NAZARENE THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY

# A THEOLOGY OF HOPE: A PROPHETIC VISION FOR THE BRONX

A THESIS IN CONNECTING TO THE PROPHETIC AND THERAPEUTIC
PRACTICES OF A HOPEFUL COMMUNITY OF FAITH

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# Doctor of Ministry Dissertation Approval

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We, the undersigned, determined that this dissertation has met the academic requirements and standards of Nazarene Theological Seminary for the Doctor of Ministry program.

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# ABSTRACT

The contemporary church is struggling to connect biblical hope with the opportunities to address socio-economic inequity toward community revitalization and holistic healing. Many churches within the Northeast Bronx are increasingly being viewed as irrelevant to the community at large because of the perceived inability to notably affect education, health, housing, policing, immigration, and socio-economic equity. The models of leadership utilized reflect a poor theological foundation and are more about gaining control than dismantling systems, empowering others, and seeking collaboration. Further, there is a lack of clear direction from leadership, ad hoc systems to recognize congregational gifting, and little focus on intentional unifying community engagement. This will serve as a tool for the church to connect unique contextual needs to hopeful practices that challenge attitudes and systems that are contrary to the Kingdom of God.

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# CHAPTER I: WHAT'S THE STORY?

## 1.1: "A BRONX TALE"

"A Bronx Tale" is an iconic film released in 1993 set in the 1960s Bronx, NY. This coming-of-age story, directed by Robert De Niro, chronicles a Bronx Italian-American boy named Calogero and his relationship with an unlikely friend and mafia boss named Sonny. Calogero is torn between the values of his bus-driving father Lorenzo and that of his mentor Sonny. While Lorenzo and Sonny differ in their approaches to life, they share a pure affection for Calogero and his well-being. The story masterfully presents and interrogates friendship while presenting ethical dichotomies, varied priorities, and prejudicial sentiments. De Niro displays timeless and unforgettable archetypes of an Italian neighborhood that audiences can quickly identify with and appreciate. Further, the movie depicts the socio-economic conditions, ethnic realities, and general affections of varied tribal groups in the Bronx in that time period. "A Bronx Tale" accomplishes its mission in presenting the Bronx as unique, dynamic, fluid, challenged, resilient, and beautiful.

The Bronx is the northernmost of New York City's five boroughs and the only one connected to the mainland of New York. It is home to the world-renowned Yankees, world landmarks like the Bronx Zoo, and Bronx Botanical Garden. It is the birthplace and incubator of countless actors, actresses, musicians, celebrities, intellectuals, writers, businesspersons, and political officials. Bronx History is global history, which can shed light on many of the major American sociological and economic dynamics. While its historical timeline is vast and robust, for the purposes of my research the Bronx's cultural and economic progression beginning from the mid-twentieth century is foundational.

The Bronx in the 1950s possessed a predominantly immigrant European distinctiveness and diversity. Arlene Alda recounts the experience of a science writer-author and educator born in 1947 who recalls, "the Bronx was such a good place to grow up in because the boundaries were so fluid. The neighborhoods were mixed and so were the schools. People from different countries lived there, people from different socioeconomic levels. However, at that time, I personally knew few Hispanics and African Americans. In fact, at Bronx High School of Science, out of a class of 860-something there were only eight black students."[1] In Megan Roby's *The Push and Pull Dynamics of White Flight: A Study of the Bronx Between 1950 and 1980* published in the Bronx County Historical Society Journal, she posits the midpoint of the twentieth century comprised an overwhelming presence of white ethnics. Of roughly 1.45 million Bronx residents counted in the 1950 census, only approximately 97,700 identified themselves as "Black."[2] According to the *Bronx Data Center*, an additional 2,000 residents identified themselves as "other races." Just ten years and one census removed from 1950, 164,000 of the 1.42 million residents in the Bronx were Black, doubling in ten years. In addition to this change, the white populations in the Bronx decreased from 1.26 million to 1.08 million.[3]

The economic impact of war coupled alongside housing limitations and the segregated racial realities made the Bronx a seemingly viable place for settlement and resettlement for persons of color. Roby presses that, "The Bronx began changing demographically right after World War II seeing the first influx of black and hispanic residents into the South Bronx at that

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[1] Arlene Alda, *Just Kids from the Bronx: Telling it the Way it Was An Oral History* (New York: Henry Holt, 2015), 172.

[2] Megan Roby, "The Push and Pull Dynamics of White Flight: A Study of the Bronx Between 1950 and 1980," *The Bronx County Historical Society Journal* Volume XLV, Numbers 1 & 2 (Spring/Fall 2008): 34.

[3] *The Bronx Data Center*, Lehman College, 8 December 2008, http://www.lehma.cuny.edu/deannss/bronxdatactr/discover/bxtext.htm>.

time, as former residents of Harlem were attracted to The Bronx because of its rent-controlled apartments."[4]

In the 1960s, the major influx of people looking for dwindling jobs inevitably led to great economic challenges and stagnation:

> There was this dramatic rise of primarily people of color from the South, who were coming here to escape what we know today was a hard situation down in the Jim Crow South. To make up for that disparity, the city helped out with welfare assistance. You couldn't be married and qualify for welfare because the assumption was that, as a couple, one person could always find a job. You also got a benefit if you had children, so the City of New York was discouraging people from getting married, encouraging them to have children without getting married, and making it difficult for a person to earn a living if they in fact required welfare help. At the same time, if you were on welfare, where you lived was entirely up to the City of New York.[5]

Ada helps to underscore the intentionality and realities of housing segregation and its resultant constraints and effects. While the urban predicament is multilayered, here we are privy to the development of the systems that undoubtedly dismantle Black families and facilitate and encourage dysfunction. Harlem saw mass exodus to the north in the 1970s after the Vietnam War, which also assisted in the relocation of Blacks and Latinos from its own dilapidated conditions toward the Bronx.

The distressing conditions inevitably led to the rise of rampant drug use and the formation and development of gangs and corrupt activity. In addition to the increased gang violence in the Bronx, residents and business owners began to watch their properties burn at a rapid pace as landlords began to burn buildings in order to turn a profit from insurance companies. Whole areas of the South Bronx had essentially been burned to the ground, and residents and city officials were at a loss as to how to stop it. Many whites throughout felt that this physical destruction of the South Bronx represented the beginning of the deterioration of the

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[4] Roby, "The Push and Pull Dynamics of White Flight," 38.
[5] Alda, *Just Kids*, 187-188.

borough.[6] As a result, many white residents left the South Bronx for the private homes in the suburbs of Long Island, Westchester, and North Bronx. Those who did not procure private housing saw the North Bronx's Coop City as a white safe haven from the crime and deterioration in the South. While many attribute the South Bronx's deterioration to the presence of persons of color, Roby accurately renders, "many whites began to blame the new Hispanic and black residents for the increase in crime and drugs. While this answer to the question of crime was seemingly obvious for many, in reality, today many historians, and even former white residents, recognize that the causes of the increase in crime and drug use were extremely complicated and had a great deal more to do with economics than race."[7]

The 1980 census reveals that the white population dropped nearly 50 percent from 1.08 million in 1970 to only 554,000 in 1980. One resident recalls, "the poorer neighborhoods, with primarily people of color, were overloaded with kids. There were these meetings where they were trying to figure out how to achieve this balance of integration without bussing the kids out of their neighborhoods. It's important to remember that no one wanted the bussing plan. The schools in the East Bronx wound up being opposed to it as the schools in the West Bronx. So, ultimately, that whole thing didn't happen...the neighborhoods were changing and it was more a signal that it was time to move."[8] While the Black population did not increase dramatically during this time period (rising to 14,000 residents), many other ethnic groups appeared on the Bronx census for the first time such as Japanese, Koreans, and a diverse Caribbean and Central American Latinx contingency.[9] According to Evelyn Gonzalez in her *The Bronx*, these new

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[6] Roby, "The Push and Pull Dynamics of White Flight," 40.
[7] Roby, "The Push and Pull Dynamics of White Flight," 45.
[8] Alda, *Just Kids*, 186.
[9] *The Bronx Data Center*, Lehman College, 8 December 2008, http://www.lehma.cuny.edu/deannss/bronxdatactr/discover/bxtext.htm>.

ethnic groups, together with minority groups already present in the Bronx like Band Puerto Ricans, composed over two-thirds of the population of the Bronx in 1980, or 745,000 people.[10]

In Alda's *Just Kids from the Bronx,* Amar Ramasar, an "eighties baby," speaks of the rising ethnic diversity he experienced in the 1990s and 2000s. He lends, "in our neighborhood there was a definite ethnic mix. There were a lot of Puerto Ricans, a lot of Spanish influences, and a lot of Jamaicans. My mother is Puerto Rican, and my father is from Trinidad and Tobago. Our neighborhood was multicultural."[11] Alda herself presses, "the changing demographic of the borough over the years went from a predominantly Jewish, Italian, and Irish landscape in the earlier part of the twentieth century to the current majority populations of African Americans and Hispanics."[12]

The historic challenges of the 1970s and 1980s alongside a great lack of resources and felt abandonment of the Black and Latino communities inevitably assisted in the birthing and incubating of a new culture called hip-hop. The hip-hop culture and artform, which embodies an ethos of resiliency and creativity, comprises five main components: emceeing, deejaying, breaking, beatboxing, and graffiti. Other key pieces of the cultural essence are knowledge of self and community as well as agency. The Bronx is central in the formation of hip-hop, which arguably is one of the greatest influences on popular global culture today. Hip-hop is ubiquitous, and its progressive influences and expressions give significant reporting and insight into the experiences, sentiments, ethos, and theology of the subjugated.

The Bronx's makeup and landscape changed rapidly in the 1990s and 2000s. According to the New York State Comptroller's Economic Snapshot of the Bronx, since 2010 it has been the fastest-growing county in New York state, driven by immigration. Immigrants are a growing

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[10] Evelyn Gonzalez, *The Bronx* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004), 109-10.
[11] Alda, *Just Kids*, 274.
[12] Alda, *Just Kids*, 274.

presence in the Bronx, and now make up 37 percent of the total population (twice the share in 1980). Immigrants are also a large part of the borough's economic success, making up nearly half of the work force and 60 percent of self-employed entrepreneurs. The population of the Bronx increased by 26 percent between 1980 and 2017, reaching almost 1.5 million people, only slightly less than the record set in 1970. According to the office's 2018 report, the number of immigrants from Africa and Asia has risen sevenfold since 1980, and together they accounted for nearly one-fifth of the immigrant population. The largest concentrations of these immigrants were from Ghana and Bangladesh.

## 1.2: PURPOSE AND QUESTIONS

Some years ago, I was in a community leadership meeting where a woman, fed up with the deplorable state of a primary street in the community, asked "Are all these churches really necessary? I'm sure there are over forty churches on White Plains Road alone between 241st Street and Gunhill Road, and the community's a mess. Wouldn't it be better to have fewer churches and at least get some tax dollars back?" I wondered at that moment how someone could make such a statement knowing all that the churches have been involved in and how they helped to transition and preserve the community against all competing odds. I concluded at that moment that this woman must be unaware of all that the churches are involved in and their impact in the community. However, more importantly, there is a sentiment that the members of the body of believers in my area are not experienced as radical followers of Christ, who are lovers of God's beloved people and are interested in holistic transformation. Scripture resonated with me at that time: "Now that you have purified yourselves by obeying the truth so that you have sincere love for each other, love one another deeply, from the heart" (1 Peter 1:22 [NIV]). This caused me to

interrogate my own participation in loving God's people. Am I loving the people whom God has placed me in proximity to? Am I loving deeply? What does deep love look like?

Today, the Bronx comprises disproportionate educational, human, and capital resources, as well as degenerative systems that create a cycle of poverty and economic stagnation. Students and families of color are subject to curricula, practices, educators, and policies that neither serve nor honor their essence. The educational crisis is not a new phenomenon but has carried on throughout the decades and is inextricably linked to places and spaces of those who are impoverished. Again, its roots have been identified from early on. Urban planner Sam Goodman remits, "in the early sixties, as part of what was seen as the need to integrate grade schools in New York City, a pairing plan was established whereby underutilized elementary schools could be matched up with overpopulated elementary schools in other parts of the city. Buses would transport the students from one to the other. P.S. 70, which was my school, in the West Bronx was paired with an elementary school in the East Bronx and we all knew that the East Bronx had bad neighborhoods."[13] Failure to address the realities of the educational crisis will continue to impede the development of family, vilify students, increase the probability of incarceration, and deprive the world of its most creative and solution-based citizens.

People in the Bronx do not have access to healthy food, nor do they have agency over food production systems. Residents of color are crippled by a flawed healthcare system and lack access to both naturopathic medicine and traditional modalities for preventative wellness. Food sovereignty, alongside holistic medicine and adequate traditional healthcare would exponentially

[13] Alda, *Just Kids*, 186.

increase the quality of life and yield a culture of generational wellness and stewardship. Failure to address these problems will facilitate degenerative spiritual and physical biorhythms.

The "white flight" that forever changed the Bronx is still present today: changing economic times and racial tensions are causing many of those who left the Bronx and other New York City boroughs for the suburbs to consider leaving their newer strongholds today, as more minorities are entering their neighborhoods. Alda remits, "It is clear that the effects of white flight are long lasting and given the changing economic times, it is quite possible that we may see a sequel to the Bronx in the 1970s in the suburbs, as crime and drug use may escalate as people try to cope and get by in dire economic times."[14]

People lack access to affordable housing and land. Home and land ownership is the substratum for community engagement and sustainability. Lack of ownership by people of color within the communities they inhabit causes disengagement within the community as well as the political process. Brutal policing, lack of accountability, inhumane and unjust policy, as well as mass incarceration continually dismantle Black families and communities while creating longstanding and transferrable trauma.

Addressing agency and holistic redemption moves people toward economic development, encourages beautification, and fosters a sense of pride and safety. Failure to address these issues guarantees that people of color are persistently abused and dehumanized while the privileged benefit and profit from their mistreatment.

While the church of God shares universal hallmarks, each geographical community has its own unique makeup and subsequent realities. Each church is apt and poised to serve its particular context effectively. However, a faith community's failure to clarify its unique essence

[14] Roby, "The Push and Pull Dynamics of White Flight," 53-54.

and identity could inhibit its cumulative missional potential. Further, if intentional leadership cultivation and release are not at the forefront of the local church as well, our churches will become increasingly irrelevant in and to the places God has sent us. Apathy towards leadership development contradicts and resists the very mandate of God. A regenerated congregation is designed to cultivate a people who propagate regenerated communities. Mobilizing church membership and the greater community to be intentionally strategic and innovatively missional requires grace, gifting, wisdom, and an ability to cast and communicate compelling visions. Naturally then, the story of the Bronx and its subsequent realities frame additional questions around faithful engagement and practice.

SOME QUESTIONS:

- What and who should a Bronx church be considering as it seeks to minister amidst the contemporary realities while positioning itself for relevant ministry in the future?
- What methodologies should be interrogated, critiqued, and/or reframed toward faithful contextual theological and ecclesiological stewardship?
- What are the potential dangers of contextualism that the church faces?
- How does a faith community in the Bronx operate as a regenerated congregation that cultivates regenerative communities?
- What does hopeful thought and practice look like to the community in which the church has been placed?

The purpose of my research, expedition, analysis, and recommendation then is to provide a prophetic rubric and resource for the church that helps to exegete this particular context while shaping a congregational missional identity that connects eschatological hope to its contextual

compassionate needs. There is great uncertainty around our peculiar and particular missional identity. The missional component of our church has felt scattered and has lacked focus. While there has been a heavy emphasis on traditional global missions and missionary support, there has been less of a strategic galvanization to engage the opportunities for community redemption and transformation in light of the ills within the urban context. These considerations elevate the need for effective communication, prophetic preaching, and prophetic prioritization within the changing cultures towards enlisting and mobilizing the church for missional engagement.

## 1.3: DESIGN OVERVIEW

My research sequence is extremely important for the overall consideration. Chapter One will present my contextual position and framework as well as my research rationale, significance, and purpose. In Chapter Two, I will explore contextual and biblical theology as well as missional ecclesiology, exploring them individually as foundational considerations for faithful ministry. I will use African theology as a case study and interpretative tool to forecast potential realities and considerations of the present and fast-growing African contingency which includes similar sentiments of its diasporic presence in the Bronx. I will also highlight the experiences of colonial dominance and disregard, and the resultant sentiments of inherent distrust as present in African, Latino, and Native peoples both historically and contemporarily. I will frame the African cessation from mainline denominations as consideration for today in the absence of robust and inclusive theological examination and ecclesiological practice.

In Chapter Three, I will set forth a theology of hope and provide a biblical reflection on Liberation theology. Next, I will suggest useful features of hope in the Bronx, asserting the need for bona fide understanding alongside experiences of freedom and true agency. Furthermore, I

will emphasize the importance of a presence within the socioeconomic sphere as additional hopeful practice as Kingdom of God participation. I will conclude the section by again applying African theology as a way to consider a comprehensive Christology and faithful ecclesiology through alternate lenses.

In Chapter Four, I will highlight the great need for prophetic proclamation in the Bronx and submit the necessity of traditional Christian creedal confessions as a safeguard and platform for inventiveness. Significant time will be spent on the critical importance of hopeful preaching, its processes, considerations, function, and impact. I will conclude by suggesting five hopeful practices for a congregation in the Bronx fixing and focusing on reconciliation, holistic healing, communal togetherness, and socioeconomic and political engagement. In Chapter Five, I will present a healthy missional theology for the church universal operating within the urban context. I will highlight the importance of ethnicity as opportunity and not hindrance. I will submit a compassionate priority and engagement as paramount for the urban church today and beyond. Finally, I will affirm the necessity of faithful and prophetic preaching, concluding a hopeful theology with the need for a celebratory posture.

## 1.4: RESEARCHER PERSPECTIVE

I currently lead the Bronx Bethany Church of the Nazarene, an established fifty-eight-year-old congregation in the Bronx, a borough of New York City, while pioneering Vine Church of Nazarene, a church plant within a suburb of the lower Westchester section of greater New York. While my responsibilities span both the Bronx and lower Westchester, the Bronx here will occupy my research and direction.

Engaging the challenges and complexities of my unique area, wrestling with contemporary issues while grappling with ministerial theology, philosophy, and methodology is enduring work. It is paramount that I continuously dialogue and reflect on the organism that is the church. The Northeast Bronx is a densely populated and diverse community comprising African American, Afro-Caribbean, Caucasian, Latino, and growing West-African contingency. My local congregation looks to me in my pastoral role to provide ways to process the actualities of their particular struggles and to give direction on how to practically move forward together in mission as the church of God in light of those felt contextual realities. Hearing, processing, and tussling with the varied worldviews can shed more light on the past while providing fresh lenses to engage both the present and future.

At this juncture of my personal and ministerial life, it is critical for me to be in ecosystems that are varied and theologically sound, and to actively explore and critique the varying modalities for effective contextual ministry to be an impactful practitioner. I am passionate about the relevant and prophetic proclamation of the Gospel and helping to facilitate cultures that are responsive to God and relevant to the world. I also am deeply concerned about the Christian missional witness, particularly in the church's consideration of the most marginalized and vulnerable people.

## 1.5: RATIONALE AND SIGNIFICANCE

The North Bronx in particular has become a global hub. Although the South Bronx has historically been known for its population of Latinx peoples, their vast presence in the North cannot be combed over. Beyond identifying what is solely applicable ministry to Caribbean people, it is essential for ministry today and beyond to be cognizant of the immense dynamic

entrances and shifts of people groups. Native considerations become even more important in these times due to an awareness of and solidarity with Native experiences and philosophies which have heightened sensitivities toward indigenous peoples and their plight. Engagement with the global community and future casting requires a receptivity and an acuteness to process all the moving peoples, processes, and conditions that affect the community and will undoubtedly impact gospel proclamation.

