its inadequate public schools, its explosive racial combinations.”\(^5\) It is important to note that the first mention of racial diversity in Full Circle is this negative reference. Mains’ analysis of the failure of the city would lead to a desire to return to the city. “My conviction laid a great deal of the blame for urban perplexities at the foot of the fleeing church which had been unable to reconcile her traditions with the crises of humanity. Cities desperately needed a generous sprinkling of salt, shaken by the hand of God, that would position the positive influence of Christians in every nook and cranny of their crowded existence.”\(^6\) Also, of note is the absence of any reference to existing urban churches. The language of Full Circle indicates the bringing of salt from the outside into the community. While there is no

\(^5\) Mains, Full Circle, 23.
explicit mention of white supremacy, the exceptional qualities of the white community to move into the black community would be assumed.

To his credit, Mains’ move into the city demonstrated a contrasting narrative to the dominant story of white flight in the twentieth century. However, despite a change in the perception of how to minister to the city, through incarnational relocation rather than white flight, the attitude towards the city remained entrenched in white Evangelical exceptionalism. Mains’ view of the city would not be a positive one, but he believed that he would be able to minister effectively in the city. Instead of fleeing the city, Mains felt the call to minister in the city. That ministry would focus on creative expression through Circle Church by David Mains. In other words, ministry in the city would involve the bringing of creativity from an outside resource, namely the creativity of David Mains.

As the church grew, Mains sought to develop curriculum to be used by other churches that would foster creative worship. By the mid-1970’s, Mains had begun exploring the hiring of staff to roll out what would come to be known as “Step Two”. Step Two would be marketed to other churches that wanted to learn from the creative worship expressions of Circle Church. Interestingly, Mains’ lasting legacy has not been in the establishment of one of the pioneering multi-ethnic churches in America, but as a pioneer of creative worship. In the description of the David Mains Papers collection at the Wheaton College Archives, the focus is on his work in creative worship. “The David Mains Collection is composed of manuscript and media material. Manuscripts include the guide for the ‘Planning Creative Sunday Morning Services’ while media material represents

---

6 Mains, Full Circle, 21.
7 Russ Knight, interview by author, 23 March 2010 and 20 April 2010, Chicago, IL.
approximaterly [sic] 20+ audio cassettes on the same topic. Eventually, Mains would be better known for his over twenty years on the radio with “The Chapel of the Air” program. His long-term legacy in the larger evangelical community focused on his work to help support the local church through church growth, worship and sermon resources.

Mains believed that Circle Church would be a venue through which creative ideas would be expressed. In Full Circle, the third chapter is titled “Why do we have church anyway,” Mains outlines his approach to church ministry with charts and diagrams that emphasize three key components: “Gifts of the Holy Spirit, Worship and Prayer, and Interaction.” The chapter, therefore, emphasizes creative expressions of church ministry and worship and how the local church could function in the area of creative worship. The next chapter in the book is wholly devoted to a description of the Sunday worship format and logistics associated with the Sunday worship. A sample worship service is offered with guidelines given on how to plan a worship service, the use of music and scripture, the necessity of variety and change in the worship service, and how to prepare effective and creative sermons. Mains’ priority was the expression of creativity in the worship service context. “Our purpose was to test ideas related to how a local church functions. . . . It is a story of church renewal.”

While Full Circle seems to prioritize creative worship and church growth and renewal, it was the church’s multi-ethnic composition that drew significant attention.

---

10 Mains, Full Circle, 70.
11 Mains, Full Circle, 71-102.
Mains was not only concerned about creative worship, he was also concerned about the church’s response to social issues in contrast to many of his contemporaries. There was intentionality to plant the church in an urban location, to reach the poor and the oppressed and to be a multi-ethnic church. The ahead-of-its-time multi-ethnic pastoral staff team, at various stages, included an African-American worship leader, a Chinese Filipino pastor (Ka Tong Gaw) and African-American pastors (initially, Mel Warren and subsequently, Clarence Hilliard). Even *Time* magazine recognized this unique feature and featured Circle Church in a December 1969 issue which focused on the diversity of the church.

His [David Mains] team ministry is mixed (a Negro, two whites and a Filipino-Chinese assist him), and the congregation is even more disparate: foreign students from the University of Illinois' nearby Chicago Circle Campus, poor people from the neighborhood, an increasing number of hippies and occasional young whites from the suburbs.

While church members saw the value of the creative worship experience at Circle Church, for the African-Americans in the church, the real attraction of the church was the open church concept. “The open church concept basically meant that a multi-ethnic congregation was not to assimilate but rather was to mutually share in the life of the church” Open church provided the grid through which disempowered African-Americans could engage in a church that still maintained a white majority. “Hilliard saw the open church concept as a crucial in a multi-ethnic community. Open church also

---

12 Mains, *Full Circle*, 27.
13 One of Mains early teachings at the church emphasized the values of ministering to the poor and the oppressed. Mains also taught on the kingdom of God, which would reflect his social justice emphasis.
means that the church not only says welcome to other ethnic groups; it encourages multi-
ethnicity and makes necessary changes in the congregation to provide an open
opportunity to express their cultural dynamic in all aspects of the church.”

In an interview with Manuel Ortiz, Clarence Hilliard reveals: “The open church . . . is not
assimilation or loss of identity, but a mutual sharing in the privileges and responsibilities
of God’s new community through the finished work of Christ, in an atmosphere of
freedom where differences are accepted and appreciated.”

8.2 A Mickey Mouse Job

In many ways, Circle Church was ahead of its time. The late 1960s and the early
1970s witnessed the advent and growing influence of the Church Growth movement.
Donald McGavran’s church growth principles developed in the mission field were
finding application in the U.S. through the work of C. Peter Wagner. One of the key
principles of the church growth movement, the homogenous unit principle, was applied
on a practical level among Evangelical churches and resulted in a de facto segregation of
American Christianity. Circle Church went against the grain. The church attempted to
build a multi-ethnic church in the midst of the strong push of the homogeneous unit
principle.

One of the expressions of the multi-ethnic church at Circle Church was the formation
of a multi-ethnic pastoral staff. Mains writes: “Our congregation was very open to hiring
a black man. Because we were so young, much of the prejudice and inhibitions an older
group might have demonstrated simply did not exist, or if they did, were being dealt with

---

16 According to former church members, Russ Knight and Peter Sjoblom, the African-American
population at Circle Church never exceeded 15%.
by the individuals who held them. We wanted an integrated church.”^{19} Circle Church hired Mel Warren as the first African-American staff member in 1968. When Warren left Circle Church, Clarence Hilliard was hired.

Clarence Hilliard was born and raised in Buffalo. He received his bachelor’s degree from Houghton College in 1969 and moved to Chicago to attend Trinity Evangelical Divinity School in the Chicago area. Prior to his move to Chicago, Hilliard had been ordained in the National Baptist denomination and served as a pastor at St. Paul’s Baptist Church in Lackawanna, NY near Buffalo. Hilliard was active in the community working in school integration and housing rights. On April 24, 1963, Hilliard was invited by the University of Buffalo Student Association to debate Malcolm X. Hilliard would criticize the lack of school integration in Buffalo as an expression of injustice. He would assert: “The school will wind up being all Negro, and the Supreme Court has rated that segregated schools are inherently inequal [sic].” Malcolm X, meanwhile, would criticize school integration as “Uncle Tom” thinking. More attention would be given to the comment’s of Malcolm X but Hilliard would be considered a significant Christian leader who could respond to a more national Civil Rights figure.^{20}

Clarence Hilliard originally came to Chicago to pursue a seminary education at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School (TEDS), while his wife and kids remained in Buffalo. His first week at the suburban campus of TEDS, Hilliard would meet students who were headed to Circle Church. The very week that Hilliard visited Circle Church was the week that Mel Warren, the first African American pastor at Circle Church

^{18} Ortiz, “Circle Church: A Case Study in Contextualization,” 9.
^{19} Mains, *Full Circle*, 40.
announced his resignation during the service. Immediately after the announcement, there was a question and answer time attended by Clarence Hilliard. Hilliard would impress David Mains and the elders of the church with his queries during the meeting. Within months, Hilliard would be hired as a pastor at Circle Church.\(^{21}\)

Circle Church had difficulty keeping even the small number of blacks at the church. The demographics of Circle Church reveals the white population to be 80-90% of the church. Hilliard initially saw his job as keeping blacks from leaving the church and believed it to be “a ‘Mickey Mouse job’ for the first couple of years. . . . It was communicated almost as a babysitting job – holding on to the Blacks that attended.” A couple of years after his arrival, “Hilliard realized that Circle was truly interested in a heterogeneous, multi-ethnic church.” Hilliard diagnosed that Blacks were leaving because “Circle was too White. . . . their worship, music, and preaching were not inclusive or representative of the Black community.”\(^{22}\)

As an African-American evangelical, Hilliard would have been influenced by the ethos of the NBEA. Hilliard served the NBEA as the head of the social concerns committee and at a later point, served as the Vice President of the NBEA. Phil Hilliard, Clarence’s son would assert that after pastoring the church, Clarence Hilliard felt that his next most significant contribution was his role with the NBEA. While holding to an evangelical theology, Hilliard was also a leader in Operation PUSH and would often reflect the burgeoning African-American evangelical theology that was conservative but reflected a high black identity and a deep concern for social justice. The intersection of

---


\(^{21}\) Phil Hilliard, interview by author, 3 March 2016, Chicago, IL, tape recording.
Hilliard’s Evangelical connection and his commitment to issues of social justice is evident in his involvement with the 1974 Lausanne Conference. Hilliard attended and presented a subcommittee response paper titled “Urban Evangelization Among the Poor.” Upon his return, Hilliard would state: "I cannot sign the Covenant. Inasmuch as I have a great deal of respect for the leaders that I know . . . Lausanne failed to meet the needs of the black world generally, and the poor, the powerless, and the oppressed specifically." Hilliard would attend a significant international Evangelical event, but would present a challenge to the status quo of passivity regarding social justice issues.

Hilliard, therefore, had a clear sense of calling to not only the blacks at Circle Church but also to the entire church to challenge them with the theology that was emerging from the black evangelical framework. For Hilliard, Circle Church’s vision of being an open church provided the motivation and focus for his ministry. Hilliard believed that to be true to the open church concept the church needed to embrace an evangelical Black theology. The priority of Mains and Hilliard were at odds from very early in their working relationship. Circle Church was becoming a church with two competing visions. Whether “Open Church” or “Step Two” would serve as the driving vision seemed to be an underlying conflict between the two pastors.

Circle Church was significant not only as an innovative church but as a church with social-historical importance. As Russ Knight explains, many African-American evangelicals were watching this church. Was integration possible among evangelical Christians? Could Blacks and Whites worship together? Clarence Hilliard’s presence

---

22 Ortiz, “Circle Church: A Case Study in Contextualization,” 8.
23 Knight, interview.
raised the stakes for Circle Church. Could a strong black identity be accepted among white evangelicals? The trajectory of black evangelicalism would intersect with white Evangelicalism in this significant moment in the specific context of this local church.

8.3 The Crisis

Starting in the fall of 1975 and into the early months of 1976, the young church would encounter a crisis that would cripple the church and ultimately alter the course of the church. It would result in the firing of the church’s African-American pastor, the resignation of the church’s only African-American elder, and the subsequent departure of all the African-Americans at Circle Church. “The Crisis,” as it came to be known stemmed from a series of conflicts that emerged on the staff, board, and congregation.

In *Full Circle* Mains claims that from early on team ministry was an important element of Circle Church. As Mains writes, “My concept of a team was that of a whole containing equal parts. All of us would be called pastor, with each man having differing areas of responsibility. . . . It would be impossible to overestimate the importance of this team concept.”25 In his book, Mains seemed to place a high value on the team concept. The actual application of the team concept, however, was much more difficult. The diversity of the team would have required a diversity in approach. In other words, leading a diverse team would have necessitated a cultural competency that acknowledged and addressed the diversity of culture and cultural values on the team. The assumption of the dominant culture’s supremacy would have allowed for one cultural expression to dominate the patterns and practices of the staff team.