While significant time has been spent identifying the inherent and historic challenges, there are just as many overwhelming opportunities in this time as well. According to *diversitydatakids.org* there are a number of transformative opportunities present in the North Bronx. There is space for congregational reshaping, faithful practice, and community transformation. Scripture reminds:

> Therefore, since we have been justified through faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have gained access by faith into this grace in which we now stand. And we boast in the hope of the glory of God. Not only so, but we also glory in our sufferings, because we know that suffering produces perseverance; perseverance, character; and character, hope. And hope does not put us to shame, because God's love has been poured out into our hearts through the Holy Spirit, who has been given to us (Romans 5:1-5 [NIV]).

I believe that, indeed, through immense challenges and suffering, there can be the production of persistence, the formation of Christian character, and the outpouring of transformative love.

# CHAPTER II: MAY I BORROW YOUR GLASSES?

Contextual and biblical theology will be surveyed in this section. The Bronx's dense and diverse ethnic composition critiques, interrogates, challenges, and sometimes rejects ideas and practices rooted in westernized Christian hegemony. An "American" faith rubric can no longer survive in a Bronx context of heightened skepticism, autonomy, and agency unless it considers the hopeful experiences, theology, and priorities of both global and North American indigenous communities. In this chapter, emphasis will be placed on African theology with a nod to Black theology as diaspora. Latin and Native American theologies will also be areas of attention, so as to underscore the experiences and contexts of underrepresented peoples. This can help to provide a biblical, hopeful lens of how God may be working in and through diversity. This chapter will begin with a discussion of contextual and biblical theology.

## 2.1: A CONTEXTUAL AND BIBLICAL THEOLOGY INTRODUCTION

It is critical to our exploration of both contextual and biblical theology to first describe them. *Context* can be defined as the set of environments, cultures, conditions, or facts that surround a particular event or situation. Further, it describes the space, time, feelings, sentiments, and factors, both spoken and unspoken, that lend to the totality of experiences. *Theology* is the study and analysis of God, divine things, and spiritual actualities. It explores the characteristics and nature of God, and the divine interactions of the cosmos and humanity. Gutiérrez, in his *Notes for a Theology of Liberation*, asserts that theology is both spiritual and rational knowledge, and emphasizes them as mandatory functions of all theological reflection.

B.A De Vries in his *Towards a Global Theology* recaps traditionalist sentiments that theology is *supracultural*; where context and culture lend little to no credence in the formation of

theology, exegetical interpretation, or forming a healthy ecclesiology. *Sola scriptura* as method presses that scripture unaided, transcends context and provides accurate biblical interpretation outside of the realities of culture and ecosystem. René Padilla contends that "if the central theme of the Bible is God's action in history, which reached its culmination in the person and work of Jesus Christ, then clearly it will be impossible to understand the biblical message apart from its original context."[15] De Vries himself concurs with Padilla and further states that, "even conservative evangelical and Reformed theology is influenced, at least to some extent, by culture."[16]

Beyond the theology and context, there is an interpersonal nature that cannot be overlooked. Both context and theology sit around and within the experiences and connectivity to humanity. Orlando Costas helps to explain that Christian theology is "not only a constructive and critical discourse on the God of revelation whom we know through Jesus Christ by the power of the Holy Spirit. It is also a contextual endeavor to interpret faith. The context of theology is not just the concrete historical, social, cultural, and religious reality in which the Christian community lives, confesses the faith, and reflects upon it. It is also the relationships that shape its theological sources."[17] Context and theology therefore must be integrative and fluid and cannot be disconnected terms and realities. The two work interchangeably to lend to a faithful understanding and experience. As Padilla shares, "the initial task of theology is exegetical, and exegesis demands the construction of a bridge between the interpreter and the biblical authors by the means of historical method, the basic presupposition of which is that the Word of God cannot

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[15] C. Rene Padilla, "The Contextualization of the Gospel," in *Mission Between the Times: Essays on the Kingdom* (Carlisle, U.K.: Langham Monographs, 2010), 105.

[16] B.A. De Vries, "Towards a Global Theology: Theological Method and Contextualization," *Verbum et Ecclesia* 37(1) (2016): 1-12 a1536, http:// dx.doi.org/10.4102/ve. v37i1.1536.

[17] Orlando E. Costas, *Liberating News: A Theology of Contextualization.* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2002), 7-8.

be understood apart from the cultural and linguistic situation in which it was already given."[18] Orlando Costas in his *Contextualization and Incarnation* offers that there is "no such thing as a timeless or non-spatially related knowledge, since knowledge is a fundamental part of life, which is, in turn, a complex, interrelated phenomenon."[19]

Contextual theology, therefore, is divine thought, method, and praxis that intentionally subscribe to context as interpretative method for exegesis and formation of theology, ecclesiology, habitus, and missiology. There is an integrative nature to contextual theology that refrains from processing theology in a cerebral vacuum. In fact, Padilla makes the point that western scholarship tends to lean to the understanding that the only culture that matters is the cerebral knowledge of the culture of the original audience and does not take into account "Primal Vision" that asserts that persons from a particular cultural background can both relate and interpret the intuitive nuances of scripture and thus its full interpretation. De Vries reminds us that, "after its initial use in 1972, Shoki Coe and Aharon Sapsezian developed the concept of contextualization, arguing that emphasis must be put on theological education in context as the only way in which theology can be truly evangelistic, namely, as a living encounter of the universal gospel with the realities that people face in their own settings (Schreiner 1976:678)."[20]

In Orlando Costas' *Contextualization and Incarnation,* he tells of theologians beginning to rediscover that the true nature of theology is reflecting on faith in the light of one's historical context. De Vries lends that "this is a task so staggering that many missionaries have not dared to begin, attempting 'to just preach the gospel' but, in actuality, also preaching the principles of their own culture. The gospel must be contextualized in dependence on the Holy Spirit for

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[18] Padilla, "The Contextualization of the Gospel," 105-106.

[19] Orlando E. Costas, "Contextualization and Incarnation," *Journal of Theology for Southern Africa* 29 (December 1979): 23–30.

[20] De Vries, "Towards a Global Theology," 1-12.

guidance and sanctified wisdom – there is no other option for intercultural missions or for gospel communication in a world of increasing religious pluralism."[21] In fact, "contextualization seeks to take the positive elements of indigenization and avoid the negative elements such as colonial connotations and is related to other terms that grapple with similar issues: adaptation, incarnation, possession and accommodation."[22]

David Kirkpatrick, in *C. René Padilla and the Origins of Integral Mission in Post-War Latin America,* brings into play and clarifies *misión integral* (integral mission) as an "understanding that posits that social action and evangelism are both essential and indivisible components of Christian mission."[23] Gutiérrez affirms Padilla: "theology is reflection, a critical attitude. First comes the commitment to charity, to service. Theology comes 'later.' It is second. The Church's pastoral action is not arrived at as a conclusion from theological premises. Theology does not lead to pastoral activity but is rather a reflection on it. Theology should find the Spirit present in it, inspiring the actions of the Christian community."[24]

The highly relational, communal, and integrative theology is rendered suspect if not "worked out" practically. It confirms and ratifies a good and true theology when love for neighbor is evidenced in habitus. Gutiérrez lends, "the renewed stress on charity as center of the Christian life has brought us to see faith more biblically, as a commitment to God and neighbor. In this perspective the understanding of faith is likewise seen to be the understanding of a commitment, an attitude, a posture toward life, in the light of the revealed Word."[25]

It is clear that the work of contextual theology yields a necessary understanding of Christian character and witness that is fresh and timely. It is central in ascertaining both

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[21] De Vries, "Towards a Global Theology," 1-12.
[22] De Vries, "Towards a Global Theology," 1-12.
[23] David C. Kirkpatrick, "René Padilla and the Origins of Integral Mission in Post-War Latin America," *Journal of Ecclesiastical History*, Vol. 67, No. 2 (April 2016): 351, https://doi:10.1017/S0022046915001670.
[24] Gustavo Gutiérrez, "Notes for a Theology of Liberation," *Theological Studies* 31/2 (June 1970): 243-261.
[25] Gutiérrez, "Notes," 243-261.

missional identity and engagement. Costas presses that contextualization of our theological reflection is essential because "the world demands it. It is especially necessary because this is what theology *should* be, and in fact *has always been, i.e.,* a contextual reflection on the action of God in history."[26] It is more evident today that God works within culture to magnify the width and breadth of his love and the unity that he desires of his church.

James Cone heavily underscores the need for contextual consideration rendering, "the importance of Scripture as the witness to Jesus Christ does not mean that Black Theology can therefore ignore the tradition and history of western Christianity. It means that our study of that tradition must be done in the light of the Truth disclosed in Scripture as interpreted by black people."[27] That is, we ought to be willing to let the contexts help shape our theology in understanding the magnitude of God's plan of redemption and renewal. To further, Lesslie Newbigin says that "true contextualization happens when there is a community which lives faithfully by the gospel and in that same costly identification with people in their real situations as we see in the earthly ministry of Jesus. When these conditions are met, the sovereign Spirit of God does his own surprising work."[28] Lesslie Newbigin's missional ecclesiology is useful for the contemporary church to form, process, and live out its missional identity. His core reflections and perspectives help the church to clearly understand the intent of God, humanity's relation to him, and in turn, the mission of God's people. By understanding the totality of the story of God, the church can bear a faithful and credible witness in leading through cultural clashes with God's kingdom, as well as navigating the assertions and realities of religious pluralism.

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[26] Costas, "Contextualization and Incarnation," 23–30.
[27] James H. Cone, *God of the Oppressed* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1975), 29.
[28] Lesslie Newbigin, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989), 154.

## 2.2: A MISSIONAL ECCLESIOLOGY

Conventional ecclesiology is the study and administration of the internal life of the institutional church – preaching and teaching, sacraments and worship, leadership, and church order. However, it has become more evident that ecclesiology not only lends to an internal organizational understanding and function, but should also frame missional identity and subsequent commitments. Relatedly, missional identity is an essential and dynamic discourse that forces Christian communities of faith to wrestle with and clarify both their unique contextual and shared universal ecclesiology. Michael Goheen, commenting on Lesslie Newbigin, asserts that Newbigin is driven by the "urgency of recovering our true identity so that we may truly serve God's purpose."[29]

Two important threads woven in missional identity tapestry are the *New Creation* theme and the *Missio Dei*. The biblical story gives us insight to the creation and blessing intention of God. Goheen stresses that "the gospel requires us to read the Bible as a cosmic story that begins in creation and ends with the renewal of creation."[30] This purview reveals God's nature, his values, and the reason for his engagement with humanity. Original intent is paramount in understanding individual and collective purpose. For Goheen, the Bible "finds its goal in the renewal of the whole creation; there, the purpose for the world is disclosed. Salvation is as wide as creation, and it is the restoration of the sin-corrupted creation back to its original purpose. That is the goal of universal history."[31] The role of Christ and the Kingdom of God are better understood and placed in enhanced context this way. According to Lesslie Newbigin, "the church may only be understood in terms of God's mission unfolded in the biblical story and its role in

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[29] Michael W. Goheen, *The Church and Its Vocation: Lesslie Newbigin's Missionary Ecclesiology* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2018), 3.

[30] Goheen, *The Church and Its Vocation,* 8.

[31] Goheen, *The Church and Its Vocation,* 27.

that history. It is not culture that gives the church its marching orders but God and what he is doing for the sake of the whole world."[32] However, Bosch reminds, "without a faithful and sustained contact with God the Church loses her transcendence. Without true solidarity with the world, she loses her relevance . . . . Christ is indeed the Head of both Church and World, but the world is not his Body. Only the Church is that."[33]

*Missio Dei* (Mission of God) features the sending nature of God and in turn the significance and realities of a sending and sent church. Jürgen Moltman renders, "if the church sees itself to be sent in the same framework as the Father's sending of the Son, and the Holy Spirit, then it also sees itself in the framework of God's history with the world and discovers its place and function within history."[34] Goheen contributes that, "the gospel, the good news, from God's own mouth, is that God intends to bless all nations, and to do so through Abraham and his descendants."[35] It is Christopher Wright, however, who lends even more appreciably that "the missional thrust of Genesis 12:1-3 is also ecclesiological. The origins of *the church* go back, not just to Pentecost, but to Abraham."[36] We can appreciate here Theodore Jennings' reflection in his *Good News to the Poor* that, "God is not in the business of changing names while leaving the things themselves untouched. God is not a nominalist. God really does transform, change, do."[37] There is therefore inherent oversight, misunderstanding, and misappropriation if ecclesiology is formed only from the inception of the established church.

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[32] Goheen, *The Church and Its Vocation,* 7.

[33] David Bosch, *Witness to the World: The Christian Mission in Theological Perspective* (Eugene: Wipf and Stock, 1980), 222.

[34] Jürgen Moltmann, *The Church in the Power of the Spirit: A Contribution to Messianic Ecclesiology* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1993), 10-11.

[35] Christopher Wright, *The Mission of God's People: A Biblical Theology of the Church's Mission. (*Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2010), 64.

[36] Wright, *The Mission of God's People*, 73

[37] Theodore W. Jennings Jr., *Good News to the Poor: John Wesley's Evangelical Economics* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1990), 141-142.

"The church finds its identity by participating in what he [God] is doing in redemptive history according to his command and invitation."[38] As Christopher Wright sees it, seeking first to view what God has done and what he is doing should be priority over any individual and communal desire for work, engagement, and programming. Failure to recognize the essentiality of these existential questions compromises missional identity. "The mission of God's people has to start and finish with commitment to the *God* whose mission we are called to share. It flows from the uniqueness of the God of the Bible, supremely revealed to us in the uniqueness of Christ." [39]

As a result, missional identity must be more than broad philanthropy and can never be divorced from or independent of the mission of God. "Truth comes as a narrative that reveals God through his mighty deeds and invites us to know him; it is a story in which God's redemptive work in history reveals his purpose and calls us to find our place."[40] Additionally, and of critical importance to Bosch, is the true understanding of God's election as responsibility. He contends that "the purpose of election was service and where this was withheld, election lost its meaning . . . election primarily conveyed neither privilege, nor favoritism, but rather responsibility."[41]

Renewal, evidenced in reconciliation, furthers the new creation motif. "God's people have been chosen to be reconciled to God, to each other, and to the nonhuman creation and to draw others into that reconciliation."[42] The Apostle Paul does well to remind us that God has "committed to us the message of reconciliation" (1 Cor. 2:5 [NIV]). This proves both distinguishable and instructive for a healthy and complete missiology. Cone lends that

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[38] Goheen, *The Church and Its Vocation,* 7.
[39] Wright, *The Mission of God's People,* 31.
[40] Goheen, *The Church and Its Vocation,* 21-22.
[41] Bosch, *Witness to the World*, 52.
[42] Goheen, *The Church and Its Vocation,* 31.

"reconciliation is that bestowal of freedom and life with God which takes place on the basis of God's liberating deeds . . . and to speak of reconciliation apart from God's liberating activity is to ignore the divine basis of the divine-human fellowship."[43]

For Newbigin, "the gospel is an invitation to believe, follow, love, and obey Jesus, and that means entry into his kingdom-community and costly participation in his comprehensive mission."[44] While it is easy to enter the story of God through the lens of personal existence alone, it leaves our ecclesiology and missiology fragmented at best. Goheen reminds that ecclesiology is "a matter of retrieving the comprehensive and public truth of the gospel, the Bible as the true interpretation of universal history, the role of the people of God in embodying and telling that story, and a proper understanding of and missionary relationship between God's people and their culture."[45]

*The Church from Every Tribe and Tongue* has emphasized global ecclesiological perspectives that have proven informative, accurate, necessary, and constructive for the church. Western influence, dominance, and interpretative authority on theological thought and practice have raised considerable flags and engendered great pushback from the global church. Green, Pardue, and Yeo's support and commissioning of global ecclesiological thought and scholarship through the reflection on the Constantinopolitan Creed has facilitated contemplation, distributed authority, provided recommendation, and formed praxis.

Ministry is contextual, and a solitary cultural interpretation, adaptation, and habitus are in opposition to the Christian mandate and call of God to be unified and unifying. Jesus himself prayed that his followers would be one: "I have given them the glory that you gave me, that they may be one as we are one – I in them and you in me – so that they may be brought to complete

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[43] Cone, *God of the Oppressed*, 210.
[44] Goheen, *The Church and Its Vocation,* 36.
[45] Goheen, *The Church and Its Vocation*, 3.

unity. Then the world will know that you sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me" (John 17:22-23 [NIV]). It is therefore possible for the people of God, encompassing great diversity culturally and otherwise, to find unity in their diversity. Kim synthesizes José Míguez Bonino that "the real issue of ecumenism and unity is not based on the tenets of our faith; rather, the real issue for ecumenical unity lies in the way the Church relates with the world in her mission."[46]

There are numerous examples of cultural diversity, theology, and ecclesiology that help us in the formation of our missional identity. It is Ruth Padilla DeBorst who brings the *misíon integral* to prominence—the "theological-missiological articulation and practice that seeks to engage followers of Jesus in linking the whole gospel to the whole life under the lordship of Christ in the power of the Holy Spirit so that the reign of God and God's justice may be made visible in particular historical contexts."[47] This global voice has not only brought its own contextual realities to the fore, but has consequently shifted the contemporary microscope toward the West for the West to also identify and grapple with its own ruckus. We see firsthand that the absence of such a voice or resurgence of ecclesiological reflection can leave the church deficient and unable to interpret the times and the context accurately.

In a very real and practical sense, it is the global indigenous perspective and experiences that lend fresh and credible eyes to ecclesiological interpretation and cultural adaptation. On African spirituality, Peter Nyende states, "African Christians believe and understand that the spiritual world is a constant interaction with the material world of humans and largely determines its fortunes. For this reason, African Christians, like the rest of the population, are alert to the

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[46] Simon C. Kim, *An Immigration of Theology: Theology of Context as the Theological Method of Virgilio Elizondo and Gustave Gutiérrez* (Eugene: Pickwick, 2012), 171.

[47] Ruth Padilla DeBorst, "Church, Power, and Transformation in Latin America: A Different Citizenship is Possible," in *The Church from Every Tribe and Tongue: Ecclesiology in the Majority World,* ed. Gene L. Green, Stephen T. Pardue, and K.K. Yeo (Carlisle: Langham Global Library, 2018), 43.

spirit world, if not preoccupied with it."[48] Here, we get a glimpse of the cultural, theological, and ecclesiological opportunities to present the gospel and engage not only the African residing in Africa, but also the diaspora present worldwide. Nyende continues, "thus, Hebrews ecclesiology, which has to do with a plane of existence not of the material kind, which those in Christ are now part of, finds hospitable ground in Africa. In consequence, it would readily appeal to African Christians and help them understand in African terms the nature of the church and provide guidance for their faith practices, thus contributing to the formation of authentic African Christians."[49] Beyond the use of such information as simply demonstrative or methodological, we see here that the voice from beyond is authoritative, in-tune, and necessary for philosophical varieties as well. The present-day mystic could benefit greatly from an African ecclesiology.

Gustavo Gutiérrez, deemed "the father of liberation theology," is another essential influence from the global church to the global church. His perspective on the poor and the systems that shape and prey on the marginalized have helped to formulate varying missiologies that continue to be struggled with today. Gutiérrez, and those like him, propose that the ministry of Jesus was approached from the bottom up as opposed to the top down, and conclude that the ministry of the church should follow suit per Jesus' modeling. Simon Kim renders, "since the starting point of liberation theology is to address the non-person, those who are considered insignificant and less than human because of injustices of society, and because the real work of liberation occurs on this level, it seems only appropriate for Gutiérrez to broaden his outreach to the poorest of the poor in his pastoral ministry."[50] We find that the theology and originality of Gutiérrez continue to be a reason for great challenge nearly fifty years later. In many ways it

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[48] Peter Nyende, "The Church as an Assembly on Mt Zion," in *The Church from Every Tribe and Tongue: Ecclesiology in the Majority World*, eds. Gene L. Green, Stephen T. Pardue, and K.K. Yeo (Carlisle: Langham Global Library, 2018), 151.

[49] Nyende, "Mt Zion," 151.

[50] Kim, *An Immigration of Theology,* 10.

thereby can affirm the need for such a perspective rejecting redundancy. As the West becomes even more populated and shortly dominated by the influx of the global Latino community, the church would do well to understand the nuances of the voices from the global margins.

There are seemingly many critiques of the global voices. Benjamin Valentin, commenting on Latino/Liberation theology, renders: "The kinds of institutional and structural social changes that theses theologies seek to foster, for the sake of their oppressed communities and others, cannot be achieved merely through local commitments; social transformation requires broad-based analysis and activism that transcends local confines."[51] However, despite all the critiques of Gutiérrez's liberationist slant, it is clear that he has added value to the universal church in shaping ecclesiology. The church benefits from the international voice, not as token, but rather as essential to the totality of a healthy theology. Underscoring the role of those like Gutiérrez, Kim encourages, "a Christocentric approach will allow us, as a people living in a specific moment of history in a particular locale, to use a unique hermeneutical lens to encounter both the historical Jesus and the Christ of faith."[52]

## 2.3: A CASE STUDY: AFRICAN THEOLOGY

Here I will explore the foundations of contemporary African theology so as to gain clarity in understanding its function, genesis, and development. First, I will survey the traditional West African indigenous tradition. Next, I will highlight the missionary impact, resultant African sentiments, and post-colonial critical theology. Finally, I will frame the rejection of mainline denominations toward the rise of African Independent/Indigenous Churches.

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[51] Benjamin Valentin, *Mapping Public Theology: Beyond Culture, Identity, and Difference* (Harrisburg: Trinity Press International, 2002), 82.

[52] Kim, *An Immigration of Theology,* 233.

## TRADITIONAL WEST AFRICAN WORLDVIEW

It is important to preface that African theology does not seek to synthesize the breadth of theological thought that spans the continent for the purpose of academic discourse. Rather, as Peter Nyende points out, African theology uses the Bible in dialogue with African cosmologies and culture for it to be a *Christian* theology with the goal and purpose to build and sustain African Christian communities in faith, ethos, and *cultus* (Nyende 2005:3–4).[53] Therefore, to arrive at a foundation for understanding African theology and the rise of African Independent Churches (AIC), we would do well to survey the traditional West African indigenous divine economy as well as the "basic context of interpretation of the Bible as therapeutic, protective, and granting success in life as emphases of African Indigenous Churches."[54]

Grasping the African indigenous hierarchy at a macro level is essential. Its structure and interface provide a lens for interpretation and understanding. Kodzo Mawusi in his research of the Ewes of Ghana shares that it "must be clear to us that religion forms the foundation and governing principle of their very existence."[55] David Adamo presents his Nigerian regional indigenous hierarchical structure as the following:

1. God (Olodumare)
2. Divinities (Awon Orisa)
3. Spirits (Awon Emi)
4. Ancestors (The Living Dead)
5. Kings, Priests, Chiefs, Queens, Rulers, Devotee

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[53] Peter Nyende, "Jesus the Greatest Ancestor: A Typology-Based Theological Interpretation of Hebrews' Christology in Africa" (PhD diss., University of Edinburgh, 2005), 219.

[54] David Adamo, *Reading and Interpreting the Bible in African Indigenous Churches* (Eugene: Wipf and Stock, 2001), 8.

[55] Kodzo Mawusi, *African Theology: A Comparative Study of the African Traditional Religion and Christian Tradition* (Victoria, BC: Friesen Press, 2015), 40.

The existence of God (*Olodumare*) is presupposed and is not argued in African indigenous religion. God is understood as creator and final authority, and divine interaction is experienced in all facets of life. Toward this claim, Adamo renders, "unlike the Eurocentric concept of God, He is not a philosophical entity."[56] Bénézet Bujo offers, "the novelty of Christianity for Africans did not consist in its proclamation of one God, but rather in the more complete and definitive proclamation of that one God, whom Africa already knew, and who is also the God of Jesus Christ."[57] Mawusi shares that among the Ewes of the Ghanaian region, the "Supreme God" has been common to African civilizations since before the coming of Christianity and Islam. He continues that, "there can be no basis for those who do not know anything about the continent, to continue their insistence that until Christian missionaries from the West showed up in the continent, Africans had no notion of the High God, the Supreme being whom the Ewes call *Mawugã*."[58]

The extensive list of names for God in indigenous traditions surely cannot be itemized all here. However, whether referred to as, "Olodumare" or "Orise" among the Yoruba, or "Chukwu" to the Igbo, God's vast naming affirms and substantiates both cultural importance and widespread belief. According to Richards and O'Brien's *Misreading Scripture with Western Eyes*, "words we use are a good indication of what we consider important. The frequency and number of words we have for a given thing or experience and its value in our worldview are connected."[59] Bujo lends that life is a participation in God, but it is always mediated by one standing above the recipient in the hierarchy of being.[60]

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[56] Adamo, *Reading and Interpreting the Bible*, 10.

[57] Bénézet Bujo, *African Theology in Its Social Context* (Eugene: Wipf & Stock Pub, 2006), 18.

[58] Kodzo, *African Theology*, 57.

[59] E. Randolph Richards and Brandon J. O'Brien, *Misreading Scripture with Western Eyes: Removing Cultural Blinders to Better Understand the Bible* (Downers Grove: IVP Books, 2012), 73.

[60] Bujo, *African Theology*, 20.

*Divinities* are locally adopted spiritual entities that are the embodiment of God with the functions of healing, protecting, and granting success in all human undertakings. The divinities have special functions assigned to them by Olodumare. *Spirits* are entities that comprise the entire world and are divided into various classifications according to their functions. *Ancestors* (also referred to as the "living dead"), are believed to have gone to a different world in spiritual existence with the function of communicating, guarding, punishing, and protecting the family from danger. The ancestor criteria are old age, honorable character while on earth, and renowned goodness. Ancestral engagement should not be overlooked by any means. It remains a cultural reality that must be dealt with. According to Jean-Marc Éla, "if the church does not recognize the cult of the ancestors, people will be forced to practice it in secret."[61]

In the tribe or nation, it is the chief, or king, who represents the ancestors. Kings and chiefs should not be regarded simply as wielders of secular administrative power. They are connected to their ancestors by a religious bond; they belong to the mystical body of the tribe.[62] *Priests*, with the permission of God, are assigned to divinities, spirits, and ancestors, and have a special connection with them. They are endowed with supernatural capability and trained in healing, protection, and success, with the expectation and responsibility of appropriating what they have been taught and gifted. For example, there is a strong belief in predestination where one's destiny has been chosen before birth. However, indigenous religion maintains that with prayer, "supernatural," and ritual actions, that which was predestined can be amended. As Adamo reminds, "success affects the totality of life and is taken seriously. All means are used to enhance success. Apart from hard work, medicine such as prayer, rituals, potent words, and faith in God are employed. All these, according to African understanding, are medicine."[63]

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[61] Jean-Marc Éla, *My Faith as an African* (Eugene: Wipf and Stock, 1998), 28.
[62] Bujo, *African Theology*, 20.
[63] Adamo, *Reading and Interpreting the Bible*, 86.

The term *medicine* may seem broad, but it is comprehensive and especially significant within African worldview and engagement. It is a non-negotiable that must be explored and understood to grasp the theological and ecclesiological implications. Adamo classifies African indigenous medicine into the three categories of protective, therapeutic, and success. He suggests that while orthodox medicine has been appropriated by Africans, the indigenous comprehensive medicinal explorations are still very much in use among African people. To define it, "African indigenous medicine is the use of anything, material or immaterial, explicable or inexplicable, which originated and transmitted from generation to generation in order to treat, to heal, to kill, to punish, obtain success or good luck and the general well-being of people."[64]

Western Christianity has conventionally classified African medicinal practices as magic and/or witchcraft, and therefore has dismissed the important contextual need for a holistic and therapeutic spirituality. Adamo presses that, "western missionaries taught African Christians to discard these indigenous ways of handling problems without offering any concrete alternative."[65] Ghanian scholar, Alex Quaison-Sackey concurs that,

> African medicine, too, was regarded as inferior; and if you were an African Christian, you were expected to seek help from the doctor at the hospital, not from the African herbalist, who had come to be styled the 'witch doctor' or 'medicine man.' And yet it was the herbalist who throughout the ages had cured our fevers and our diseases. His knowledge of local herbs could have been used in the development of curative medicine in Africa, but instead he was condemned, and no distinction was made between him and the trickster or 'juju-man', who preyed on our superstitious beliefs.[66]

Justin Upkong in his *Reading the Bible with African Eyes* underscores that Africans were not taught how to use the Bible as a means of protecting, healing, and solving the daily problems of life. Adamo speaks of the inability of the missional initiatives to meet the inherent physical and cultural needs of the African despite the building of maternities, dispensaries, and hospitals

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[64] Adamo, *Reading and Interpreting the Bible*, 15.
[65] Adamo, *Reading and Interpreting the Bible,* 47.
[66] Alex Quaison-Sackey, *Africa Unbound* (New York: Frederic A. Praeger, 1963), 38-58.

where orthodox medicine was dispensed. He renders that "those fortunate enough to have access to these hospitals and maternities, could not afford to pay for the cost of orthodox medicine while others who have access to this orthodox medicine and were able to pay for them still had problems of dealing with what they believed to be the source of the diseases, and misfortune, and they sought protection from what befell them."[67]

## 2.4: JUSTIFIABLE DISTRUST: COLONIAL IMPACTS WITH LATINO AND NATIVE AMERICAN CONSIDERATIONS

It is important to recognize the role Africa and Africans have played historically in the formation, engagement, and development of the New Testament Church, at least via the Kingdom of Axum, Egypt and North Africa, and the Alexandrian and Coptic churches. Lamin Sanneh in his book *West African Christianity*, recounts the significant influence of the region and asserts, "in assessing the historical importance of Christian independency in Africa we have to take account of the century or so of effective African agency before the arrival of imperialism and the essentially religious motivation of the men in the independent churches."[68]

For this reflection however, our focus will be on the colonial period and the missionary impact in that African theology and African Independent Churches undoubtedly have foundations in the protest and response to the colonial period, the missionary movement, and neo-colonialism. According to Sanneh, the reasonable and incontrovertible period from about 1450 to 1750 is the time Christianity was transported to West Africa. He maintains that "the Church became an adjunct of the commercial enterprise unable – except perhaps for Warri, the Congo, and Angola – to generate an independent confidence in its own message, and suffering

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[67] Adamo, *Reading and Interpreting the Bible*, 72.
[68] Lamin Sanneh, *West African Christianity: The Religious Impact* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1983), 169.

the side effects of sudden changes in the trading fortunes of the forts."[69] Mongo Beti describes Christianity as an import that took no account of the African religious tradition and was bound to be seen as nothing more than an element of the colonial system. To that end, Bujo affirms Beti: "most of the Europeans who came to Africa at the beginning of the colonial period did not do so with the idea of helping or 'civilizing' black people, but for the reasons of self-interest."[70]

Sanneh reminds that various means were used by the colonizers to subdue the Africans, which can be grouped under three headings: the drawing of frontiers, the manipulation of traditional chiefs, and the attitude to traditional religion.[71] In fact, "a Belgian handbook for colonial administrators for instance insisted that the work of civilization was not in the hands of the government alone, but also in the hands of missionaries, for religious teaching and religious institutions were of great importance."[72] Contrarily, some make it a point to not discount the legitimacy of those whose intent was neither colonization, control, nor ill-intent. In Robert Heaney's *From Historical to Critical Postcolonial Theology*, he affirms that missionaries were not straightforwardly colonialist agents.

To chronicle the establishment of Christian colonies in West Africa will not prove helpful for this particular consideration. However, it is important that we take note of missional activities by the Church Missionary Society and its related bodies in territories now identified as Senegal, Gambia, Guinea, Sierra Leone, Liberia, Ivory Coast, Ghana, Benin, Nigeria, Cameroon and Gabon. Also, for our purposes, *mainline denominations* and members of the Missionary Society need to be identified as well. These comprise Wesleyans, Quakers, Roman Catholics, Baptists, The Countess of Huntingdon's Connection, Methodists, Presbyterians, Anglicans, and

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[69] Sanneh, *West African Christianity*, 20.
[70] Bujo, *African Theology*, 39.
[71] Bujo, *African Theology,* 40.
[72] Bujo, *African Theology*, 44.

Episcopalians. While the gospel was touted as priority, it was experienced by Africans as a denunciation of culture and a denigration of personhood. Bujo notes that "it is hardly an exaggeration to say that the missionaries adopted an attitude of blanket condemnation of African culture in all its aspects. African converts were required to turn their backs on the whole of their tradition and the whole of their culture. Only then was it considered that the Christian faith had truly taken root in their souls."[73]

Kesteloot concurs with Bujo, asserting that "the colonial powers were not content merely with replacing the African social system with another. They had recourse to every available means to impress upon the black people, in word and in deed, that they were inferior to whites and, furthermore, that the inferiority was due to the color of their skin."[74] The confluence of profiteering and conspiracy coupled with the rejection of indigenous religious expression and culture would serve as the backbone for a critical theology. Marginalization, disenfranchisement, lack of agency, and the missionaries' inability to address the cultural and religious concerns deeply ingrained in African society were also principal in the construction of African theology.

Bujo renders that contemporary African theology arose out of the "feeling of black people that they had not been taken sufficiently seriously by white people, including missionaries. African theology therefore is the reaction."[75] Robert Heaney defines post-colonialism as a critical stance and language that gives voice to the marginalized. He makes special note that, "post-colonialism is not a chronological marker so much as an oppositional movement towards decolonization."[76] The movement began questioning the validity of faith that

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[73] Bujo, *African Theology*, 45.

[74] Lilyan Kesteloot. 1968. *Négritude et Situation Coloniale*. Yaoundé, Cameroon: Ctr de Littérature Evangelique, https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=lsdar&AN=ATLA0000251937&site=ehost-live.

[75] Bujo, *African Theology*, 49.

[76] Robert S. Heaney, *From Historical to Critical Postcolonial Theology: The Contribution of John S. Mbiti and Jesse N. K. Mugambi* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick Publications, 2015), 13.

proclaims freedom, but which has leaders and proponents who enslave and denigrate. Sanneh shares that "missionary confidence in the ability of Africans and of their equality in the Church had been considerably undermined by the racist doctrines of anthropology."[77] Heaney continues that, "any post-colonial analysis must take care not to simply outline the effect of the colonialists' action on the colonized but also take account of the agency of the marginalized."[78]

Not only was the consciousness and framework for pushback arising by those within the religious realm, but the movement spanned to African students and the diaspora. Following the renaissance of the 1920s, Bujo speaks of the Negritude movement of the 1930s led by Léopold Sédar Senghor, Aimé Césaire, and Léon Contran Damas, who were Africans studying at the Sorbonne in Paris, as critical to the awareness and particular rising consciousness of African authors. Although not theologians per se, they pioneered a movement of Africans who wanted to think and write as Africans. The West African region and the diaspora now began believing and seeking to contribute to their own comprehensive Christian expression. Africans, through the power of the Holy Spirit, could themselves critique their indigenous religion while celebrating and maintaining culture. There was no need for mutual exclusivity in totality. Africans, without the mainline denominational influence, could meet the deep spiritual needs that the African so long desired.

Further, as Africans, they possessed the ability to govern and administrate excellently, independently, and contextually. African scholarship was of value not only for the African but for the global community. Although theological training and development was housed in the West, Gosnell Yoke shares in his *Biblical Hermeneutics*, "the purpose of African cultural hermeneutics is not only to understand the Bible and God in African experience and culture, but

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[77] Sanneh, *West African Christianity*, 168.
[78] Heaney, *Postcolonial Theology*, 16.

also with the hope to break the hermeneutical hegemony and ideological stranglehold that Eurocentric biblical scholars have long enjoyed."[79]

## A NATIVE AMERICAN CONTEXTUAL EXPLORATION

In my exploration and examination of "sister" movements to Latin American Liberation Theology I have been led to examine Native American Theology, often also referred to as Indigenous or in some instances, Indian.

The context behind Native American Theology and its development is a particular movement of Native Christians to independently and comprehensively identify and engage the vastness and depth of God's love within the totality of creation, while honoring ancient identity. As a result of historic and intuitive theological spatial understanding, Native Christian methodology can provide poignant insight to subjects such as the Kingdom of God, cosmic harmony, eschatology, and liberation theology. Further, the movement seeks to interrogate, express, and reconcile the love of God as described in the Judeo-Christian scriptures through the lens of indigenous peoples who have endured inconceivable pain and subsequent brokenness at the hands of those who claim to be the followers of Christ. Randy Woodley highlights the contrast between "the Euro-American preference for orthodoxy, conquest, hierarchy, and a past-future Christology with Native American emphasis on orthopraxy, harmony, mutuality, and a present-centered Christology." [80]

The fifteenth century arrival of Europeans on western shores inaugurated an experience of terrorism, oppression, and disenfranchisement of Native Americans that arguably no other

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[79] Gosnell L. Yoke, "Biblical Hermeneutics: An Afrocentric Perspective," *Journal of Religion and Theology*, vol 2, no 2 (1995): 145-158.

[80] Debra Avery, "Shalom and the Community of Creation: An Indigenous Vision." *Interpretation* 67, 3 (2013): 323. Academic Search Premiere, EBSCOhost, http://0-search.ebscohost.com.kc-towers.searchmobius.org/login.aspx?direct=true&db=rfh&AN=ATLA0001967357&site=ehost-live.

ethnicity has been subjected to. George Tinker frames that, “Indian people only became cognizant of a need for “liberation” after the brutal tragedy of the European invasion and conquest generated the radical imbalance of the subjugation and genocide of the aboriginal owners of the land.” [81] Diabolic crusades massacred aboriginal peoples and plundered their land. The Christian church, both leading and standing complicit, intentionally dismantled cultural identity and practice while assimilating those who remained to a Eurocentric Christianity and cultural expression.

As a result of these historical and cultural realities, it became abundantly evident that the colonizer who mishandled scripture, misunderstood culture, and misappropriated in practice should not be the only source of theological interpretation and understanding. In fact, Native American Theology in many ways contrasts the White Euro-American worldview and exposes its theological limitations. Tinker lends that, “indeed for a White American to ask any Indian, ‘What is your word for God?’ immediately forces a near-fatal compromise in the Indian worldview from which it is difficult to recover. It presumes that whatever is the case in the tribal worldview, it must necessarily have an easy analogy in the colonizer English language.”[82]

The audience of the movement is two-fold, the primary being native peoples. The audience extends to and for the benefit of the global Christian community. George Tinker asserts, “it is this context of contact between Christianity and traditional cultural practices and beliefs that provides the backdrop for Native American debate over the nature and meaning of liberation theology.” [83] As Native culture and experience are interrogated alongside scripture, basis forms for robust and expansive interpretation and liberation as opposed to reasons for dismantling

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[81] George Tinker, *Liberation Theologies in the United States: An Introduction*, ed. Stacey M. Floyd-Thomas and Anthony B. Pinn (New York: NYU Press, 2010), 171. Academic Search Premiere, EBSCOhost, http://0search.ebscohost.com.kc-towers.searchmobius.org/login.aspx?direct=true&db=nlebk&AN=309339&site=ehost-live.

[82] Tinker, *Liberation Theologies*, 171.