---

25 Mains, *Full Circle*, 41.
As the founding pastor of the church, Mains had requested from the board that clarification be given over the roles of the staff. Eventually, he would request that he be officially established as the Senior Pastor. In particular, Mains wanted to exert full authority over the Sunday Worship Services. Conflict arose among the staff over this authority over the worship services. While Mains did not preach every Sunday, he established an approval process for all sermons preached at the church. In *Full Circle*, Mains reveals that “each sermon is now a composite of the thoughts of the other five [staff members]. Whoever preaches goes over his thoughts with another member of the team on Monday. . . . On Tuesday the entire staff hears in summary the emphasis of the sermon.” Both the team concept (as worked out through the Sunday worship service) and the effort of David Mains to be established as the senior pastor tested the relationship between Hilliard and Mains.

Hilliard was concerned that the worship services were too white. Being an open church meant that all the races should be allowed to contribute to the worship service. Blacks should have a significant say in the planning of the worship service. To live into the open church concept, “the Blacks of Circle Church mapped out what they saw as significant [ways] to produce a ‘soul experience.’ First, they needed a soul choir and a Black choir director. Secondly, they wanted the Black preacher to do more preaching.”

---

26 Knight, interview. Peter Sjoblom, interview by author, 23 March 2010 and 20 April, 2010, Chicago, IL. See also Circle Church Elders, “October 20, 1975 Meeting Minutes,” asking the staff “to deal with the concept of Senior Pastor.” See also a reference in the December 20, 1975 letter from the Black members of Circle Church questioning the decision to establish David Mains’ authority over all the worship services.

27 Mains, *Full Circle*, 43.

28 Russ Knight asserts that Mains preferred classical music over soul music. In addition, Mains’ desire to launch “step Two” meant that he wanted stricter control over the Sunday service. (Knight, interview).

29 Ortiz, “Circle Church: A Case Study in Contextualization,” 8.
Mains wanted to maintain authority over the worship service as the Senior Pastor. He would write many years after The Crisis:

I don’t believe Clarence [Hilliard] ever recognized the fact that I was senior minister and the reason he was given opportunity was by my invitation. We were not equals on staff, we didn’t receive the same pay, we didn’t have the same title. The reason he felt like an equal was because I treated him that way. When you have two senior ministers in any church – red, yellow, white or mixed – you have trouble. 30

Hilliard, however, saw conflict developing out of the lack of willingness to adhere to the open church concept. Mains control over the service in the pursuit of “Step Two” meant the absence of concern for the African-Americans at Circle Church, which would be in violation of “Open Church.”

In the fall of 1975, Hilliard proposed to preach a sermon titled, “The Funky Gospel.” Hilliard wanted to push the congregation towards an understanding and even an embracing of Black theology. The sermon referenced James Cone and his work, Black Theology and Black Power. It boldly proclaimed that “Christ came into the world as the ultimate ‘nigger’ of the universe.” Hilliard connected concern for the poor with black theology. “To be black theologically is to join yourself to the Lord Jesus Christ, find your identity with the poor, the powerless, and the oppressed.” Hilliard raises the challenge that “one must realize that another gospel is being preached – the gospel of the system, the gospel of the status-quo, the ‘honkey’ gospel. . . . I seriously question the nebulous, almost contentless ‘Lord and Savior Jesus Christ’ presented in both the Billy Graham

30 Ortiz, “Circle Church: A Case Study in Contextualization,” 11. The quote comes from a response letter from David Mains upon seeing the rough draft of Manuel Ortiz’ article.
style and the ‘four spiritual laws’ type of evangelism.” Hilliard expressed a deep discontent with the white Evangelical appropriation and application of the gospel. “what is it that we evangelicals have been preaching? I said at the outset that we have been preaching a honky Christ to a hungry world. This honky Christ has no content; he does not come to the dispossessed. We preach a honky Christ of easy salvation. Specialists in getting quick, easy decisions for a strange, mystical, theologically white Christ are rapidly increasing. These persons peddle a Jesus easy to accept, a Jesus who demands very little commitment of energy, money, life.” Hilliard believed that this sermon moved them towards Open Church, as the previously silenced black voices in the church would be allowed to speak the fullness of a realized black identity and theology.

“The Crisis” began when Hilliard was prohibited from preaching this sermon. A series of meetings occurred between the staff, the elder board, and certain members of the congregation. Multiple conversations occurred that not only revolved around the preaching of the “Funky Gospel” sermon, but also who had the authority over the sermon, the worship service, and the church. The elders generated a document that explained the “Chronological Events Through the Crisis.” The beginning of the crisis is identified as Monday, September 29, 1975, when “the elders started discussion on how eldership and modules relate to the church.”

According to Phil Hilliard, the modules referred to the formation of small groups that were often regionally based. One of the issues that needed to be addressed may have been concerns raised by the “black module,”

32 Hilliard, “Funky Gospel.”
33 Circle Church Elders, “Chronological Events through the Crisis,” 1-3.
a group located in the Austin neighborhood and comprised mostly of African-Americans.35

The discussion at a subsequent meeting on October 20 centered around the concept of the Senior Pastor and how eldership and modules related to the church. Early in this process, the issue of the senior pastor came up. It is presented in conceptual form because Mains sought clarification on the role and job description of the senior pastor. The elder conversation would gesture towards a desire (whether by Mains or by the elders) to affirm a level of authority and power to the senior pastor. As the senior pastor, Mains particularly wanted control of the entirety of church worship life. The first mention of the “Funky Gospel” sermon appears on October 29 when the a sub-committee of the elder board was asked to consider the sermon. On Friday, October 31, the committee listened to a presentation of the “Funky Gospel” by Clarence Hilliard. The notes show that “David left the meeting early because of tension.”36

The next staff meeting was held on Monday morning, November 3, where “Clarence stated that he felt very uncomfortable because he was the only Black. David asked for Clarence’s resignation. Staff suggested David and Clarence talk.” That evening, the elders met “and it was agreed that David would be over service planning, but some were uneasy.” The statement that “David would be over service planning” indicates that Mains’ desire to be in control of the entirety of the worship service was being met, while “some were uneasy” seems to indicate concern that this control would prevent the expression of diverse worship and preaching that would reflect the open church concept.