[83] Tinker, *Liberation Theologies*, 171.

culture and validating oppression. Cone is helpful here as well as he submits, "Divine freedom is not merely an affirmation of the self-existence and complete transcendence of God over creaturely existence. It also expresses God's will to be in relation to creatures in the social context of their striving for the fulfillment of humanity. That is, God is free to be for us."[84]

The major theological themes of the movement are communal theology, spatial theology, and shalom theology. The communal, shared, and interdependent nature of the Trinity is central to the movement. Randy Woodley himself speaks about the "community of creation" affirming the realities of interdependence that exists in and between all things in creation. He accentuates the embrace of the "whole being greater than the sum of its parts." Individualism is rejected and frowned upon. In fact, beyond shared resources, communal theology suggests there can be shared concern and peace. Subsistence hunting and farming support this perspective, honoring all who live and have being. Tinker laments that the abandonment of the communal nature of Indian people for European individualism perpetuates Native genocide, strips Indians of their essence, and is biblically incorrect.

Spatial theology is critical in the movement as well. The Native American existence is entrenched and grounded in space and place. While Americans and Europeans are more concerned about the "when", Native theology and its value system is more concerned about the "where." Woodley renders, "Native American traditionalism is oriented toward a spatial cosmic paradigm; therefore, when Native Americans convert to Christianity, they often speak of theology in spatial, rather than temporal, terms."[85] Subsequently, the locational understanding of the Kingdom then emphasizes deeply the responsibility of preserving relationships with God, others, and creation in every sphere within the Kingdom. In fact, Native American liberation

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[84] Cone, *God of the Oppressed*, 128.

[85] Randy Woodley, *Shalom and the Community of Creation: An Indigenous Vision* (Eerdmans: Grand Rapids, 2012), 71.

theology is distinguishable in that it derives its imperative from a spatial archetype. Josiah Baker lends that, "whereas most Christian liberation theologies liberate societies by progressing toward future virtues, Native Christian liberation theology liberates by rooting societies in their surrounding environment."[86]

Shalom theology or "harmony way" is germane to the movement as well. According to Woodley, the Euro-American perspective looks to hope for a better reality that will be realized in the future. However, Native Christians focus on God's redemption and human responsibility in terms of cosmic harmony and locational peace. "Referencing Talmudic literature, Woodley describes *shalom* as the 'metanarrative' of the Torah, thus showing that God's intended life for his people is one of peace."[87] He speaks of the Harmony Way (shalom) as divinely given ways of communal peace to be lived out by community members. This means that negative sentiments, bad feelings, grudges, sicknesses, and material things can and should be shed to create harmony in all facets of existence, to create a pure communal path.

Josiah Baker asserts: "The cause of social justice and peace, in this manner, is connected with a theology of space by Native Christians. They argue that Christians are to be concerned with creation as part of their pursuit of justice because society, like creation, groans for liberation (Rom. 8: 22). What remains to be seen, however, is if such a locational basis for liberation can find its ultimate purpose as a restoration of relationship with God."[88] Spatial reality opens up the vastness of God and creates a deep appreciation and honoring of the present while seeing the land as sacred and worthy of redemption. Baker lends, "in liberation theology, they claim societies can only be liberated by re-establishing their relationship to their surrounding

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[86] Josiah Baker, "Native American Contributions to a Christian Theology of Space," *Studies in World Christianity* 22 (2016): 234–46, doi:10.3366/swc.2016.0158.

[87] Woodley, *Shalom and the Community of Creation*, 11.

[88] Woodley, *Shalom and the Community of Creation*, 11.

environment; in this way, creation is the basis for liberation."[89] While some may believe that an overemphasis could cause great challenges, I would argue that our underemphasizing has done the same.

Woodley suggests that though Euro-Americans look to hope for what is to come only, true eschatological hope does not only look to what is to come. Rather, it sees the "now" in the spatial paradigm as critically important to engage as well, particularly in the realm of liberation. Debra Avery asserts that "if we allow the indigenous gifts of intimacy, reciprocity, and harmony to push us beyond our deeply embedded constructs, then we may find much guidance and healing."[90]

## A SOCIO-POLITICAL EXPLORATION

I will highlight here three foundations in understanding contemporary secular religious challenges and will explore identification markers of a politically co-opted church. I will then survey the politics of Jesus and his truth-telling model for the church.

A foundational pillar for effective and prophetic preaching is to be keenly aware of context. Whether globally, nationally, or locally, God speaks to people within the actualities of their context to give way to God's preferred present and future. I use the realities of the structure and culture of the United States of America, as both case study and lens, to highlight the veracities of politics and society.

Central to understanding the U.S. "context" must be its history and constitution. Original intent and design do indeed speak volumes. Tracking the Reformation Era through Martin Luther, John Calvin, and Henry VIII illustrates how the defiance of Roman Catholicism's

[89] Baker, "Native American Contributions," 234–46
[90] Avery, "Shalom and the Community of Creation," 323.

lifestyle infringement in fact became an adopted practice of encroachment within Protestantism when power shifted in Europe. We see this transference in full view in the new world. Marvin McMickle notes, "Jamestown [Virginia] is noted for having two significant firsts attached to its legacy: it was the first British colony in North America to begin the practice of importing Africans for the purpose of indentured servitude and then slavery, and also to have an established church that specifically targeted Roman Catholics and all other dissenters for persecution."[91] This imposition, which carried into the colonial new world, led to a clear intentionality in ensuring there was no notion of a state governed by religion.

McMickle goes to lengths to remind that "the United States is not a Christian nation; it is a secular nation that protects the rights of all religious groups, as well as the rights of those who choose not to observe religious tradition at all."[92] While Christian fundamentalism would assert that the U.S. is a Christian nation, its designers sought to protect varying religious and non-religious lifestyles, neither promoting or enhancing any religious group, and abstaining from preferential engagements, therefore rendering such a sentiment inaccurate. Even churchman Roger Williams, founder of the First Baptist Church in Providence Rhode Island, propagated separation of church and state and thoroughly believed "that when the power of the state is used to advance the work of the church, the result is more politics and less true religion."[93]

McMickle, interpreting the First Amendment of the constitution furthers, "none of the laws or teachings of any religious text will be considered as the laws by which American society will be governed."[94] Differing religious thoughts and praxis coupled with non-religious and anti-religious opinions create contextual diversity in values and worldviews.

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[91] Marvin A. McMickle, *Pulpit and Politics* (Valley Forge, PA: Judson Press, 2014), 91.
[92] McMickle, *Pulpit and Politics*, 79.
[93] McMickle, *Pulpit and Politics*, 93.
[94] McMickle, *Pulpit and Politics*, 98.

APOLITICAL, PARTY-POLITICAL, OR BIBLICAL POLITICAL

Another important identification is the stance church leaders take in regard to the church's political involvement. Stauffer provides examples and assessments of clergy aligning with the mainline democratic and republican political parties, highlighting the reality of three Christian political postures. "It seems popular lore in contemporary American culture to assume that there are only two theo-political positions. According to the popular way of categorizing people, there are conservatives and liberals. If you are conservative, then you are politically and theologically conservative; if you are liberal, then you are politically and theologically liberal."[95]

Leah Schade inserts similar typologies to Stauffer but gives a better description, crediting H. Richard Neibuhr's *Christ and Culture* for his five-fold expanded designations. The Apolitical posture speaks of "a reticence to speak in detail of the deteriorating social, cultural, and political situation of the day…this narrowing of the content of preaching is achieved either by forgoing the consecutive exposition of the Word in favor of a diet of individual texts, by hyper-spiritualizing its content, or by refusing to follow through on certain more sensitive or controversial implications of Scripture."[96] Schade, reflecting on Niebuhr's *Christ Against Culture,* says: "these are the Christians who have separated themselves from the world in an attempt to retain purity by defining themselves over and against the culture."[97]

Stauffer's Party-Political posture is what Neibuhr deems, *Christ of Culture*. While Stauffer presses that "the partisan approach frequently substitutes addresses on relevant

[95] Mike Slaughter, Charles E. Gutenson, and Robert P. Jones, *Hijacked: Responding to the Partisan Church Divide* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2012), 43-44.

[96] Tim J. R. Trumper, *Preaching and Politics: Engagement Without Compromise* (Eugene: Wipf and Stock, 2009), 2-3.

[97] H. Richard Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture* (New York: Harper Row, 1951), 22.

historical-political/party-political topics for the exposition of the Word,"[98] Neibuhr renders that, "Christians are called not just to be fully engaged in the world, but to see their faith in Christ and their citizenship as seamlessly interwoven."[99] Stauffer contends that in this posture there is a "transfer of hope from the power of the gospel to the efficiency of party machinery. Accordingly, preachers have increasingly promoted one political party over another, and expected their hearers to vote accordingly."[100]

Stuaffer's Biblical-Political approach presses the preacher and congregation's role to be a political analyst who learns to discern how scripture applies to the contemporary situation. This is expanded again by Niehbuhr's notion of *Christ Above Culture*, where culture is still viewed positively but affirms that Christ and culture are different. "Thus, through the church, culture can be held accountable and even transformed. Great confidence is placed on human reason as well as the church to help followers move higher and higher in their upward climb to God."[101]

*Christ and Culture in Paradox* and *Christ as Transformer of Culture* round off Niehbuhr's classifications. Christ and Culture in Paradox offers a "realistic approach in working within culture, but also recognizes abject sinfulness within humans and culture that ultimately renders it hopeless as a source of goodness."[102] Christ as Transformer of Culture "causes believers to see how God is transforming the culture right now, and to be inspired to join in this great work. It is a more realized eschatology wherein we can see the people, institutions, and work that is revealing what God is up to in the world to bring about salvation."[103]

This diversity in theological interpretation and thought highlights the myriad of

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[98] Trumper, *Preaching and Politics*, 7.
[99] Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture*, 22.
[100] Trumper, *Preaching and Politics*, 8.
[101] Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture*, 22.
[102] Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture*, 22.
[103] Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture*, 23.

perspectives that may make up any single congregation or may be the sentiments of an everyday citizen. Such assortment lives against the secular realities, causing a holy dissonance. It is not only important to identify the constitutional nature of the context and the theological institutional implications of the context, but also the socio-economic experienced realities of all people within the context –particularly from the margins. Obery Hendricks Jr. provides great insight for those viewing the gospel, the life, and the message of Christ within empire:

> The truth is that the harsh social, economic, and political factors of Jesus' life as a colonial subject of the Roman Empire helped to shape the holistic spirituality that undergirded his earthly message and ministry. In this sense, the ministry of Jesus paralleled God's self-revelation in the Exodus event: both God and Jesus intervened in history in response to the cry for liberation of the oppressed people of Israel. And like the God of tyranny, he also asserted the justice of God as the basis for struggling to vanquish degrading social practices and oppressive political structures for all time to come. His repeated emphasis on the "kingdom of God," that is, the sole rulership of the God of justice; his unrelenting focus on freedom and liberation, on the right of all to have abundance in every sphere of inner life; and his ever-present concern for the poor and unprotected together constitute a platform for liberation that far exceeds in its scope even the most ambitious secular political agenda.[104]

It is reasonably argued that the foundations of the political divide are greed, materialism, and individuality. Stauffer himself uses Stanley Hauerwas to inject the notions of self-interest over the greater good for humanity. McMickle concurs by reminding of the historical pillaging and murdering of indigenous peoples and the enslavement of the Africans for the furthering and sustaining of the American economy. Cone imparts, "what is invisible to white Christians and their theologians is inescapable to black people. The cross is a reminder that the world is fraught with many contradictions – many lynching trees. We cannot forget the terror of the lynching tree no matter how hard we try."[105] Stauffer lends that "greed is thus rightly called a deadly sin because it perverts the possibility of a proper human relation to the Creator, from whom we have

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[104] Obery M. Hendricks, Jr., *The Politics of Jesus* (New York: Doubleday, 2006), 95.
[105] James H. Cone, *The Cross and the Lynching Tree* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 2011), 159.

received all that we need as gift. Greed presumes and perpetuates a world of scarcity and want – a world in which there is never *enough*."[106]

The socio-economic realisms have trickled down to set the stage for the political allegiances to usurp the call of Christ. There is more of a commitment to the *American Dream*. Stauffer wrestles with the nuanced private and public discussions about contentment and advancement, the relativism of what is too much versus what is enough. Therefore, there must be continued critique of egregious economic divides, racial disparities, and overall inequities rooted in greed and perpetuated by systems.

Marvin McMickle notes that "religion is strongest when it is able to exist and advance on the merits of its teaching and doctrines, and not when it requires the support of the state to maintain its buildings, clergy, doctrines, and disciplines."[107] He shares the example of the historical employment of the African American preacher who was sustained by the contributions of the local church and therefore could speak boldly and prophetically without fear of affect to income. Put plainly, the co-opted church is one that preaches and embodies allegiance to political structures and values, and actively takes sides without honest introspection and critique. The co-opted church is one that does not allow for different and dissenting voices to be heard and to exist within the community.

The co-opted church is by many accounts complicit, if disengaged, with the issues of justice and equity within the society. Schade draws from Lenora Tubbs Tisdale and finds similar findings: fear about hurting or dividing their congregation, fear about compromising their ability to effectively minister in their church, fear about receiving negative pushback for being "too

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[106] Clay Stauffer, *Preaching Politics: Proclaiming Jesus in an Age of Money, Power, and Partisanship* (St. Louis: Chalice Press, 2016), 44.

[107] McMickle, *Pulpit and Politics*, 94.

political," and fear about loss – loss of members, money, and their own positions.[108]

Obery Hendricks gives solid insight into the prophetic nature of Jesus within culture and context. He aptly and effectively parses the vocal nature of Jesus to the silence within our own context. He pushes, "when religious leaders of America saw the injustice coming from the White House, they should have addressed it by taking the prophetic stance Jesus enjoined upon us. They should have reminded our heads of state that our God is a God of justice, friend to the poor, a lover of peace, a demander of truth, a hater of exploitation and elitism and bullying the vulnerable." [109] Jennings underscores such a point rendering that "Wesley's sympathy for the poor and downtrodden, which governed his economic ethic, made it impossible for him to find sympathy for a rebellion of the wealthy and, from his point of view, oppressors.[110]

Hendricks highlights the economic agenda by paralleling Jesus' perspectives with both traditional conservatism and liberalism. Per conservatism, he starts by dispelling "orders and classes," pointing out that Jesus "preached to sweep away elitism and gross class disparity." [111] Next, Hendricks highlights gradualism, suggesting that while seemingly innocent, "some changes in society need to be rapid, if not immediate, as in cases of gross social injustice."[112] Further, Hendricks comments on the ill-treatment of the poor which implies "that the poor and needy are somehow to blame for their own plight, or that it is their natural lot in life."[113] He adds "one shortcoming of liberalism is that its stress on human freedom and human liberation can lead to self-indulgence, sometimes confusing freedom from oppression with freedom from personal moral restraints and watchfulness."[114] Another shortcoming of liberalism is that, "despite the

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[108] Leah D. Schade, *Preaching in the Purple Zone: Ministry in the Red-Blue Divide* (New York: Rowman and Littlefield, 2009), 21.
[109] Hendricks, *The Politics of Jesus*, 254.
[110] Jennings, *Good News*, 220-221.
[111] Hendricks, *The Politics of Jesus*, 275-276.
[112] Hendricks, *The Politics of Jesus*, 278.
[113] Hendricks, *The Politics of Jesus*, 285.
[114] Hendricks, *The Politics of Jesus*, 313.

nobility of its social concerns, in too many quarters it has lost its spiritual center and personal religious witness."[115]

According to Hendricks, the politics of Jesus can be summed up in love for neighbor as oneself and the will of God expressed through justice, righteousness, and steadfast love. Regarding justice, Hendricks asserts, "in its purest form, this ethic holds that everyone has the same inalienable right as anyone else to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness and wholeness; the same right of freedom from exploitation and oppression and every form of victimization."[116] Per righteousness, it is the, "loving and just fulfillment of our responsibilities to others as the ultimate fulfillment of our responsibility to God."[117] Cone asserts that, "the cross places God in the midst of crucified people, in the midst of people who are hung, shot, burned, and tortured."[118] Finally, Hendricks pushes that the third foundational ethic of Jesus is an unwavering love for God.

As we explore and connect missional identity and ecclesiology, we preserve God's original call to Abraham to be a blessing to the nations. As Wright reminds, "clearly not everything is cross-cultural evangelistic mission, but everything a Christian and a Christian church is, says and does should be missional in its conscious participation in the mission of God in God's world."[119] Therefore the ecclesiological goal of the worshiping congregation must be also to extend to spheres that diametrically oppose the *blessedness* of God. As a result, justice should be at the forefront of the hearts of the credible worshiping community. An ecclesiology devoid of it misses the essence and nature of God who makes all things new. "Justice in the Old Testament is not blind impartiality, but intervening to set things right, such that those who have

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[115] Hendricks, *The Politics of Jesus*, 313.
[116] Hendricks, *The Politics of Jesus*, 320.
[117] Hendricks, *The Politics of Jesus*, 320.
[118] Cone, *The Cross and the Lynching Tree*, 26.
[119] Wright, *The Mission of God's People,* 26.

been wronged are vindicated, those who are being oppressed are delivered, and those who are weak and vulnerable have their voices heard and their case attended to."[120]

## 2.5: AN ALTERNATIVE: RISE OF THE AFRICAN INDIGENOUS CHURCH

David Adamo asserts that African Independent Churches (AIC) are called such because of the belief that they walked out of the western mainline churches' control. They also gave them the name *Protest Churches* because of the belief that they walked out of the western mainline churches in Africa as a protest against an un-African Christian type of worship.[121] Per our earlier reflection, there are a number of elements that comprise western control.

In light of the mainline denominational exodus, there are elements that are attracting persons in droves to the AIC. First, it is important to remember that African agency was not a new phenomenon. Africans have a long history of leadership in science, mathematics, arts and therapy. Sanneh thus notes: "in assessing the historical importance of Christian Independency in Africa we have to take account of the century or so of effective African agency before the arrival of imperialism and the essentially religious motivation of the men in the independent churches."[122] Adamo contends that, "the most pungent reason given for becoming members of African indigenous churches is *cura divina*."[123] He goes on to name some key factors: divine healing, prayer, spirituality, evangelism, revival, flexible worship services, the elaborate role of women, the emphasis on the power of words, and the power of names.

There are a few more important factors, however, that have led to the rise of African Independent Churches. Sanneh links a turning point in history to the humiliation by the Christian

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[120] Wright, *The Mission of God's People,* 52.
[121] Adamo, *Reading and Interpreting the Bible*, 23.
[122] Sanneh, *West African Christianity*, 168.
[123] Sanneh, *West African Christianity*, 37.

Mission Society (CMS) of the Anglican Bishop Crowther, who was to lead a Niger mission of trained Africans in Africa in 1861. Crowther's vision of indigenous scholarship, leadership, and independent governance was met with a smear campaign and sabotage to maintain CMS control. Sanneh states, "the CMS allowed Crowther to be outflanked until the substantive powers he held as bishop were effectively curtailed, his priestly stature was diminished and the man himself was reduced to a sorry sight."[124]

According to Adamo, there are a myriad of reasons for the breaking away and rise of the independent church, but one such sentiment was that the missionaries were hiding the power of the Bible, and that such power would never be shared and would need to be independently discovered. In light of the totality of African needs not being addressed, and the realities of marginalization, it could only be deduced that there is an experience that Africans must explore themselves.

Second, there were also "national feelings, struggles for authority and leadership disagreement over finance, breaches of church discipline, polygamy, lack of adequate attention paid to dreams, prophecy, and healing ministry in both body and soul."[125] Sanneh suggests a few adaptations; the first, by breaking from European administrative control because "white control began to be seen as indispensable to the effective management of the Church, and Africans were consequently removed from positions of influence."[126] Third, interest shifted from institutional structures and administrative forms toward inner renewal and personal wellbeing. He shares, "the Charismatic Churches, therefore, combined the two fundamental elements of Christianity and

[124] Sanneh, *West African Christianity*, 169.
[125] Adamo, *Reading and Interpreting the Bible*, 82.
[126] Sanneh, *West African Christianity*, 168.

African culture in a way that advertises their Christian intentions without undervaluing their African credentials."[127]

Stephanie Lowery presents five main things that AICs offer Africans. First, divine revelation granted to the founder, underscoring God's active communication to his people today. Second, holistic salvation, which means the leaders can heal, cast out spirits, or provide deliverance from oppression, and so forth. Confidence in the salvation in Christ affects every aspect of life and reinforces the sense that God has the power and willingness to address their problems. Third, freedom from western control, and dignity as Africans. Fourth, more equality among men and women, and openness to women and youth who are gifted. Fifth, a heavy reliance on the Spirit's power, which may be "closely linked to a robust pneumatology and the Trinity than other models."[128]

The dynamic movement and communal nature of Africans have also proven vital to their departure from traditional western church settings. There is a fluidity and less regimented existence that cannot be encumbered. Malleability is important to the African. There is a rejection of the notion of universal fit due to the breadth of expression and varying contextual needs. Adamo agrees that "the static nature of the so-called mainline churches toward change contrasts badly over against the dynamic adaptability of the AIC. This adaptability is seen in their liturgy, choruses, and ritual innovations, their emphasis on the special methods in sharing, and caring, in situations of rapid social change, their method of healing, money saving, and money lending in situations of deprivation."[129] He continues that the "missionary/western ways of reading and interpreting the Bible is too foreign to meet the urgent needs of Africans. They are

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[127] Sanneh, *West African Christianity*, 180.

[128] Gene L. Green, Stephen T. Pardue, and Khiok-Khng Yeo, eds., *The Church from Every Tribe and Tongue* (Carlisle: Langham Publishing, 2018), 86.

[129] Adamo, *Reading and Interpreting the Bible*, 24.

down-to-earth in their belief, doctrine, and response to the problems of their African congregation."[130]

The first evident indigenous church formed was the United Native African Church in Lagos, Nigeria in 1891. As a result of "dissatisfaction with the dictatorial missionaries, foreign formalism which sometimes led to the quenching of the spirit, and against the foreign anti-African customs, laws, dancing, family, marriage, and etiquette, the African Church Organization was formed in 1901 and many prophetic figures emerged."[131] Here again is the deep frustration with, and rejection of, mainline influence that impedes on the very things that are the essence of Africanism. Cones' reflection on the African American cessation from the mainline white church is noteworthy. He states, "leaving white churches helped blacks to find their own space for free religious and political expression, but it did not remove their need to wrestle with God about the deeply felt contradictions that slavery created for faith."[132]

[130] Adamo, *Reading and Interpreting the Bible*, 37.
[131] Adamo, *Reading and Interpreting the Bible,* 73.
[132] Cone, *The Cross and the Lynching Tree*, 26-27.

# CHAPTER III: A THEOLOGY OF HOPE

The promised arrival of the Holy Spirit is a guarantee of hope. According to Colossians 1:3-5, faith in Christ and a love for God's people spring from hope. The Apostle Paul calls it the "*true message of gospel.*" The Word of God says that people can be filled with joy and peace as they trust God and overflow with hope by the power of the Holy Spirit (Romans 15:13[NIV]). This indeed is a truism not only for those in antiquity, but also for us who live today. Scripture says, "...we boast in the hope of the glory of God. Not only so, but we also glory in our sufferings, because we know that suffering produces perseverance; perseverance, character; and character, hope. And hope does not put us to shame, because God's love has been poured out into our hearts through the Holy Spirit, who has been given to us" (Rom. 5:2b-5 [NIV]).

Jesus' words of comfort to his disciples in John 14:1-4 are foundational pillars for a theology of hope: "Do not let your hearts be troubled. You believe in God; believe also in me. My Father's house has many rooms; if that were not so, would I have told you that I am going there to prepare a place for you? And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come back and take you to be with me so that you also may be where I am. You know the way to the place where I am going." (John 14:1-4 [NIV])

Jesus assures his beloved disciples that heaven is better than their current reality and that in the fullness of time, they will be present with him. We are to therefore keep before us that our true "citizenship is in heaven" (Philippians 3:20a). In light of this actuality, we, like the disciples, can also be certain that heaven is (and will always be) better than our now. This reality helps us in the potential of subscribing to an over-realized eschatology. We have been given assurance that we can be filled with joy and peace and overflow with hope, no matter the earthly

circumstance, by the Holy Spirit. We view perseverance and suffering differently. Christ's character will be formed in us, and hope will be realized. Moreover, our concern of feeling and looking foolish can pale in comparison to the experience of God's love being poured out into our hearts by the Holy Spirit.

While our heavenly hope is in the future day when the Lord will renew all things and make all things right, we live in hope and experience now a foretaste of the future to come. We can begin to experience righteousness (justice), peace, and joy now. We are not putting off the hope for the future but begin to live, experience, and practice hope now. Fanny Crosby's "Blessed Assurance" reminds us of both the more to come and the experience of the now. David Bosch lends, "Mission is faithful hope-in-action and therefore manifests itself in the patient impatience of hope…It does not mean hoping only for a new heaven, but also for a new earth – the first Christians expected both!"[133] This hope-in-action guards us from an under-realized eschatology.

The Holy Spirit has become the down payment now for the future hope. Paul writes to the Ephesians, "When you believed, you were marked in him with a seal, the promised Holy Spirit, who is a deposit guaranteeing our inheritance until the redemption of those who are God's possession—to the praise of his glory" (Ephesians. 1:13b -14 [NIV]).

The reign and rule of Christ, King in the Kingdom of God, has already invaded the world; he has inaugurated heavenly hope and the renewal of all things. Therefore, *Hope* people are citizens of the Kingdom of God who live in two realities. We live in expectation of what is to come and in active, continuous participation in the Kingdom of God. The Bible says, "For the Kingdom of God is not a matter of eating nor drinking but a matter of righteousness (*justice*), peace, and joy in the Holy Spirit" (Romans 14:17 [NIV]). These priorities are the concerns of

[133] Bosch, *Witness to the World*, 237.

Holy-Spirit-directed Kingdom citizens. Bosch is helpful here to emphasize divine dependence. He invokes, "it is precisely mission which should keep alive the hope for divine fulfillment of the Kingdom. Where the expectation of God's intervention withers, mission loses its true character, and eschatology is reduced to ethics. It then becomes either merely humanitarian improvement without a transcendent dimension, or a private affair where the concern is not with the renewal of the entire creation but simply with individual salvation, a living on after death."[134]

ESPN's *The Last Dance* traced the story of the historic championship Chicago Bulls' challenges and triumphs through the lens of the great Michael Jordan. They did not just hope they would change the course of history, but prepared, practiced, and participated in expectation of things to come. Similarly, we ought not live carelessly, nor aimlessly. We are not escapists, nor passivists. We are God's people who live in hope by participating in God's preferred future, before we reach the end of all things.

The Apostle Paul frames it well in Titus 2:

> For the grace of God has appeared that offers salvation to all people. It teaches us to say "No" to ungodliness and worldly passions, and to live self-controlled, upright and godly lives in this present age, while we wait for the blessed hope—the appearing of the glory of our great God and Savior, Jesus Christ, who gave himself for us to redeem us from all wickedness and to purify for himself a people that are his very own, eager to do what is good (Titus 2:11-14 [NIV]).

The Apostle Paul highlights a number of noteworthy salient points. First, Paul's use of, "in this present age" is intentional for those who may not see the priority of the present. In fact, we are not being taught only about what is to come at the culmination of all things, but how to hope now saying, "no to ungodliness and worldly passions and live self-controlled, upright, and godly lives in this present age" (v.12).

[134] Bosch, *Witness to the World*, 237.

Second, there must be a conscious rejection of the agenda of things that we are encouraged to be passionate about but are contrary to values of the Kingdom of God. The Kingdom of God changes our priorities. This rejection is of both personal ungodliness as well as societal ungodliness. Scripture says the Kingdom of God is more than a matter of moral rectitude but "righteousness (justice), peace and joy in the Holy Spirit" (Ro. 14:17). As Spirit people, we are particularly interested in full righteousness. James Cone shares, "To speak of history eschatologically is to speak of the promise of God's Word of liberation, disclosed in God's future, breaking into our present, and overthrowing the powers of evil that hold people in captivity."[135] It means that particularly now in times like these, we say "No" to suspect and misrepresented Christian character, and the priorities that are anti-Kingdom of God, and "No" to societal sins that are diabolic like classism, and the ugly effects of ungodliness seen in blatant racial discrimination, injustice, murder, poverty and marginalization. God's people should not shrink back, because God's design for our engagement is for now. Cobb says, "We would not have understood our personal need to repent of racism if it had not been so clearly shown to us that racism is far more than a personal problem. It has destroyed whole peoples in genocide, and it has psychologically degraded others. It is built into systems of oppression in which we participate."[136]

In considering the historic presence of African Americans and rapidly increasing Afro-Latino contingencies in the Bronx, we are invited and mandated to engage the work of contextualization in a fast and ever-changing landscape. Native considerations are also critical as a directional rubric towards a practical, holistic, reconciling, and harmonious participation. The Bronx has and continues to comprise a great population from the Caribbean. Mention must be

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[135] Cone, *God of the Oppressed*, 128.

[136] John B. Cobb, Jr., *Grace and Responsibility: A Wesleyan Theology for Today* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1927), 130.

made of Burchell Taylor and Garnett Roper whose scholarly work in Caribbean theology stands as both useful and poignant. However, my emphasis here is on African theology with considerations of Liberation, Black, and Native theology, due to ample overlap in their realities of experiencing biblical hope and important application.

Recently there was a major fire in the South Bronx that made national news because of the extent of the fatal devastation. Seventeen residents died suddenly while many others experienced serious injury. Unprecedentedly, thousands of mourners lined the streets to pay respects at the public funeral led by the community's imams at the Islamic Cultural Center. Anyone present would be in awe of the densely populated streets of West Africans, particularly in light of city-wide COVID-19 related social distancing protocols. Although the residents and those who died are predominantly Gambian, Caribbean communities are well able to identify and consider the nature, breadth, and implications of such a loss in both their American and global contexts.

While alternative housing in such a time may be the easiest to consider as a compassionate response, there are other immigrant and cultural similarities that the greater communities of color understand as diaspora. There are shared realities of the challenges of living through tragedy as undocumented citizens and shared understanding of various financial constraints, matriarchal and patriarchal responsibilities, the logistics of returning bodies to home countries, limitations due to the COVID-19 pandemic, and pluralist religious considerations, along with many others.

As Imam Sheikh Mussa Drammeh addressed the thousands gathered lining the streets to mourn and pray, he spoke of the slumlord conditions in the Bronx that required the use of space heaters which inevitably led to the horrid fatalities. He paralleled the conditions of their

immigrant community against the residents of Manhattan and said, "Bronx is a part of New York City too…and no one would have died if there was accountability for the deplorable living conditions we endure." Present were the newly elected Mayor of New York City, Lieutenant Governor, Congressmen and Congresswomen, and a host of other New York City leaders who offered condolences and promises of change.

## 3.1: A BIBLICAL REFLECTION ON LIBERATION THEOLOGY

It is a worthy exercise to explore and analyze the heart and response of God in Exodus 3:7-10 in conjunction with major themes and values of Latin American liberation theological movements. This familiar Exodus story recounts the enslavement of the Israelites by the Egyptians. Although the Israelite Joseph was once appointed a high-ranking official within the Egyptian administration, subsequent to his death his kinsmen were enslaved by the Egyptians and forced to become the workforce of the kingdom. They were made subject to deplorable living and working conditions, existed in abject poverty, experienced brutality and murder while enduring gross disenfranchisement and injustice.

This alien community's egregious mistreatment was evident to God and their cries for deliverance were heard. The Bible reminds us that the Lord said, "I have indeed seen the misery of my people in Egypt. I have heard them crying out because of their slave drivers, and I am concerned about their suffering" (Exodus 3:7 [NIV]). James Cone presses, "liberation is not merely a thought in my head; it is the sociohistorical movement of a people from the oppression to freedom – Israelites from Egypt, black people from American slavery. It is the mind and body in motion, responding to the passion and the rhythm of divine revelation, and affirming that no chain shall hold my humanity down."[137]

[137] Cone, *God of the Oppressed*, 140.

There are four salient points we should consider. First, God is aware of the deplorable conditions of poor, migrant, and immigrant people. Verses 7 and 9 tell us that God sees both the misery of the poor as well as the exact, intricate, overt, and covert ways of oppression. While man may see in part, God indeed sees the whole. This is a critical theme within the liberationist movement in that it speaks to God's preferential ear towards the poor and his deep concern with justice. Cone again lends, "God came, and continues to come, to those who are poor and helpless, for the purpose of setting them free. And since the people of color are his elected poor in America, any interpretation of God that ignores black oppression cannot be Christian theology."[138] Further, it mirrors God's unfaltering awareness, indignation, and objection to human suffering as a byproduct of the values of the empire. Gustavo Gutiérrez in his *Theology of Liberation* reminds that there must not only be solidarity with the poor, but also objection to the conditions in which they endure.[139]

Second, while verses 7 and 9 reveal for us that the agents responsible for the suffering of the Israelites were indeed the "slave drivers," it is Egypt that was also indicted as being both participant and complicit in the malicious acts and environments cultivated in the Israelite reality. This defines the inherent nature of the liberationist movement to both name and unmask those who are both perpetrator and accomplice. In this biblical story we not only see the overt manifestations of evil and injustice, but also the inherent call to name and unmask those diabolic systems that propel, encourage, and protect the culture of oppression and injustice. It can be said that in Egypt systemic injustice is identified and called out. In Bosch's *Witness to the World* he cites Richard Shaull: the church is "to be a source of dissatisfaction and disruption, calling attention to the problems, realities, and responsibilities otherwise ignored…The church as an

[138] Cone, *God of the Oppressed*, 126.
[139] Gutiérrez, "Notes for a Theology of Liberation," 247.

eschatological community is called to bring the future into the present as an explosive force, to be a sign of the power of reconciliation as it breaks down old barriers and overcomes old conflicts."[140]

Our purview continues as we bear witness to the intervening heart of God and his determination to care for the ostracized. Verse 8 shares the Lord's divine intervention and his commitment to justice and liberation. The Lord says, "so I have come down to rescue them from the hand of the Egyptians and to bring them up out of that land into a good and spacious land, a land flowing with milk and honey—the home of the Canaanites, Hittites, Amorites, Perizzites, Hivites and Jebusites" (Exod. 3:8 [NIV]). While there may be a notion that God is not concerned with the earthly living condition of his people, his commitment to adjust and amend Israel's earthly reality diametrically combats that assertion. Costas himself remits, "the good news of God's kingdom is vividly demonstrated and credibly announced as a message of liberating love, justice, and peace."[141]

The call of God and human participation in the divine work of liberation is expressed in Verse 10: Moses was sent to Pharaoh to bring the Israelites out of Egypt. Gutiérrez asserts that "Liberation, therefore, seems to better express both the hopes of oppressed peoples and the fullness of a view in which man is seen not as a passive element, but as agent of history."[142] It is the utmost privilege to be selected by God to be his accomplice in his salvific and liberating efforts in the world. Passivity is neither the call nor the luxury of the believer. According to Jennings, "Holiness does not only mean corresponding to God, but it also means standing over against that which is opposed to God."[143] Cobb submits that "God works not only by imparting

[140] Richard Shaull, "Towards a Reformulation of Objectives," in Norman A. Horner, ed., *Protestant Crosscurrents in Mission* (Abingdon: Nashville, 1968), 104, quoted in David Bosch, *Witness to the World: The Christian Mission in Theological Perspective* (Eugene: Wipf and Stock, 1980), 37.

[141] Costas, *Liberating News*, 62.

[142] Gutiérrez, "Notes for a Theology of Liberation," 247.

[143] Jennings, *Good News*, 148.

righteousness but also by awakening the will to justice on the part of the victims and to freedom on the part of the enslaved…we can therefore include liberation as an important aspect of salvation in a Wesleyan theology for our time."[144] It is noteworthy that Moses, an Israelite, is whom God chooses to lead his people. This reality rejects the notion that the liberation and release must come from outside instead of from indigenous leadership.

## 3.2: HOPE AS HEARD

A missional ecclesiology and identity are questionable if the totality of its formation is from the standpoint of the privileged or the elite. While John Stott reminds that "the mission is the global outreach of the global people of God,"[145] *global* must look out, but must also look within. The missional church listens from the margins, goes out from the margins, and comes back in. The margins should not be viewed as objects of charity, but rather integral pieces to be heard from and led by in the formation of a missiology. Goheen shares that "Christians who have embraced Christ have allowed themselves to be drawn into the western story as their ultimate allegiance and, like their unbelieving neighbors, have made peace with the relegation of their Christian faith to the realm of values."[146] The western story has and continues to perpetuate marginalization, and advances the values of the societal elite and the aristocracy. Cone suggests, "God came, and continues to come, to those who are poor and helpless, for the purpose of setting them free. And since the people of color are his elected poor in America, any interpretation of God that ignores black oppression cannot be Christian theology."[147]

The underserved and those who suffer provide voices and direction that are in keeping with

[144] Cobb, *Grace and Responsibility*, 31.
[145] John Stott, *The Contemporary Christian: An Urgent Plea for Double Listening* (Leicester: IP, 1992), 335.
[146] Goheen, *The Church and Its Vocation,* 25.
[147] Cone, *God of the Oppressed*, 126.

the God of justice. Carlos Siliezar submits that the unique love between the Father and Son should be central in ecclesiological expression. His Johanine interpretation suggests the "being of the church as a suffering community that loves the world, underscores its mission of reconciling the creation with its creator and redeeming diversity."[148] For Siliezar, the suffering community speaks poignantly and honestly to the ills of society. It can accurately assess the covert antithesis to the Kingdom of God while providing a rubric for the expression of God's redemption. Therefore, all the more, the voice from the margins, although difficult to hear, must be sought out and engaged by the church.

The African American experience and Black culture are essential in developing a missional identity and subsequent missiology, particularly within the United States. Historical disenfranchisement and marginalization have cultivated both a voice and *modus operandi* that frames the concerns of those on the fringes of society. Through overt and covert attacks, plots of the state, the assault on the Black family, health crises, mass incarceration, and what remains under the banner of systemic injustice, there is a slant and shaping of its theology and, in turn, a formed ecclesiology. Black preaching authority Frank Thomas reminds us that "African American prophetic preaching began with the highly contextualized socio-cultural realities of oppressed Black American citizens and, by not retreating from daunting issues of the public sphere, Black preaching sought to expose America's failed promises to its Black citizens." Cone reminds, "it is the encounter of the truth of black experience that enables black theologians to know that they must speak the truth to the people. To speak the truth to black people is to relate the story of our mothers' and fathers' struggles to present struggles and thereby create a humane

[148] Carlos Sosa Siliezar, "The Church as an Assembly on Mt Zion," in *The Church from Every Tribe and Tongue: Ecclesiology in the Majority World*, eds. Gene L. Green, Stephen T. Pardue, and K.K. Yeo (Carlisle: Langham Global Library, 2018), 112.

future for our children."[149] Katie Cannon remits, "it is because a few Black clerics dared to preach prophetically, many heard the promise of a new and hopeful future in their urban Promised Land."[150]

It also is critical to note Latinx and Liberation theology. Virgilio Elizondo, scholar, and vanguard, has contributed to the design and development of what is *mestizo*. Elizondo focuses his efforts on the dynamic ethnic and cultural mixing of groups within Mexican history, exploring the sociopolitical experiences and ideas of the North Atlantic indigenous peoples and the Spanish colonial influence. For Eliondo, *mestizo* is the wave of the future. Kim interprets by furthering, "the world's population is currently filled with biological, cultural, and social *mestizaje*. The lack of attention to this reality means that the majority of the world's population is not acknowledged, and their gifts are not utilized in society at large."[151] With the realities of the mixed nature of North American society, there is a reckoning that the culture cannot escape. In fact, it is reasonable to assert that divine providence makes escape impossible.