34 Circle Church Elders, “Chronological Events,” 1.
35 Hilliard, interview.
36 Circle Church Elders, “Chronological Events,” 1.
A subsequent staff meeting on Wednesday, November 5 would generate further conflict as the staff discussed the preaching of the “Funky Gospel” sermon in an upcoming service. Hilliard would ask that the issue be taken to the elders. The elders would meet on Friday, November 7 where “David stated that he could not live with the situation if he was not in charge over all service planning. Clarence said that he couldn’t live with the situation because he felt that if David was over his services that would be the death of open church.” The resolution of this impasse was pushed back as the Sunday worship service for November 9 was replaced with a concert. The elder meeting on November 13 would be the effort to resolve this conflict that had led to growing polarization and misinformation.37

A November 15, 1975 letter from the church elders to the church members was produced as a result of that meeting and attempts to describe the emerging conflict. “Two weeks ago, during a time when the elders were re-evaluating the structure of the church, the staff deadlocked over a key issue in the structure and requested resolution of the matter by the elders.” David Mains’ assertion of Senior Pastor authority to prevent Clarence Hilliard from preaching the sermon initially raised the issue of church structure. The letter goes on to state that “Issues of staff teamwork relationships, trust, and submission were evident. The elders were also very concerned that David and Clarence were feeling immense pressure from several outside sources that were unrelated to these issues. We felt that it would be more appropriate to deal primarily with the matter of healing for Dave and Clarence and not to only decide on the question of church

37 Circle Church Elders, “Chronological Events,” 2.
structure.”  

Both pastors were asked to step back and not bear any official responsibilities with the idea that both needed healing.

While the focus of the letter was on the need for Dave and Clarence to rest and to receive healing, there was a specific decision made about governance over the Sunday Worship Services.

We have affirmed that Dave is especially gifted in the areas of preaching and creative worship planning. However, the blackening of Circle, while not the total of what is involved in becoming an open church, has many unique aspects. We feel that the blackening of the church would be endangered if all of the services were under exclusive white authority. We have decided, therefore, that Clarence’s services will not be a part of Dave’s responsibility nor authority.  

At this point, there seemed to be an affirmation of the open church concept and Hilliard’s authority over select services at the church. In Mains’ November 20, 1975 response letter to the Elder’s letter, he claims “that the relationship with me as your former Senior Pastor has been radically changed. This is so much the case that my old position is almost non-existent. . . . In fact, I bear no ‘official responsibility in the church at this time.’ . . . Under the present circumstances, however, my responsibilities are so ill defined there is no way I can respond positively when people ask if I would consider staying”  

From late November to early December, more meetings occurred between the elders of the church with the staff to gauge next steps as well as a meeting with the Black fellowship. At one point, Tom Skinner officially attended an elder meeting on December 2, 1975. During this time, there was also an appeal to John Perkins for input. Both individuals may have expressed minimal support for Clarence Hilliard to remain at the

---

38 Circle Church Elders, “November 15, 1975 Letter to the Members of Circle Church.”
39 Circle Church Elders, “November 15, 1975 Letter to the Members of Circle Church.”
church.\textsuperscript{41} At the December 9, 1975 Elders Meeting, David Mains stated that he “was unable to see any possible way of staff working together at this point.” Clarence Hilliard “felt he could continue to work as a part of staff only if he was free to preach the messages he feels God has given to him and if a situation arises in staff where he feels a need to have additional black input he be allowed to bring additional blacks into the discussion.”\textsuperscript{42} The issue of under-representation of blacks on the staff, the elders, and throughout the entire process was addressed in the December 15 meeting. “The question of whether or not the elders should attempt to get more black input at this point was discussed. It was concluded that at this point in time it is meaningless to attempt to get more black input, that we will have to, as a church, reap what we have sowed.”\textsuperscript{43}

For Hilliard, the conflict revolved around the failure of Circle Church to live up to the open church concept. Towards that end, Hilliard would need to have authority over the direction of the services that would reflect the open church priority. For Mains, the issue revolved around his role as Senior Pastor. Mains would need to have complete control over every service, including the “soul services” which would typically be under the leadership of Hilliard. The minutes of the meeting reveals that “a consensus decision was reached by the Elders that the staff is in fact incompatible and should be dissolved. . . . The implications of that decision were not decided on at this meeting.”\textsuperscript{44}

At the December 15, 1975 Elder Meeting, “It was decided that the elders should ask for Clarence’s resignation and the reason would be because there is a lack of

\textsuperscript{40} David Mains, “Letter to Circle Elders,” (November 20, 1975).
\textsuperscript{41} Hilliard, interview; Henry Greenidge, interview by author, 20 February 2016, Jackson, MS, tape recording; Ron Potter, interview by author, 20 February 2016, Jackson, MS, tape recording.
\textsuperscript{42} Circle Church Elders, “December 9, 1975 Meeting Minutes.”
\textsuperscript{43} Circle Church Elders, “December 15, 1975 Meeting Minutes.”
\textsuperscript{44}
communication and confidence between Clarence and the Elders.” The elders decided to ask for Clarence’s resignation. The vote was: 7/2/1:

- 7 votes affirmed the decision
- 2 votes abstained
- 1 vote withdrew

The Elder minutes defined “withdrew” as withdrawing “from the question if you don’t feel you can support the decision, but feel it is important enough to make the decision. This would mean you would have to withdraw from the elders.” The “withdraw” came from Russ Knight, Circle Church’s only African-American elder. At a follow-up elders meeting on December 17, another vote was taken with 6 votes affirming the decision, 2 votes submitting to the decision (they could not affirm going ahead with the decision as the best thing to do, but were able to submit to the decision), and 2 withdrawals (Russ Knight with an additional member of the board, David Martin submitting his resignation).