There is a difference between Elizondo's priorities and Gutiérrez's. Kim brings to the fore the differences between Elizondo's and Gutiérrez's definitions and focus on the marginalized:

> For Elizondo, they are the border-crossers on the frontiers of Mexico and the United States, who experience marginalization in two forms. Within Euro-American culture, Mexican Americans are marginalized as foreigners sometimes within their own land, while within Mexican culture, they are marginalized as not being "Mexican" enough because of their encounter with the English-speaking population. In contrast, the marginalized for Gutiérrez are the poor in Latin America who are the majority, yet who have no voice in society. The insignificant poor located on the fringes have an existence of voicelessness and subhuman conditions and an inability to become agents of their own history.[152]

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[149] Cone, *God of the Oppressed*, 28.

[150] Katie Geneva Cannon, *Katie's Canon: Womanism and the Soul of Black Community* (New York: Continuum, 2003), 116.

[151] Kim, *An Immigration of Theology*, 172.

[152] Kim, *An Immigration of Theology*, 175.

There are many misconceptions of Latino/Liberation theology. A primary critique is of its insular nature and aversion to participation within the global *whole*. However, Kim affirms that, "just as Jesus was divinely destined to generate new life from the margins, and just as he was able to come to terms with his status as an inside-outsider, Elizondo believes that similarly, Mexican Americans now find themselves in a unique position to advance a liberating mission not only for their own well-being but also for that of others."[153]

A common criticism of theology originating from the margins is that such theology perpetuates and supports separation. However, marginal theology rarely supports that claim. Theology from the margins is a gateway to reconciliation. Sunggu Yang reminds that Martin Luther King, Jr.'s preaching is "more than the celebration of God's victory over evil, but the celebration of the universal reconciliation between God and people and between the oppressed and the oppressors."[154] There is much to glean and appreciate from the fringes of society. "The reflections of theologians such as Elizondo and Gutiérrez have encouraged even those outside of their cultural and ethnic spheres to discover richness within the labeled impoverished and marginalized existence."[155]

## A TEACHING EXAMPLE

The foundations of the name of God revealed as Yahweh (the God who delivers) and Kenite influence can serve as a backdrop in tracing prophetic priorities. The Kenite hypothesis asserts that the worship of Yahweh was present with the Kenites of Midian. This hypothesis, first introduced in 1862 by F. Wm. Ghillany has become widely adopted. Gene Rice goes further in

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[153] Valentin, *Mapping Public Theology,* 57.

[154] Sunggu Yang, *King's Speech: Preaching Reconciliation in a World of Violence and Chasm* (Eugene: Cascade Books, 2019), 51.

[155] Kim, *An Immigration of Theology*, 233.

his historical, anthropological, and critical analysis to assert that Kenites (clan of Midian or priestly order of Midian) were most likely Africans, and the revelation of God as Yahweh to Africans can serve as an expectation of African theology today. Rice remarks, "most important of all, Israel came to know that Yahweh, the God of the Kenites, was a God who acts on behalf of the oppressed. There is a significant difference between the God of the patriarchs and matriarchs and the God of Exodus."[156] Rice goes on to contend that the Kenites were reasonably instrumental in cultivating the faithful interaction between God and Moses. "Not least of the legacies of the Kenites is their willingness to share their faith with others and their zeal for their faith when it was threatened. Jethro/Reuel cordially welcomed Moses into his family, rejoiced in what Yahweh had done in liberation from Egyptian bondage, initiated Aaron and others into the worship of Yahweh, and instructed Moses in the role of priest and the administration of justice."[157] There is the assumption that the Israelites adopted the worship of Yahweh from the Kenites, and that Jethro gave Moses instructions about the administration of justice and how to relate to Yahweh.

## 3.3: HOPE AS LIBERATION

Luke 4:18-21 cannot be ignored in the understanding of God's salvific plan and method through the personhood of Jesus Christ. This account of Jesus' own proclamation as the fulfillment of Isaiah's prophecy (Isaiah 61) frames Christ's vocation and marks the time of both spiritual and communal freedom and renewal.

> The Spirit of the Lord is on me,
> because he has anointed me

[156] Gene Rice, *Africa and the Bible: Corrective Lenses-Critical Essays* (Eugene: Cascade Books, 2019), 88.
[157] Rice, *Africa and the Bible*, 89.

> to proclaim good news to the poor.
> He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners
> and recovery of sight for the blind,
> to set the oppressed free,
> to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor.
>
> Then he rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the attendant and sat down. The eyes of everyone in the synagogue were fastened on him. He began by saying to them, "Today this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing" (Luke 4:18-21 [NIV]).

Christ's arrival not only speaks to the release of the spiritually broken and bound, but to those who are physically broken and bound. A healthy and faithful reading of scripture must connect Jesus' proclamation to Jubilee theology. Christopher Wright renders, "the jubilee was in essence an economic institution. It had two main points of concern: the family and the land. It was rooted, therefore, in the *social* structure of Israelite kinship and the *economic* system of land-tenure that was based upon it. Both of these, however, also had *theological* dimensions in Israel's faith."[158] To underscore further, Isaiah 58 critiques and condemns the complicit and unjust activities that the Israelites are inflicting on their neighbors. God labels Israel's interactions "chains of injustice" and "cords of yoke" while classifying those who are affected as "oppressed." Connectively, a failure to connect God's holistic liberation mishears Christ's proclamation. While this may seem elementary or lucid, it must be said and cannot be missed. It is noteworthy that the Lord highlights the spiritual activity of his people who are engaged in fasting and prayer and are unconcerned with the physical conditions of those amongst them. The Lord makes it a point to clarify that such a disconnected spirituality is neither what he chooses or what he is pleased with:

> Is not this the kind of fasting I have chosen:
> to loose the chains of injustice

[158] Christopher J.H.Wright, "Theology of Jubilee: Biblical, Social and Ethical Perspectives," *Evangelical Review of Theology* 41, no. 1 (January 2017): 6–18, Academic Premiere, EBSCOhost, https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=lsdar&AN=ATLAn4105437&site=ehost-live.

> and untie the cords of the yoke,
> to set the oppressed free
> and break every yoke?
> Is it not to share your food with the hungry
>
> and to provide the poor wanderer with shelter—
> when you see the naked, to clothe them,
> and not to turn away from your own flesh and blood?
> Then your light will break forth like the dawn,
>
> and your healing will quickly appear;
> then your righteousness will go before you,
> and the glory of the Lord will be your rear guard (Isaiah 58:6-8 [NIV]).

Hope therefore, must be centered in the reality of God's freedom through Christ and his mission of release from diabolical and unsanctioned systems that create and perpetuate spiritual and physical bondage. It includes freedom from classist and racist realities that facilitate human suffering. Wright suggests, "if all Israelites share this same status before God, then the impoverished or indebted brother is to be regarded and treated in the same way as God regards and treats all Israel, i.e., with compassion, justice, and generosity. So, the theology of Israel's land and of Israel's status before God combine to affect this very practical area of social economics."[159] As Jennings puts it, "holiness is transformed from an elitist to a populist project by the power of grace"[160] and God's grace "does not, then, provide a dispensation *from* holiness but serves as the capacitation *for* holiness."[161]

Jubilee theology not only frames ownership, stewardship, and relationship through socioeconomics, but even more to the bestowed divine right to freedom for all God's beloved creation, which is a priority for God. Jennings lends that John Wesley was "passionately committed to freedom of conscience and religion and, over time, came to be persuaded that

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[159] Wright, "Theology of Jubilee," 6–18.
[160] Jennings, *Good News*, 141.
[161] Jennings, *Good News,* 140.

slavery was an appalling deprivation of rights."[162] Not only should this be a realization of those considered oppressor, but it should serve as a reassurance and inspiration for the oppressed. Cone presses that, "liberation is not a human possession but a divine gift of freedom to those who struggle in faith against violence and oppression. Liberation is not an object but the project of freedom wherein the oppressed realize that their fight for freedom is a divine right of creation."[163]

A hallmark of experiential hope, therefore, must provide an impression of a God who not only desires freedom and intervenes for it, but also a God who bestows agency to the oppressed to desire and toil toward that end. This again must affirm that the source of hope is God; He defines it and gives it. Cone does well to remind us that "when theology defines the problem of suffering within the context of philosophical discourse, it inevitably locates the Christian approach to suffering in the wrong place…The Bible is the exact reverse. Its emphasis is on what God has done in Jesus' cross and resurrection to destroy the powers of evil and give the oppressed the freedom to struggle against humiliation and suffering."[164] Brian Stone further helps in his reminder that, "freedom is creative when I have a stake in my freedom, when I am a participant in my choices. Creative freedom is more than the mere exercise of options but the expression of who I am, complete with all my gifts and defects."[165]

Liberation and hope are at the center of the expressiveness in Black communal worship experiences globally and should never be interpreted as escapist or contrived euphoria. "Rhythm and dance point to the experience of liberation as ecstasy, that is, the ability of the people to step outside of their assigned place and to affirm their right to be other than what is now possible in

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[162] Jennings, *Good News*, 221.
[163] Cone, *God of the Oppressed*, 127.
[164] Cone, *God of the Oppressed*, 164.
[165] Brian P. Stone, *Compassionate Ministry: Theological Foundations* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1996), 25-26.

history."[166] Exuberance is present because the gospel, in the midst of deplorable conditions, reveals God's character and nature. The Lord revels in freedom. The Lord must act. The Lord has promised his presence. Cone again puts it best, "for black people singing, praying, and preaching are not grounded in any human potentiality but in the actuality of God's freedom to be with the oppressed as disclosed in the cross and resurrection of Jesus."[167] This is true exuberance. This is true fervor. This is hope.

## 3.4: HOPE AS AGENCY

The foundations of the African indigenous church are robust, historically rich, and deeply complex. This research gives a cursory peek into the factors and experiences from which African theology and the indigenous church derive. It must be reiterated that the goal of the theology (and the church) is to be found faithful and contextually relevant. Further, that culture—when embraced, interrogated, critiqued, and celebrated—is the means which God uses to meet and transform persons. As Peter Nyende lends, "authentic African forms of Christianity must be matched by fidelity to the Bible for African Christianity, that is, African biblical Christianity. The quest for authentic African Christianity must then be guided by biblical insight or else it will be left at the mercy of what is African, or what is locally expedient and pragmatic for the survival, sustenance, or growth of churches in African cities, towns, and countryside. Otherwise, it will even be at the mercy of ecclesiastical entrepreneurs who are simply out to make money through churches."[168]

It is easy to discount the indigenous church and categorize it as rogue or unstructured. What the research has revealed is that there has been much experience, consideration, prayer,

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[166] Cone, *God of the Oppressed*, 146.
[167] Cone, *God of the Oppressed*, 129.
[168] Green, Pardue, and Yeo, eds., *The Church from Every Tribe and Tongue*, 141.

heartache, and wrestling in the African Church. I appreciate Richards and O'Brien's reflection on cultural mores. They assert that "the best way to become sensitive to our own presuppositions about cultural mores – what goes without being said for us – is to read the writing of Christians from different cultures and ages."[169] The investigation proves that the African church has arguably withstood the most challenges and continues to endure. What has been interesting has been the posture that many Africans have taken in regard to their own persecution and willingness to endure until the end. In fact, Sanneh presses, "many Africans saw their slighted labor in the redeeming light of Apostolic example."[170] "It is not denied that there were, in the African cultural tradition, elements which had to be challenged by the Christian gospel. The failure was to distinguish between the positive and negative elements in the culture."[171]

Ample time has been spent on the effects of colonialism and how American Christianity has been subject to syncretism. There is, however, the potential of similar dangers in African, African American, and Native theology that potentially takes contextualization beyond the proclamation of the gospel in a given context to becoming reinforcement of cultural values. There is the potential for cooptation in these expressions as well. They can manifest in an over-realized eschatology and a prosperity gospel. There can be commitments solely to ethnically homogeneous communities in an environment where the Lord has given the ability for unity within diversity. There is the possibility of complete rejection of thought partners from dominant ethnicities because of a feeling of imposition of a skewed or flawed theology. Further, there can be a melding of cultural practices that are diametrically opposed to the radical call of Christ to discipleship and new life in Christ Jesus.

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[169] Richards and O'Brien, *Misreading Scripture,* 49.
[170] Sanneh, *West African Christianity*, 169.
[171] Bujo, *African Theology*, 48.

There must be however, an anchoring orthodox belief and rubric. While it can be argued that the Christian creeds serve as a theological and ecclesiological mainstay, it can also be argued that the creeds were predominantly crafted out of the European experience which again relegates power and influence and does not represent the global community. How can we know the nature of orthodox belief? How do we have the confidence that we are proclaiming the gospel in various contexts rather than using scriptural narratives to reinforce cultural norms? These are critical questions for us to ask and process.

While the potential of creedal rubric will be discussed more in chapter four, Elizabeth Mburu's "four-legged stool model" of application to biblical texts and recommendations prove helpful now. Mburu presents the model's emphases as: examining the parallels to African contexts; the theological context, the literary context; and the historical and cultural context, for faithful application to individual contexts.

The examination of parallels to African contexts is the perspective that theological and cultural contexts are the primary contributors to worldview. Therefore, socio-political, and geographical features are of great importance. The work of identifying and interrogating our own worldview will allow the interpreter to, "recognize where our assumptions do not fit with the text."[172] Theological context is the practice of understanding the theological emphases both biblically and systematically. The literary context seeks to identify genre, technique, language, and flow, while the historical and cultural context seeks to understand the mindset of the author as well as how the text was formed and shaped by the sociocultural, political and economic circumstances.

According to Mburu, Africans are still trying to imitate foreign ways when it comes to reading and interpreting and applying the Bible in our everyday lives; but the church can claim

[172] Elizabeth Mburu, *African Hermeneutics (*Carlise, Cumbria: Langham Publishing, 2019), 67.

early African interpretation.[173] While Mburu's interpretive method does not offer particularly novel interpretive thought, she does provide help and direction toward a rubric for contextualization through the work of Samuel Waje Kunhiyop. Kunhiyop renders a process toward an African intercultural hermeneutic that embraces contextualization[174]:

- Africans tend to have an inherently religious or spiritual worldview that is not lost when they become Christians.
- The philosophy and methods used in an African hermeneutic must address issues that are relevant to African Christians.
- An African hermeneutic must ground abstract thinking in concrete realities.
- An African hermeneutic must be comprehensible to all Christians and not just a select group of intellectuals. The goal is for millions of believers who live in Africa to truly understand the biblical text and apply it in their lives.

The Final Communiqué of the Pan-African Conference of Third World Theologians spoke pointedly about African theology, culture, and context:

> We believe that African theology must be understood in the context of African life and culture and the creative attempt of African peoples to shape a new future that is different from the colonial past and the neo-colonial present. The African situation requires a new theological methodology that is different from the approaches of the dominant theologies of the West. African theology must reject, therefore, the prefabricated ideas of North Atlantic theology by defining itself according to the struggles of the people in their resistance against the structures of domination. Our task as theologians is to create a theology that arises from and is accountable to African people.[175]

Mburu also notes that all conclusions regarding the text must be rooted in an understanding of the culture and worldview of the Bible. Only by understanding both African realities and biblical realities can one avoid the dichotomous approaches toward syncretism.

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[173] Mburu, *African Hermeneutics*, 4.
[174] Samuel Waje Kunhiyop, *African Christian Theology* (Nairobi: HippoBooks, 2021), xv-xvi.
[175] Kofi Appiah-Kubi, Sergio Torres, eds., *African Theology en Route: Papers from the Pan African Conference of Third World Theologians* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1979), 11.

Hope must include an understanding that the underrepresented, the minority, the disenfranchised must have a voice and should lead. There are ample resources that exist within the global community that can and should give the church direction. The voices from within have a way forward for both the church and the community. There is a sense that leadership and agency should be given. However, hope is sensitive to power dynamics and seeks to critique, release, share, and be led. True hope that resides within the mission of God understands that leadership and agency should be sought out, recognized, and submitted to. An asset-based approach to ministry presupposes God's presence and recognizes the inherent value within the unheard and discounted.

In Henri Nouwen's *Compassion*, he uses an illustration called the "Land of Fools and the Watermelon" to affirm that, "real, humble service is helping our neighbors discover that they possess great but often hidden talents that can enable them to do even more for us than we can do for them."[176] The concept of leadership and load-sharing that comes from within is important to a hopeful structure and hopeful sustainability. The Israelite story of redemption and God's leadership through the prophet Moses is helpful here. The Lord appeared and selected Moses (Exodus 3), an Israelite by birth, to be an agent of liberation and deliverance. While certainly the Lord could have used alternate means, he chose his agent of promise from within the Israelite people. Further, as Moses was faced with the burden of leadership and the realities of the formation of community and its governance, the Lord, through the counsel of Jethro, again chose from within.

> Moses' father-in-law replied, "What you are doing is not good. You and these people who come to you will only wear yourselves out. The work is too heavy for you; you cannot handle it alone. Listen now to me and I will give you some advice, and may God be with you. You must be the people's representative before God and bring their disputes to him. Teach them his decrees and

[176] Henri J. M. Nouwen, Donald P. McNeill, and Douglas A. Morrison, *Compassion: A Reflection of the Christian Life* (New York: Doubleday, 1982), 80.

> instructions, and show them the way they are to live and how they are to behave. But select capable men from all the people—men who fear God, trustworthy men who hate dishonest gain—and appoint them as officials over thousands, hundreds, fifties and tens. Have them serve as judges for the people at all times, but have them bring every difficult case to you; the simple cases they can decide themselves. That will make your load lighter, because they will share it with you. If you do this and God so commands, you will be able to stand the strain, and all these people will go home satisfied" (Exodus 18:17-23 [NIV]).

Eric Law's idea of decentralizing power through mutual invitation is also critical here. Hopefulness occurs in mutuality that is not controlled by the dominant force. Law's thought on doing justice in an ethnorelative way must be presented. He speaks of an "environment that allows people to interact with equal power and therefore redistributes power evenly."[177] Individual agency is not a stand-alone, but must be supported by a communal voice and prerogative. Communities of color are inherently relational and share that collective voice. Law underscores that "for people of color a monocultural gathering serves as a time to be in community to gain self-esteem in the context of the collective, and to gain strength before moving into a world that does not value who they are."[178] African American pastors historically understand their role as preacher, intermediary between God and congregation, but also as representative of the collective who is accountable to the collective. Black pastors are neither cavalier nor flippant about who is able to address their congregations, because the voices *from* the people and the voices *to* the people matter.

## 3.5: HOPE AS WITNESS WITHIN SOCIOECONOMIC AND POLITICAL ARENAS

Goheen reminds that "the business of the missionary congregation is to embody and tell the true story of the world, narrated in Scripture and centered in Jesus, in its own place and to the

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[177] Eric H.F. Law, *The Wolf Shall Dwell With the Lamb* (St. Louis: Chalice Press, 1993), 35.
[178] Law, *The Wolf*, 35.

ends of the earth, all to the glory of God."[179] A whole and healthy ecclesiology does indeed look at the totality of the biblical story and movement in the world to share in the renewal and renewing work of God. Wright concurs, "if we are in Christ, we not only share in the blessing of Abraham, we are committed to spread the blessing of Abraham."[180] It is easy to remain insular, to settle for comfort and miss the call of God. We see through our exploration of the varying subthemes that being missional is deeply sacrificial and drives us from our comfort zones. Wright again recaps that "the blessing of Abraham is self-replicating. Those who are blessed are called to be a blessing beyond themselves – and this is one feature that makes it profoundly missional."[181] The missional church, therefore, should first always ask and investigate the great renewal story of God, searching its context for how God could be moving uniquely and collectively there.