Gaius Berg who had submitted an affirming vote on December 15 changed his vote on December 17 to a “submitting” vote. Berg stated that “the Open Church was dead in the form tried at Circle Church. That is, that a basically white church hire a black minister and try to gradually build up the black membership.” Berg’s analysis reflected a disappointment in the death of the open church but also recognizing the problems in their approach to build an open church.

The bulk of the remainder of that meeting would be the drafting of a letter dated December 17, 1975 and sent by the Elders to Clarence Hilliard:

---

44 Circle Church Elders, “December 9, 1975 Meeting Minutes,” 2.
Clarence, we love you; so it is with great pain and struggle that we have come to the point of believing that we can no longer work and minister together. In other words, it is with deep regret that we are at the point of asking you for your resignation. We, the elders, feel that there is an irreconcilable difference of perspective on both the problems involved in this present crisis and the solutions to those problems.\(^\text{48}\)

In response, African-American members at Circle Church sent a letter on December 20, 1975 that challenged the Elders’ decision. The letter signed: “Clarence L. Hilliard and The Black Fellowship” confronted the elders saying, “It [the letter from the Elders to Hilliard] is vague, ‘irreconcilable difference’ and [sic] needs to be defined and supported by evidence.” The letter questioned the authority of the elders saying, “The elders also shifted from presenting a recommendation to the church to the elders requesting the resignation.” Most explicitly, the matter of race was brought up:

The stated needs of Blacks are still being ignored and the action itself is a racist attempt to make Blacks the scapegoats. It is obvious that the elders never responded in love to the urgent request in the Black Resolution for Black involvement in all meetings dealing with this crisis. . . .To ask Pastor Hilliard for his resignation under the present circumstances without any real effort to get at the bottom of the issues as we see them seems to be a racist attempt to place the blame on the Black pastor for the present status of things and expect to solve the problem by getting rid of him. The truth of the matter is that when the elders intended course of action is complete they will not only have succeed in getting rid of Pastor Hilliard but will have forced the Blacks out of the church as well.\(^\text{49}\)

At the end of the process, despite the strong protestation by Blacks at the church (in the form of an additional eight-page letter), Hilliard was fired\(^\text{50}\) while Mains was reinstated. A letter of introduction was offered on behalf of David Mains by the elders on

\(^{48}\) Circle Church Elders, “December 17, 1975 Letter to Clarence Hilliard.”

\(^{273}\)
December 20. “The Elders express their affirmation for you as both the founder and a leader of Circle Church. We as a church have learned much from your ministry regarding spiritual maturity, utilization of gifts, and creative expressions of worship. . . . We welcome you back into the whole of ministry at Circle Church.” The letter makes no mention of open church even as Mains is asked to lead the church in evaluating the church’s goals in the coming months.51

The eight-page letter from the Black fellowship dated December 20, stated among other things, concern over favoritism shown to David by the Elders, David’s forcing authority over the Sunday morning services and the prohibition of preaching “The Funky Gospel,” unfair treatment towards the black children of the church, superior attitude of whites towards blacks, the lack of black elders, complete disregard of the concerns of blacks at Circle Church. The decision to ask for Hilliard’s resignation was not supported by Russ Knight, the only African-American member of the elder board, who had already resigned from the elder board. In a letter dated January 9, 1976, The Black Fellowship of Circle Church issued the following statement to the Elders:

Our Fellowship is violated by your decision to terminate Pastor Hilliard’s employment. We are also convinced that you have officiated over the death of the Open Church at Circle. Therefore we ask that when you terminate Pastor Hilliard’s employment that our names be stricken from the records of Circle Church and be dropped from your mailing list. At that time our involvement in Circle and other related activities will cease.  52

49 Clarence Hilliard and The Black Fellowship “Statement of Response and Appeal of Pastor Hilliard and the Black Members of Circle to the Elders’ Request for Pastor Hilliard’s Resignation.” (December 20, 1975)
50 Circle Church Elders, “January 5, 1976 Letter to Clarence Hilliard.”
A formal notice of resignation would also be submitted by Phyllis McKenny, the director of the Soul Choir. Russ Knight would write a letter explaining his resignation from the Elder board stating, “I believe that the elders were fully aware that this action would eliminate further participation by Blacks in the on-going program of Circle. They were ready to face the consequences of this action and I was not.”\footnote{Russ Knight, “Letter to the Circle Church Community.”} The Black fellowship would leave Circle Church. Clarence Hilliard would plant Austin Corinthian Baptist Church (ACBC) in the Austin neighborhood on the west side of Chicago. David Mains would continue as the Senior Pastor of Circle Church for another year before resigning in 1977. He would eventually find fame in Evangelical Circles for his radio program, \textit{Chapel on the Air}, which he directed from 1977 to 1995. Mains would proceed to author numerous books. His bio at his ministry website would acknowledge that he “received an honorary doctorate for his role in contributing to the life of the national church; . . . established the daily television show \textit{You Need to Know}, which addressed local church issues and in 1995 won the distinguished TV Programmer of the Year award from the National Religious Broadcasters; . . . [and] formed \textit{Mainstay Church Resources} in 1996 to provide sermon series helps for local pastors.”\footnote{Mainstay Ministries, “About David Mains.”} Mains’ contributions to Evangelicalism would be acknowledged with the archiving of his papers in the Wheaton College Archives and Special Collections.

\section*{8.4 The Aftermath}

For many in the African-American evangelical community, the failure of Circle Church signaled another incident of black evangelicals being rejected by white
Evangelicals. What compounded matters for black Evangelicals was that these were the “good white people,” yet, there were “significant blind spots” for even progressive white Evangelicals in relating to their African-American counterparts. Ron Potter stated a mistrust of even progressive white Evangelicals. “Many New Black Evangelicals see the White Evangelical ‘left’ to be as irrelevant to them as neo-evangelicalism was to their predecessors in the fifties. The new Blacks feel that White Evangelicals as a group, no matter how radical or young, will never come to grips with the demon of racism embedded within them.” Maybe even more significant were the differing reasons and perspectives that developed along color lines that emerged in the context of the crisis. The Circle Church story reveals the great gulf that was difficult to bridge among black and white evangelicals, even in the midst of positive intentions and great promise.