Today more than ever, the credible witness of the church is tied to its engagement in the socioeconomic challenges and realities of oppressed and subjugated peoples. Wright contributes, "even if we agree that the concept of sending and being sent lies at the heart of mission, there is a broad range of biblically sanctioned activities that people may be sent by God to do, including famine relief, action for justice, preaching, evangelism, teaching, healing and administration."[182] The new creation theme and Biblical narrative underscores a novelty that exists as a result of engagement with Christ. Today, a bearer of the presence of God not only speaks to the new life in Christ as personal salvation, but also in their enlistment into the broader scope of renewal and reconciliation of all things. Wright again argues that, "if our mission is to share good news, we need to be good news people. If we preach a gospel of transformation, we need to show some

[179] Goheen, *The Church and Its Vocation,*103.
[180] Wright, *The Mission of God's People,* 72.
[181] Wright, *The Mission of God's People*, 68.
[182] Wright, *The Mission of God's People*, 24.

evidence of what transformation looks like…the biblical word is, holiness, and it is as much a part of our missional identity as of our personal sanctification."[183] The totality of the message of holiness should be whole and holistic and rightfully so.

Engagement within the public arena is the natural byproduct of the community that seeks to love the vulnerable. While relief efforts are important, it is also the response to the systems that perpetuate injustice towards the margins that should be the case for the missional church. There are indeed faith communities that take on an apolitical posture in their faith. The apolitical posture speaks of, "a reticence to speak in detail of the deteriorating social, cultural, and political situation of the day…this narrowing of the content of preaching is achieved either by forgoing the consecutive exposition of the Word in favor of a diet of individual texts, by hyper-spiritualizing its content, or by refusing to follow through on certain more sensitive or controversial implications of Scripture."[184]

While this may seem to be a matter of prerogative for some, other faith leaders suggest otherwise. For Marvin McMickle, "this means that the pastor either embraces Robert McAfee Brown's idea of politics as a means of grace or employs Anthony Pinn's notion of bringing one's religious sensibilities to bear in shaping governmental policies that aid the most disadvantaged persons in society."[185] The life and engagement of Jesus provide a framework for expectations. Obery Hendricks offers this reflection of Jesus' interaction and appointment within the public sphere:

> The truth is that the harsh social, economic and political factors of Jesus' life as a colonial subject of the Roman Empire helped to shape the holistic spirituality that undergirded his earthly message and ministry. In this sense, the ministry of Jesus paralleled God's self-revelation in the Exodus event: both God and Jesus intervened in history in response to the cry for liberation of the oppressed people of Israel. And like the God of tyranny, he also

[183] Wright, *The Mission of God's People*, 30.
[184] Trumper, *Preaching and Politics*, 2-3.
[185] McMickle, *Pulpit and Politics*, 167.

> asserted the justice of God as the basis for struggling to vanquish degrading social practices and oppressive political structures for all time to come. His repeated emphasis on the "kingdom of God," that is, the sole rulership of the God of justice; his unrelenting focus on freedom and liberation, on the right of all to have abundance in every sphere of inner life; and his ever present concern for the poor and unprotected together constitute a platform for liberation that far exceeds in its scope even the most ambitious secular political agenda.[186]

In essence, Jesus did not shy away from political engagement. His words and actions were subversive to the societal norms and to the injustice present within the socioeconomic arena. The interface of Jesus with Zacchaeus yielded a willful restoration and reconciliation. "Zacchaeus stood up and said to the Lord, 'Look, Lord! Here and now I give half of my possessions to the poor, and if I have cheated anybody out of anything, I will pay back four times the amount'" (Luke 19:8 [NIV]). A life that once taxed and oppressed was now the beacon of God's justice and recompense. As Bosch reminds, "In both Old and New Testaments God reveals himself as the One who has compassion on the less privileged, the marginal figures, and the outcasts. He is the God of grace."[187] Brian Stone remits, "being poor and powerless, or standing with those who are, often has a way of bringing us closer to the truth of a situation than is available to those who see the world from the vantage point of the comfort and power they wish to retain."[188]

Barkely Thompson notes, "the politics of God is a narrative of liberation, peace, reconciliation and grace."[189] Jesus himself embodied a paradoxical nature that could not be relegated to one political side or another. He possessed the ability to be completely aligned with the will of God, often puzzling both those with him and those opposed. Hendricks shares, "the Gospel is not partisan, and God is neither a conservative nor a progressive. As Christians we

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[186] Hendricks, *The Politics of Jesus*, 95.
[187] Bosch, *Witness to the World*, 57.
[188] Stone, *Compassionate Ministry*, 13.
[189] Barkley S. Thompson, *In the Midst of the City* (Houston: Bright Sky, 2018), 19.

must not begin with our secular political beliefs, convictions, and commitments and then use the Gospel to prop them up. Rather, we must begin with the Gospel and allow the Gospel to shape our politics whole-cloth."[190]

Hope as witness, then, should concur with Niehbur's *Christ as Transformer of Culture* classification, as again it "causes believers to see how God is transforming the culture right now, and to be inspired to join in this great work. It is a more realized eschatology wherein we can see the people, institutions, and work that is revealing what God is up to in the world to bring about salvation."[191]

## 3.6: AFRICAN THEOLOGY: TOWARDS A CHRISTOLOGY AND ECCLESIOLOGY

Earlier, I explored the foundations of contemporary African theology and its prophetic priority so as to gain clarity in understanding its function, genesis, and development. I sought to survey the traditional West African indigenous tradition, highlighting the missionary impact, resultant African sentiments, and post-colonial critical theology. I framed the rejection of mainline denominations toward the rise of African Independent/Indigenous Churches. Here, I will explore the role of ancestors as foundation for and a pathway toward a new Christology and ecclesiology. Next, I will frame the African need for biblical interpretation towards usefulness so as to attend to the multifaceted and holistic needs of the people. I will conclude with a scripturally derived African prophetic priority and underscore the need for understanding and appreciating African indigenous theology.

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[190] Thompson, 21-22.
[191] Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture,* 23.

## SOME QUESTIONS

Tracing African ancestral engagement is critical in the understanding and development toward an African Christology and ecclesiology. Varying questions arise with the African's ability to recognize and reconcile the cultural role of ancestors alongside the Christian confession of monotheism and faithful practice. Ancestral recognition and communion are so pervasive and widespread that it is unavoidable. Jean-Marc Èla poses three major questions of the African that must be interrogated and processed responsibly: "How can we live and express our faith so that it becomes more than an alienating reflection of a foreign world which attacks our indigenous customs and beliefs? How can we live our faith so it will not marginalize and discredit our ancestors? Can the church become the place in black Africa where communion with the ancestors is possible?"[192] While some western influences render the cult of the ancestors problematic and conflicting to the Christian experience, others have framed it as *ancestral recognition* that is formative and necessary in greater theological experience and participation.

## ANCESTORS, CHRISTOLOGY, AND ECCLESIOLOGY

The existence of God (*Olodumare*) is presupposed and is not argued in African indigenous religion. God is understood as creator and final authority, and divine interaction is experienced in all facets of life. [193] Therefore, per Adamo's African divine hierarchy, ancestors can and should never be understood as replacement nor conjoined in worship. The very assumption displays a fundamental misunderstanding of indigenous religion and African culture. Adamo notes that "under no circumstances are the ancestors ever placed on a divine plane, which

[192] Éla, *My Faith as an African*, 14.
[193] Adamo, *Reading and Interpreting the Bible*, 10.

could be used to justify sacrifices given to them."[194] Anselme Titianma Sanon renders that "cult" among Africans connotes a dramatic celebration to summon a spirit or invisible being which could be completed by the sacrifice of an animal, but no such thing is rendered in ancestral recognition and communion.

An ancestor is not a general term ascribed to all who have died. Rather, it is a designation reserved for elders who have passed on who have been known to live God-fearing and upright lives within the social structure, clan, or family. Ancestral engagement is centered in "an understanding of kinship that also provides a vision of the world in which human beings are intended to transcend earthly limitations."[195] The ancestor, therefore, is not a separate entity. While a western perspective asserts the totality of the human being exists in sole personhood, Africans view themselves as whole when in communion with people and ancestors. According to Mawusi, "when one takes his or her time to study what it means to be a total human being, not only in the sense of an individual but as a communal being, then this will not be an issue to struggle with. What is unfortunate from the African perspective, is the individualism mentality of the West, which is destroying communal life and preventing people from being respectful of each other."[196]

Additionally, African cultures fail to refer to an ancestor as "dead." Rather, they are "departed," or "have passed on." It is believed the relationship with the ancestors consists of the belief that the deep communion established among the members of a family is not broken by death, but is maintained despite and beyond death, therefore nothing in this relationship is

[194] Éla, *My Faith as an African*, 17.
[195] Éla, *My Faith as an African*, 17.
[196] Mawusi, *African Theology*, 108.

contrary to the Christian faith."[197] He furthers that, "it is wrong for a Christian to suddenly cut oneself off from people within the clan or to renounce the bond of kinship."[198]

As an oral tradition, the cult of the ancestors is also the preservation of history, the formation and transfer of values to and for the generations. Oral tradition is centered in communicating, continuing, and passing from person to person as opposed to text to text. Oral traditions rely heavily on symbols, representations, places, and people to convey sacredness. Bujo describes the actions and rituals of the ancestors as their "written down" autobiography, an inheritance that is handed down to their descendants.[199] It is an engagement in which people are both relating the lives of their ancestors and also confronting their own lives with what these people did and spoke. J.B. Metz renders that through the appropriation of inheritance, the living turn it into a source of life for the next generation. He asserts that remembering and reenactment of the deeds of ancestors and elders is a memorial-narrative act of salvation designed to secure total community, both before and after death, with all good and benevolent ancestors.[200]

According to Éla "sacrifices offered cannot be considered idolatrous; but a recognition of the authority of the ancestor."[201] Ancestors are not worshiped but their descendants reflect their power. For example, among "pagan" peoples of Cameroon, the omnipresent funerary jar has a truly revelatory function whose purpose is to put one in touch with the ancestors. The jar is not worshiped, but serves a representative, proxy, and presence of those who have constituted the community's existence. Among other things, ancestors function as guides who remain linked to their families and continue to protect the living, caring for them and acting as their intermediaries, while receiving their respect, reverence, and solicitude. Agbonkhianmeghe E.

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[197] Éla, *My Faith as an African*, 20.
[198] Éla, *My Faith as an African*, 25-26.
[199] Bujo, *African Theology*, 77.
[200] Bujo, *African Theology*, 78.
[201] Éla, *My Faith as an African*, 23.

Orobator submits, "different times, especially during festivals and family ritual celebrations (birth, initiation, marriage, reconciliation, and so on), the living community pours libation and offers sacrifices to its ancestors to invoke their presence and acknowledge their membership in the communion of the living."[202]

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There are African cultures that will never offer sacrifices to the dead. Here we must make the distinction between sacrificial offerings and gestures asserting continued presence and recognition. "When people offer beer and food to the dead, they understand perfectly well that they are not 'performing a cult' to the dead, but instead reliving a kinship relationship with them, actualizing such a relationship once again in the living present. It is important to understand clearly that this is not a religious act, but rather a form of symbolic experience."[203] Differentiation is not the priority. Rather, a continued connection in all facets of life is paramount. Mibiti asserts, "When these acts are directed towards the living-dead, they are a symbol of fellowship, a recognition that the departed are still members of their human families, and tokens of respect and remembrance for the living-dead."[204] *Ubuntu,* the doctrine and approach to life that emphasizes social unity and generosity of spirit, rejects the individualistic, segmented and compartmentalized reality, and embodies a communion and commonality that invades, interprets, and instructs.

Conversely, there are cultures who do offer sacrifices to the ancestors which can cause conflict between the Christian faith and the African tradition. According to Éla, "it is important

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[202] Agbonkhianmeghe E. Orobator, *Theology Brewed in an African Pot* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 2008), 114.

[203] Éla, *My Faith as an African*, 19.

[204] John Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy* (New York: Doubleday Anchor, 1970), 76.

to note that if the ancestor is offered a sacrifice of atonement, it is because he represents the symbolic face of the father who knows all, who punishes and who rewards…the sacrifice offered to the ancestor as a token of atonement is in no case an act of 'adoration.'"[205] Essentially, the belief and engagement with ancestors can never supersede, replace, nor overshadow their lucid monotheism. Against this background, Ancestral engagement should not be viewed as worship, keeping Christian monotheism intact.

Can we reconcile maintaining a relationship between the living and the dead? Must it be reconciled at all? Must Africans break their relationship with their ancestors to be faithful believers?

## TOWARD A CHRISTOLOGY

Bujo considers the ancestor preoccupation a typical, anthropocentric, African "mode of thought" and contends to consider Jesus as our proto-ancestor. Proto-ancestor as the basis of Christology starts with God-fearing ancestors who have been ratified as a "good influence" and whose lives have been used as God wishes. The proto-ancestor motif, however, is not one-sided; it is rooted in both dimensions of the historical Jesus and the Christ of faith. Jesus did not only realize the authentic ideal of the God-fearing African ancestors, but also infinitely transcended that ideal and brought it to new completion.[206]

Bujo affirms that Jesus Christ, the present Word made flesh, is the privileged and unique place of the total revelation of humankind and contends that if Jesus Christ is the explanation of God, he is also the explanation of humankind. Therefore, Jesus makes all the striving of the ancestors after righteousness and all their history, in such a way that these have now become a

[205] Éla, *My Faith as an African*, 22.
[206] Bujo, *African Theology*, 80.

meeting-place with the God of salvation. Above all, Jesus Christ himself becomes the privileged locus for a full understanding of the ancestors. In these last days, therefore, God speaks to us through the Son, whom God established as unique ancestor, as proto-ancestor, from whom all life flows for God's descendents (cf. Heb 1:1-2).[207] African ancestors are not only taken up in Jesus Christ but are also transcended in him. We can therefore use the concept of proto-ancestor as the starting point of a Christology applicable for the African. Proto-ancestor should be understood beyond the prototype and model of morality to be imitated, but must see Jesus Christ as source of life and happiness, from which we bring to realization in our lives the memory of his passion, death and resurrection, making the Saving Event the criterion for judging all human conduct.[208]

## TOWARD AN ECCLESIOLOGY

As Christology goes hand-in-hand with ecclesiology, Jesus as proto-ancestor is founder, leader, organizer, and disciplinarian of the church. Communion with Christ, therefore, should be understood as crucial in African ecclesiology. Bujo submits that, "the Eucharist as the proto-ancestral meal must be the foundation-stone of a Church which is truly African."[209] Jesus Christ as proto-ancestor leads the African community through challenges in and toward faithfulness. The Eucharist framed through the ancestors brings appreciation, understanding and appropriation toward the function of healing. Bujo reminds,"it was through that dynamic force, which is the Spirit, that the Father raised the Son from the dead. It is this same joyful vital power, uniting Father and Son, and constituting the inner strength of the Trinity, which now creates a new community of the initiated 'clan' members. The Son, raised from the dead to a new life by the power of the Spirit, is, by that same power, constituted as Proto-Ancestor. He is now the

[207] Bujo, *African Theology*, 83.
[208] Bujo, *African Theology*, 87.
[209] Bujo, *African Theology*, 94.

source of that power and together leads the community as Church to fullness of life and eschatalogical completion."[210]

In Pope John Paul II's "Post-Synodal Exhortation" address to the African Bishops, the place of the ancestors in African culture was recognized. For the Roman Pontiff, African ritual or practice of veneration of the ancestors is not a paganism in nature or against the will of God. Instead, it reaffirms that African cultures have an acute sense of solidarity and community life.[211] Both Éla and Orobator identify the communion of the saints as central to understanding and appreciating the ancestral necessity in an African ecclesiology. Both cite the communion of the saints as Christian creed which was underscored by the Catholic Church's commitment to the commemorative liturgical introduction of the Feast of All Souls so as to parallel and ground the thought in historical precedence in relation to Chinese ritual.

A key component of the African rejection of mainline denominations and western theology is an inherent suspicion that western Christianity has willfully omitted or hidden a transformative experience of power or has been unable to access what could attend to the inherent holistic needs of the African. Bujo notes that Jesus, "in giving himself as food to those who believe in him, he becomes the life-giving grace which flows into all His descendants, the true 'life force' which Africa has always been seeking."[212] Further, "the Eucharist must not be treated simply as an object of contemplation. It is to be seen rather as the very life of the Church and the source of its growth."[213]

According to Éla, the Eucharist would express the mystery of faith by signs marked by local customs. Prayer would be more free flowing than a prescribed recitation and linked to the

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[210] Bujo, *African Theology*, 95.
[211] Mawusi, *African Theology*, 112.
[212] Bujo, *African Theology*, 94.
[213] Bujo, *African Theology*, 93.

totality of family, rendered by heads of families trained in ministry, and the ecclesiology would reflect both liturgical renewal and a genuine encounter with the values of non-Christian religions.

# CHAPTER IV: PROPHETIC PROCLAMATION

Here, I will investigate the importance of prophetic preaching for both societal transformation as well as shifting Christian congregational culture. First, I will examine the preliminary considerations of the spiritual, emotional, and physiological processes in preparing to preach prophetically. I will discuss the need for the herald to be one who listens as both biblical scholar and modern contextual exegete. Next, I will define and explore the phenomena of preaching as an opportunity for healing, teaching, persuasion, transformation, and assurance. Further, a look at the African American experience and celebratory technique will serve as a foundational formula to provide homiletical hope to and through the voices on the margins. Subversive preaching as a function will naturally resolve the investigation to include truth-telling, counter-cultural proclamation, immigrant considerations, and systemic injustice as bastions of the prophetic utterances. Further, I will submit an ecclesiological anchor towards methods and engagements that are paramount for both the hopeful proclamation and practices in the Bronx.

## 4.1: THE PREPARED PREACHER

The precursor to prophetic preaching is a preparation that is deeply spiritual, personal, academic, interactive, and faithful. There is much that leads up to the preaching moment that warrants both intimacy and authenticity. It is essential to view preaching foundationally as a spiritual gift. While Cox could be construed as seeing preaching as more method, Brueggemann, Voelz, and Thomas recognize it plainly as a gift. Thomas takes time to extrapolate and affirm preaching as a dispensation of the Holy Spirit, asserting, “preaching is a spiritual gift given by

the Holy Spirit to help the church proclaim and celebrate the good news of Jesus Christ."[214] He continues, "we preachers are junior partners and facilitators in the celebrative emotional process. We assist the Spirit, but the work is that of the Holy Spirit." [215]

Second, preaching is something to be experienced. In fact, "people rarely experience the sermon if the preacher does not experience it first. The preacher must prepare and shape the sermon and the preacher's self from the perspective of experiential preparation."[216] Cox is in step with Thomas: "good preaching must be applied uniquely to the preacher before it can be made public, thus allowing the power of the sermon to heal the messenger first."[217]

Third, preaching can be developed and improved upon. In times alone and in reflective study the preacher is to be impacted personally by the holy writ. However, there is a dynamic within the preaching moment that lends to further understanding, illumination, and participation of the agent. An impartation happens at the proclamation point that is beyond the private preparation. As per Thomas, "the agent does not dialogue with the tradition and the Holy Spirit in study or in the preparative moments alone; there is a dialogue going on in performance, and often the Holy Spirit and the tradition embodies itself in the audience, specifically in the call of response of the audience."[218] Yang cites Lischer's observation that "God is continuously in dialogue with humans and specifically gives the Word to the preacher, and when the preacher preaches, the whole universe helps the preacher to deliver God's word."[219] Essentially, the preaching agent is to also learn to listen while preaching.