The story of Clarence Hilliard’s intersection with white Evangelicalism takes a quiet but important turn nearly two decades after his departure from Circle Church. Tim Hoekstra planted Suburban Life Community Church in the western suburbs of Chicago in 1991. The church followed a typical pattern of suburban church growth. They initiated a homogenous unit principle church as outlined by C. Peter Wagner along with the strong influence of the Willow Creek Community Church. Willow Creek’s influence would compel the church to establish a seeker sensitive church to reach the white suburban community in DuPage county. The church had grown at a rate of approximately 100 people per year and had reached 300 Sunday attendees.

55 Knight, interview and Sjoblom, interview.
By 1996, a group of men at the church including Pastor Hoekstra had attended the Promise Keepers for several consecutive years. The men grew tired of going to the conference without doing something at a local level. A core group emerged who wanted to not only experience more diversity but also experience what it means to have racial reconciliation as part of their lives. For over a year, the group met to pray. In late 1997, Clarence Hilliard was speaking at an NAE event in Florida. A connection to a Suburban Life Community Church member was made by one of the attendees. Through a series of different connections, one of the leaders of Suburban Life would initially meet with Clarence Hilliard back in Chicago.

In January of 1998, Tim Hoekstra would meet Clarence Hilliard for the first time. Hilliard was 67 at the time of their first meeting. He would explicitly state to Hoekstra that he did have time for a once or twice-a-year black history month experience. Hilliard warned Hoekstra to be ready for the deal to come down upon you. By Hoekstra’s own account, he felt the movement of the Holy Spirit and agreed to submit to Hilliard’s leadership. Clarence Hilliard would preach the “Funky Gospel” sermon for the first sermon he would preach at Suburban Life Community Church, launching a long-term relationship between the two churches.

As Suburban life made the move towards racial reconciliation, significant pushback would occur from the congregation. Clarence Hilliard would preach more frequently at Suburban Life and Hoekstra’s sermons would begin to reflect the same themes as he preached the need to submit to the leadership of an African-American pastor and an African-American church. By the end of the first year of relationship with ACBC, fifteen
households would leave the church citing a lack of desire to engage in ministry in the city as one of the principle reasons.

The relationship between the two churches would continue to develop. Leadership between the two churches would meet at ACBC every Wednesday at 6AM to listen to Clarence Hilliard’s teaching followed by breakfast fellowship, where the conversation would continue around the meal. The meetings would expand to a men’s fellowship on the first Saturday of each month. Hilliard would present historical material on racism and offer an African-American perspective on the Bible. The connection would further expand to a Sunday night dinner and worship once a month, first at Suburban Life and eventually moving to ACBC. The emphasis on each of these meetings was on developing relationships and affirming the leadership of African Americans in relationship to the white suburban Evangelical church. Hoekstra states that Hilliard would challenge the attendees at the gatherings with teachings on the black presence in the Bible and white privilege. Hoekstra added that Hilliard was always open to answer all kinds of questions even as Hoekstra would raise tough challenges.

The relationship between Hilliard and Hoekstra lasted seven years until Hilliard’s passing. When Clarence Hilliard’s son, Phil Hilliard took over ACBC, the relationship continued with the same dynamic. When Clarence Hilliard passed, some members at Suburban Life began to question whether it was time to move on from the partnership. Suburban Life leadership re-committed to the relationship between the two churches. Between 2006 and 2007, another group of ten households would leave Suburban Life Community Church. Approximately $80,000 in giving was lost during this process. The core leadership at Suburban Life believed that the cost was worth the commitment. The
relationship had changed the church and there was no going back. Tim Hoekstra would affirm with Phil Hilliard that the leadership of Clarence Hilliard had been passed on to Phil. By 2016, the two churches had been in relationship for over nineteen years.

In an interview with Tim Hoekstra, the pastor recognized that the relationship that formed in the 1990s was informed by Clarence Hilliard’s experience at Circle Church. Hilliard would talk about Circle Church and address what may have gone wrong with the noble effort. Hilliard would joint out that often white Evangelicals wanted reconciliation on their own terms. Typically, whites wanted black folks to become white. This desire would be exasperated by the issues of power and who would ultimately make the decisions on what would happen at the church. The pain of the experience was still felt by Hilliard, who felt that the whites in the church would say, “We love having you at the church,” but when it came to the bottom line, white would take over. They would welcome you but wanted your attendance on their terms. Hilliard recognized the diseased theological imagination at work among white Evangelicals at Circle Church who would elevate the exceptionalism of whiteness would reject any narrative that did not align with the triumphalistic narrative.

Hoekstra would seek to avoid this type of dysfunction in the relationship between the two churches. He would consistently affirm Clarence Hilliard and ACBC as the authority in the relationship. At great cost, he would lead the church towards an embracing rather than a subsuming of the lament of the other. Through the building of the relationship, both ACBC and Suburban Life would reap kingdom benefits. Hoekstra would note that much of his present work was on the west side of Chicago. He was spending less time in the suburbs, but instead, had been empowered by Suburban Life to stay connected with
churches on the west side of Chicago. Clarence Hilliard’s bold proclamation of liberation had been heard by a white suburban Evangelical pastor, whose impact was felt in an authentic relocation incarnation ministry on the west side of Chicago.
Conclusions

The pathway towards a genuine multi-ethnic future for the United States remains an unclear one. The venomous political dialogue and the sociological challenges of ongoing segregation contribute towards a racialized problem in our society and in our churches. The churches, in turn, have not supplied a theological imagination that measures up to the needs of society. Instead, the historical expression of theology in the United States has provided a dysfunctional imagination that has damaged the Evangelical witness. Our nation remains segregated and divided and our churches lead the way.

Emerson and Smith’s categories presented in the introduction offers an initial understanding of the challenges for racial integration and reconciliation for Evangelicals in the United States. The problem does not emerge from a vacuum but instead is the result of a historical reality. The history of Evangelicalism reveals a long pattern of inability to deal with cultural changes and an inability to address destructive structures and systems. Evangelicals continue to cling to a bounded set soteriology and ecclesiology that betrays a sense of exceptionalism and triumphalism. The assumption of perspicuity and reasoning (exceptionalism) coupled with the strong sense of having inherited the mantel of orthodox theology and the charge to further that exceptional theology (triumphalism) provides an obstacle for those who may display a theological affinity but not hold physical similarity to white Evangelicalism. Clinging to an exceptionalistic and triumphalistic view of one’s own past and future allows for the sustaining of systems that undermine unity and community in the gospel.
Despite this complicated history, Evangelicals continue to opt for quick problem solving methods that often have counter-productive consequences. The belief that the most effective way to deal with race is a colorblind approach that minimizes cultural differences, allows the dominant culture to walk away from the issue virtually unscathed. Quick and easy answers that provide a multi-ethnic optic rather than deeper relationships in community have been embraced by Evangelical Christians. For decades, Evangelicalism sought to deal with different cultures by implementing the homogenous unit principle. Despite a complete absence of a biblical and theological foundation, the HUP became the norm by which most U.S. churches operated, generating a de facto segregation that left Evangelical Christianity with the same level of segregation as the deep south during the Jim Crow era. Even entering into a time of greater ethnic diversity, the quick and easy solution has been to encourage non-white Christians to enact and perform whiteness, demonstrating the dysfunctional theological principle that salvific viability is rooted in approximating whiteness. But even this expectation has proven inadequate as African Americans who demonstrated every attribute required to earn the metaphorical Evangelical card, have been rejected. Echoing Evangelical theology, graduation from Evangelical educational institutions, participation in Evangelical parachurch ministries, and speaking and writing to an Evangelical audience has not insured inclusion in the Evangelical world. Race still trumped theology in a negative way in the Evangelical world. Tom Skinner offered a strong Evangelical message through his personal testimony. His foundational theological approach would be soundly evangelical. However, when the emphasis of his preaching began to include social and racial justice issues, Evangelicals rejected both the message and the person. The difficulty of
discussing race in Evangelical circles meant that the topic could not be broached but instead the easier option of the HUP was embraced. Quick and easy answers that emerge from a capitalistic and triumphalistic mindset has not addressed the theological problem of race. Instead, Evangelicals have embraced approaches that have exasperated rather than quelled the problem.

The third category offered by Emerson and Smith addresses the subcultural toolkit of U.S. Evangelicalism. In particular, the hyper-individualism of Evangelicals has yielded the miracle motif approach for reconciliation. White Evangelicals believe that changing individuals and helping them become good people will address racial injustice in society. The miracle motif has very little grounding in actual Biblical principles or in how change actually occurs in the real world. Instead, it perpetuates the narrative that hyper-individualistic expressions of faith that emerged out of a dysfunctional cultural context was deemed appropriate to deal with complex issues. The miracle motif also affirms the exceptionalism of white Evangelicals and upholds the ideal of an exceptional individual with the capacity to almost single handedly change the world. White Evangelicals can perform the miracle of healing centuries of tragic history with independent individual action. The miracle motif furthers the triumphalistic narrative as well, since the rational individual will emerge victorious in the battle against prejudice. The Circle Church story uncovers the fantasy that individuals will be able to single handedly bring about systemic change. Often that burden to change would fall upon those outside the dominant culture. That heroic individual would not be equipped with any power or authority, but would be expected to produce miraculous results. This pattern continues in current times with white mega-churches hiring the one minority associate
pastor to serve as the “magic minority.” The magic minority staff member is expected to conjure up other minorities simply through his or her presence at the church, even if that individual is not given any authority to actually enact changes.

All three of the categories offered by Emerson and Smith gestures towards a diseased theological imagination deeply embedded in Evangelicalism. Despite protestations that progress has been made, the patterns of dysfunction continue to manifest. The theological assumption of white Evangelical exceptionalism is evident in the Evangelical application of the Creation account and Biblical anthropology. The diseased theological imagination propels Evangelicals towards a self-perception that elevates white minds and the product of white minds. The theological dysfunction continues with a triumphalism that roots soteriology in whiteness. The severing of Jesus from his Jewish identity and the reconstituting of Jesus as white completes the triumphalistic narrative of Western Christianity. By idealizing Evangelical identity with the approximation of whiteness, the narrative of the successful Christian life is wedded to whiteness. Evangelical theology embraces an exceptionalism and triumphalism that perpetuates the ongoing cycle of the formation of the diseased theological imagination.

The historical development of this unique Evangelical identity in the twentieth century requires a connection to a different Christian narrative that emerges from both a similar and dissimilar context. The intersection of Evangelical history and theology with the narrative of African American Christianity could provide a corrective for a dysfunctional exceptionalism and triumphalism. By inverting the exceptionalistic assumption that non-whites are grafted onto the tree trunk of white Christianity and instead, offering the image of multiple tributaries that contribute to the large sea of
Christian faith, a new type of engagement is offered for disparate groups. Several examples emerge from this possible intersection.

First, we address the struggle of white American Christianity in dealing with a long history of a dysfunctional engagement with the culture. Vacillating from an over acquiescence to the culture versus a condemnation of the culture has resulted in an ongoing confusion about the healthy relationship between church and culture. The HUP that derailed any possibility of integration in the Evangelical community demonstrated a dysfunctional relationship between church and culture. The ease with which the Republican party swallowed up the well-intentioned efforts of Evangelicals to change the culture through political involvement reveals an ineptitude in social-cultural engagement. The ambivalence and confusion demonstrated by white American Christianity has resulted in the ongoing inability to discern what is cultural (American exceptionalism and patriotism) from what is Biblical (a call to be salt and light).

In contrast, the narrative of the African American church has not been found in the center of the American Christian narrative. Christendom has not typically been attributed as a characteristic of the African American church. The history of the African American church offers the possibility that a Christian community can offer cultural relevance and adaptability in the midst of tremendous oppression and suffering. The lament of slave religion led to a celebration of God’s work rather than an attempt to curry favor with the powers that be in the surrounding culture. The African American church pursued human agency in the context of community. An example emerges from the story of the NBEA, where autonomy and agency was expressed through the diversity of groups that formed the NBEA. The emergence of the “young turks” allowed for a highly
contextualized expression of the gospel to be voiced. The balance of community and ministry was attempted by the NBEA, in order to work through key differences. The failure of those efforts may be due to the cultural captivity of a subgroup within the NBEA that gravitated towards the theological dysfunction that sought approximation to whiteness. The ability to incorporate both celebration and suffering, both praise and lament should continue to be a hallmark of African American Christianity, in both its traditional form and its evangelical expression.

Second, the failure of the Evangelical church to move beyond the cultural expressions of power and authority has resulted in a dysfunctional application of power. The example of Circle Church provides a snapshot of a community that failed to understand the power of white privilege. By insisting on the authority of the white senior pastor over the African American pastor in all matters, Circle Church failed to recognize the complex and prolonged history of oppression of blacks by whites. In promoting the value of Step Two over and against Open Church, the desires of the white senior pastor overrode the needs of the church in the area of racial integration. The dysfunctional dynamic of power and the diseased theological imagination that undergirded that dynamic was never fully understood. The latent and overt expressions of white exceptionalism, privilege, and supremacy were not understood by the leaders of Circle Church leading to a derailment of a noble effort. White Evangelicalism’s celebratory propensity needed the balancing of a lament narrative. Clarence Hilliard’s call for lament through the “Funky Gospel” sermon was not given a voice, in lieu of the dominant narrative of success expressed through Step Two. The integration of black and white
evangelicalism required the yielding of power of the dominant culture to more intentionally listen to the lament of the community that had previously been silenced.

Finally, the theological problem of the assumption of exceptionalism of white Christians and the assertion of the inevitable triumph of white Evangelicalism has derailed credible witness. The absence of racial integration, racial reconciliation, and racial justice is a theological problem rather than a social-historical problem. The diseased theological imagination of the Western Christian mind has produced a particular gaze over creation and over humanity that places whiteness at the pinnacle. A dysfunctional anthropology, hamartiology, Christology, soteriology, and ecclesiology all serve to form a diseased theological imagination absent of the necessary tools to address a profoundly troubling history.

The narrative of the emergence of a unique U.S. Evangelical movement in the latter part of the twentieth century points towards the inability to adequately confront race as a theological issue. Instead, quick and easy answers were offered that ultimately undermined the potential process of healing. At critical junctures in the history of U.S. Evangelicalism, opportunities to intersect with another branch of Christianity, African American evangelicals, were presented. Part of the failure of the late twentieth century Evangelical discourse on race was the failure to fully engage a community with numerous points of theological affinity, but arising from a different social context. This disconnect with black evangelicals was not in theological categories that would typically matter to Evangelicals, but a failure of the theological imagination. White Evangelicalism could not expand community to include those of “different” and “other” flesh despite agreement on the central theological issues. The failure of the imagination to see “the
“other” as offering a positive contribution to the existing boundaries allowed white Evangelicalism to continue undisturbed by the presence of African American evangelicals.
Bibliography


Kindle.

295


——. “Moving toward the Next Evangelicalism.” In *Mobilizing for the Common Good: The Lived Theology of John M. Perkins*, edited by Peter Slade, Charles Marsh, and


——. “Response to Peterson.” *The Covenant Quarterly* Vol. LXVII, No. 1 (February 2009), 44-47.


302


——. *If Christ is the Answer, What are the Questions?* Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1974.


——. *Why We Must Win the American Negro.*” Moody Monthly (April 1968), 34-37.


Archives and Collections

Private Collection of Board Minutes from Circle Church (Copies in Author’s Possession):

Circle Church Elders. “Chronological Events through the Crisis.”

——. “October 20, 1975 Meeting Minutes.”

——. “December 9, 1975 Meeting Minutes.”

——. “December 15, 1975 Meeting Minutes.”

——. “December 17, 1975 Meeting Minutes.”

——. “November 15, 1975 Letter to the Members of Circle Church.”

——. “December 17, 1975 Letter to Clarence Hilliard.”
——. “January 5, 1976 Letter to Clarence Hilliard.”


Knight, Russ. “Letter to the Circle Church Community” (no date given but included in the cluster of letters dated January 9, 1976).


Billy Graham Center Archives, Wheaton College, Wheaton, IL


**Interviews**


Hoekstra, Tim. Interview by author. Tape recording. Phone (Chicago, IL), March 14, 2016.


Skinner, John. Interview by author, Phone (Knoxville, TN), March 9, 2016.


Biography

Soong-Chan Rah is Milton B. Engebretson Professor of Church Growth and Evangelism at North Park Theological Seminary in Chicago, IL.


Rah is an ordained minister with the Evangelical Covenant Church denomination. He is formerly the founding Senior Pastor of the Cambridge Community Fellowship Church (CCFC), a multi-ethnic, urban ministry-focused church committed to living out the values of racial reconciliation and social justice in the urban context. Soong-Chan has previously been part of a church planting team in the Washington DC area and previously worked with InterVarsity Christian Fellowship at MIT.

He currently serves on the board of World Vision, Evangelicals 4 Justice, and the Catalyst Leadership Center. He has previously served on the board of Sojourners and the Christian Community Development Association. He has been an active member of the Boston Ten-Point Coalition (an urban ministry working with at-risk youth) and is a founding member of the Boston Fellowship of Asian-American Ministers.

Soong-Chan received his B.A. in Political Science and History/Sociology from Columbia University, his M.Div. from Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary, his Th.M. from Harvard University, and his D.Min. from Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary.

Soong-Chan, his wife Sue, and his two children Annah and Elijah live in Chicago, IL.