There is consensus that the preaching event is beyond academic engagement and must include the essence of who we are as humans. Plainly, the preacher is not asked to abandon the

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[214] Frank A. Thomas, *The Like to Never Quit Praisin' God* (Cleveland: Pilgrim Press, 1979), 47.
[215] Thomas, *The Like to Never Quit Praisin' God*, 53.
[216] Thomas, *The Like to Never Quit Praisin' God,* 56.
[217] Richard H. Cox, *Rewiring Your Preaching* (Downers Grove: Intervarsity Press, 2012), 63.
[218] Thomas, *The Like to Never Quit Praisin' God,* 10.
[219] Yang, *King's Speech*, 12.

things that make him or her mortal. Rather, there is recognition of the opportunities and limitations of humanity. Listeners feel and move and are beings created in the image of God. People have emotional and physiological realties that are adjoined with varying worldviews that they deem canon. These realities and worldviews cannot be bypassed but should serve as the backdrop for a God who speaks contextually and in season. Brueggemann reminds that "there are no 'textless' worlds and people come to the preaching moment with texts already in hand that describe the world."[220] Similarly, Thomas himself agrees that, "the sermon must appeal to core belief through treatment of emotional context and celebrative emotional process."[221]

I stand with Brueggemann who shares concerning the responsive, assertive, and imaginative act of interpretation and renders, "in a culture that has learned well how to imagine – how to make sense of – the world without reference to the God of the Bible, it is the preacher's primary responsibility to invite and empower and equip the community to reimagine the world as though YHWH were a key and decisive player."[222]

It is incumbent on the preacher to be not only aware of the scriptural text to provide interpretation, but also keenly aware of the context in which he or she is called to serve and proclaim as minister. As Brueggemann puts it, "if interpretation is formed around what the text 'means,' students – seminarians, pastors, laypeople – are willing and able in various ways to let the text guide a redescription and reimagination of the public world in which they practice faith."[223] I widen his sentiment that in the absence of a clear understanding and accurate depiction of the public world, there will be inability to redescribe or reimagine anything new. As Thomas reminds, "experiential hermeneutics relates the exegetical message to the existential

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[220] Walter Brueggemann, *The Word Militant: Preaching a Decentering Word* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2010), 23-24.

[221] Thomas, *The Like to Never Quit Praisin' God,* 24.

[222] Brueggemann, *The Word Militant*, 148.

[223] Brueggemann, *The Word Militant*, 83.

condition of human suffering."[224] To present God as only transcendent and disconnected fails miserably in describing both His heart and purposes. The immanence of God (Emmanuel) forces the preparer to be vested, attentive, and interested in God's word in season.

Text faithfulness is paramount. It is a Spirit-led engagement through reverence and scholarship serving as guide for the agent. Handling of the Scripture must not be cavalier, but rather deeply understood to be the basis for reorder and grace. It is the preacher that presents the countercultural word of God humbly and faithfully serving as a reliable source. "The world of the gospel is not real, not available, until this credible utterance authorizes a departure from a failed text and an appropriation of this text."[225] There is great prospect to live faithfully to the text while giving it the space to breathe and speak. King believed that, "the preacher's first role is not to search for or even rediscover God – as if God were not known – but to re-represent God's self-manifestation through speech rooted in the Word."[226] Brueggemann asserts, "we characteristically resolve such daring rhetorical acts by killing or dissolving the text by source analysis, by identifying glosses, and by various maneuvers that destroy the artistic intent of the text, as though the text could utter only one thing at a time."[227]

There can be an inherent draw on the preacher to deviate from faithful interpretation to present new information to the gathered. "The preacher must pay attention to the ways in which the text and its interpretation participate in the process of alienation."[228] There are threats to improper exegesis that can inevitably lead to unreliability and even heresy. Brueggemann reminds that "the pastor is not the voice of newness nor the source of trouble. It is the text, in its own utterance, that is both life-giving and scandalous…when preachers reposition themselves

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[224] Thomas, *The Like to Never Quit Praisin' God,* 89.
[225] Brueggemann, *The Word Militant,* 27.
[226] Yang, *King's Speech,* 39.
[227] Brueggemann, *The Word Militant,* 38.
[228] Brueggemann, *The Word Militant*, 89.

vis-á-vis the dangerous text, congregations may also be repositioned for a listening they thought not possible."[229]

Against the background that the majority populous has already adopted a life-text that is devoid of God, it would do well in this post-modern realm to view Scripture as a *new text*. Brueggemann lends that "the sermon is not an act of reporting on an old text, but it is an act of making a new text visible and available."[230]

Prudency would warrant a definition of prophetic preaching to serve as the foundation of investigation and discovery. For this purpose, I will adopt the definition as Walter Brueggemann has coined it: "offering an alternative perception of reality and in letting people see their own history in the light of God's freedom and his will for justice."[231] It is therefore the empowerment, art, skill, and faithfulness to proclaim and assist in the shaping and reshaping as God sees and deems.

Restoration and repair are present in Scripture: each helps to affirm the role of prophetic utterance in healing. Ezekiel 37:1-6 speaks to a national contextual problem, the activity of the Holy Spirit, and a word from God that brought about both renewal and assurance. The prophet Ezekiel was presented with a circumstance and a new reality in light of that existence. Like Ezekiel's word in season, the prophetic preaching moment has the opportunity to mediate a word from God that mends and establishes that which was once broken. Cox contends that "hope offers healing for the here and now and continued healing for the future."[232]

Beyond the reality of personal healing, the preacher is granted the task of proclaiming a widespread message of consolation. Cox furthers, "when speaking of healing, most think of body

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[229] Brueggemann, *The Word Militant*, 45.
[230] Brueggemann, *The Word Militant*, 85.
[231] Brueggemann, *The Word Militant*, 116.
[232] Cox, *Rewiring Your Preaching,* 61.

healing and then possibly mind, but healing is much more inclusive than mind and body. The mind is healed, and relationships and communities are healed, while emotional pain and despair are replaced with hope and peace. Faith, which is the basis for spiritual healing, is enhanced with brain-based preaching."[233] While I am challenged by Cox's "brain-based" preaching assertion, I agree that healing is more robust and does in fact extend to relationships and communities beyond the personal. Voelz himself "sees the preaching moment as one of liberating transformation that brings healing not just to self, but to fragmented and broken communities and is ambitious enough to work toward the healing of socio-economic and political systems."[234]

Teaching modalities and pedagogy are consistently critiqued and scrutinized. I suggest that the role of the preacher-as-teacher is to remain a student. We are well aware by now that regurgitation does not equate to transformation; rather, the ability to think and process critically is the objective. As Voelz presents, "preaching-as-teaching encompasses more than just giving biblical and theological information to uninformed, mostly passive listeners."[235] Thomas, as advocate for celebratory preaching, furthers Voelz's sentiment by contending, "the experience of celebrative design is that people will recall and practice much more of what they have celebrated."[236]

I adopt Voelz' perspective on the preaching-teaching moment to "aim to enable the gathered community to approach life with critical thought, then act with emancipatory impulses and courageous love."[237] Freire's perspective on education is noteworthy and encourages the

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[233] Cox, *Rewiring Your Preaching,* 61.

[234] Voelz, Richard W. *Preaching to Teach: Inspire People to Think and Act* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2019), 10.

[235] Voelz, *Preaching to Teach*, 7.

[236] Thomas, *The Like to Never Quit Praisin' God,* 65.

[237] Voelz, *Preaching to Teach*, 9.

agent to "make teaching a practice of freedom, 'critical intervention,' and liberation, rather than a practice that reinforces domination."[238]

As the agent is engaged in the moment, it is important to resist the temptation to give resolve and finality. Thomas concurs, citing the popular preached text of *Uncle Wash's Funeral*. Brueggemann expresses the same sentiment, deeming it "unhelpful for the text interpreter, and therefore the preacher, to give heavy closure to texts because such a habit does a disservice to text and to listener, both of which are evokers and practitioners of multiple readings."[239] The true teacher creates opportunities and clears stages to critically think and change practice.

Finally, Giroux sees teachers as "reflective practitioners with the goal of empowering others to engage in critical thinking towards transformation…teachers are to make knowledge problematic; utilizing critical and affirming dialogue; and make the case for struggling for a qualitatively better world for all people."[240] "The preacher-as-teacher seeks to expose, examine, and help listeners assess the social, economic, political, and theological relationships that undergird daily life…it makes regular interventions into the lives of listeners to help them think in ways that empower them for transformative living."[241]

Persuasive preaching is a core function of the agent's articulation. While the preacher cannot enforce a particular behavior, the genius is in presenting the message of God in a way that both convicts and provides some level of movement and deeper commitment. As noted earlier, there is a total dependency on the Holy Spirit to present each message faithfully. In keeping with the Spirit's activity, Thomas trusts that "celebrative design has learned that if the preacher helps

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[238] Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (New York: Continuum, 2000), 73.
[239] Brueggemann, *The Word Militant: Preaching a Decentering Word*, 23.
[240] Henry A. Giroux, *Teachers as Intellectuals: Toward a Critical Pedagogy of Learning* (Granby: Praeger, 1988), 125.
[241] Voelz, *Preaching to Teach,* 9.

people experience redemptive past and/or a liberated future, then people have been offered the best motivation to behave in new ways."[242]

To ensure that this remains a focus of the preacher, it is encouraged that both a behavioral purpose statement and rhetorical strategy are employed as baseline rudiments. Per Thomas, these processes seek to keep before the agent the sermon function as well as the form of the sermon, through which the shift to transformed behavior will take place. Plainly, it is more likely to reach the goal of persuasion if it is intended from the onset.

I stress that the primary task is to give assurance of the completed work of Christ Jesus, which in turn causes assurance in all of God's promises. There is often the misconception that the prophet is designed to present judgment and wrath. Certainly, there has been ample evidence of this in scripture. However, the prophetic task is also to assure. In fact, it is arguably the main task in the proclamation of grace. Thomas notes: "preaching leads people to an intuitive experience of the assurance of grace."[243] He continues "it is the preacher's task to provide the assurance of grace rather than answers and certainty."[244] "Good news received as the assurance of grace will produce thanksgiving and joy, and this is the reason the climate of celebration is in and around every page of the New Testament."[245] "If we want people to experience rather than solely intellectualize the good news, then we must construct sermons that help people see, taste, hear, touch, and feel the gospel."[246] On the heels of this brief introduction to prophetic assurance, we would be wise to turn our attention to the African American homiletical art as the citadel of hopeful and grace-filled prophetic preaching.

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[242] Thomas, *The Like to Never Quit Praisin' God*, 65.
[243] Thomas, *The Like to Never Quit Praisin' God*, 47.
[244] Thomas, *The Like to Never Quit Praisin' God*, 83.
[245] Thomas, *The Like to Never Quit Praisin' God*, 41.
[246] Thomas, *The Like to Never Quit Praisin' God*, 56.

## 4.2: PREACHING HOPE: AN AFRICAN AMERICAN APPROACH

Frank Thomas speaks of the six characteristics of African American experiential preaching. As exploration of all six would prove too robust, I will introduce three: the idea of celebratory preaching, the need to provide hope within the preaching moments, and the need to hear the prophetic from those on the margins.

Celebratory preaching is again "completely dependent on the Holy Spirit and is neither arbitrary nor accidental."[247] At the core of the celebrative moment is existential exegesis and experiential preaching. There must be a deep connection and understanding of the times and an articulation that is far from abstract. Celebration employs the situation-complication-resolution technique. Although this construct may seem easy, it is no simple task. At the core, "the sermon, as a work of homiletical art, must place and sequence materials within the sermon so that they climax with a signature ending that is celebrative."[248] It includes style, but is beyond it. It is an intentional defiance of evil and an end that must conclude in hopeful celebration.

Thomas introduces "the first organizing principle of the emotional context of the celebrative sermon as the introduction of suspense."[249] There is to be a set-up, a plot, something must "thicken." Second is the resolution of that which was introduced through the lens and light of the gospel. "The third organizing principle of the emotional context of the celebrative sermon is the celebration of the resolution of the suspense."[250] "Once the gospel resolves the complication, the sermon shifts to the high moment, the apex, the zenith of the entire sermonic design – celebration."[251]

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[247] Thomas, *The Like to Never Quit Praisin' God*, 53.
[248] Thomas, *The Like to Never Quit Praisin' God,* 68.
[249] Thomas, *The Like to Never Quit Praisin' God*, 74.
[250] Thomas, *The Like to Never Quit Praisin' God*, 75.
[251] Thomas, *The Like to Never Quit Praisin' God*, 75.

Hope is the central essence of the African American experience and thus germane to its proclamation. There is not only identification with the oppressed but an expectancy and assurance of deliverance. This expectancy does not, however, absolve the preacher or hearers from involvement. Rather, it sees personal involvement and patient endurance as part of God's salvific plan. Thomas presses that, "the mission of the celebrative community is to proclaim that the dominion of death has been overcome and the dominion of God rules."[252]

It does not end there. Homiletical hope is not simply for the reversal of power; rather, this proclamation of hope is that of a renewed reality where harmony reigns supreme. Yang reminds, "King's preaching is more than the celebration of God's victory over evil, but celebration of the universal reconciliation between God and people and between the oppressed and the oppressors."[253] Yang continues, "the ultimate end of King's civil rights movement, beyond the triumph of the oppressed over the oppressors, was to effect this reconciliation."[254] King's interpretation of biblical hope was that every adversary could be we won over with love, and thereby redemptive hope was to be the goal of the prophet.

I concur with Thomas that all people, "universally possess innate worth, because they reflect the image of God."[255] The certainty is that disenfranchisement and marginalization are realities that are in direct opposition to such a statement. While it is the privileged and the powerful that create and propagate the platforms for speech and claim credibility, it is the messages to and from the margins that are prophetic and transformative. The *Magnificat* in Luke 1:46-56 depicts God's willingness to speak to the margins. It is indeed true that "what people

[252] Thomas, *The Like to Never Quit Praisin' God*, 42.
[253] Yang, *King's Speech,* 51.
[254] Yang, *King's Speech*, 15.
[255] Yang, *King's Speech,* 42.

have thought was a problem of scarcity becomes instead an opportunity to reveal God's abundance."[256]

Not only does God speak to the margins, but the prophetic voice also arises from the margins to speak to the suffering, ostracism, and perpetrators of evil. Thomas reminds, "African American prophetic preaching began with the highly contextualized socio-cultural realities of oppressed Black American citizens and, by not retreating from daunting issues of the public sphere, prophetic Black preaching sought to expose America's failed promises to its Black citizens. It is because a few Black clerics dared to preach prophetically, many heard the promise of a new and hopeful future in their urban Promised Land."[257]

It seems a bold assertion to consider the preacher as a transformative intellectual. However, Voelz argues just that and more. "The preacher-as-teacher as a public or transformative intellectual uses the sermon as an exercise in critical thinking in order to help the faithful exercise their agency in and beyond the ecclesial sphere."[258] This perspective sets the framework for a message and proclamation that is both global and universal. Simply, the prophetic preacher is not only a voice to the initiated but for those who are a far way off. Therefore, I agree whole-heartedly with Voelz that, "preaching is a communicative event that seeks to construct a vision for the public sphere beyond ecclesial gatherings."[259]

Prophetic proclamation, while necessary for the church, must embrace its nature to speak truth to power, reminding both leaders and systems of the values and justice of God. According to Yang, "King's God had to be universal enough to embrace the whole American socio-political and cultural reality."[260]

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[256] L. Gregory Jones, *Christian Social Innovation* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2016), 16.
[257] Cannon, *Katie's Canon*, 116.
[258] Voelz, *Preaching to Teach,* 9.
[259] Voelz, *Preaching to Teach*, 23.
[260] Yang, *King's Speech*, 25.

SUBVERSIVE PREACHING

I define *subversion* as undermining the principles of, to corrupt or disrupt with intentionality. It can be said that the messages of the dominant culture are designed to subvert the purposes of God, or that the intent of the prophetic proclamation is to subvert the dominant anti-Christian culture. Brueggemann leans more to the latter, furthering that "preachers and congregations will have to learn again that the news entrusted to us does not conform to a fearful moralism or to a brazen globalism."[261] It is therefore paramount for the agent to understand the magnitude of hostility the herald will encounter as a result of faithful and prophetic proclamation. Brueggemann also shares the possibility and hazard of adjoining our message with the governing principles and power structures. "We may adopt a strategy of making our 'under-version' sound closely like the dominant version, or an alternative strategy of showing our 'under-version' to be in deep tension with the dominant version."[262] Even today we see first hand the subtlety and plausibility of the former, particularly within the North American political realm.

Truth-telling is inherent in preaching subversively, serving as interpreter and mirror. The agent not only recognizes what is said, implied, or experienced, but also what is not said. Voelz reminds that "the preacher-as-teacher seeks to bring to light the power structures that are maintained by silence or conflict."[263] The declarative word of God not only presents alternative realities, but also accurately interprets the times. Truth-telling speaks to and beyond conditions and includes deep relational breakdowns and incongruence. Brueggemann shares that in prophetic poetry, "prose tends to devolve into concrete issues. On the main point, however, both

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[261] Brueggemann, *The Word Militant,* 19.
[262] Brueggemann, *The Word Militant,*152.
[263] Voelz, *Preaching to Teach,* 13.

poetry and prose cut underneath concreteness to more elemental, relational matters."[264] Since how persons and groups relate to God and others is of obvious importance in scripture, prophetic utterances will in turn speak truthfully to those realities.

Brueggemann stresses, "the common primary 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, but not to pursue the immediate reconciliatory work."[265] However, I believe the two can be held in tandem as a priority, particularly in this environment. Just as "the Old and New Testament texts both proclaimed a social reality that did not exist until that moment of articulation,"[266] the inclusion of immediate reconciliatory framework can as well. Jones uses an example of differing opinions of compassion, the age-old sentiment of "teach a man to fish." While some will argue that relief is necessary, the response of teaching is equally important. Jones takes it further by stretching the preacher to "realize that sometimes we need to be innovative in seeing the need to change the nature of the fishing industry."[267] In this climate, counter-cultural expression must also give way to the plausibility of systemic change. I am reminded that, "nobody can switch worlds unless an alternative world is made richly available with great artistry, care, and boldness."[268]

In many ways the immigrant identifies as both the exile and the oppressed, and there is a rebellion that is rising quickly globally. What is true is that there is a great opening on the part of the exile to preserve culture and faith as well as opportunity to abandon it. There is much to learn and gain from the migrant experience. Like the Jews of the Old Testament, "exile did not lead them to abandon faith or settle for abdicating despair, nor to retreat to privatistic religion. On the

[264] Brueggemann, *The Word Militant,* 17.
[265] Brueggerman, Walter, *The Prophetic Imagination: 40th Anniversary Edition* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2018), 27.
[266] Brueggemann, *The Word Militant*, 91.
[267] Jones, *Christian Social Innovation,* 70.
[268] Brueggemann, *The Word Militant,* 33.

contrary, exile evoked the most brilliant literature and the most daring theological articulation in the Old Testament."[269] I concur that there are stories being woven like a tapestry through the marginalization that will lead to sociological reversal. I agree that such a reversal has already begun, in that "those at the margins of dominating knowledge will no longer permit the practitioners of dominating power to be supervisors of absolute knowledge."[270]

The prophetic agent is to live in the space of announcer of injustice and advocate of its counter. This preaching function cannot be abdicated. The role of the herald is to proclaim the good news. Such news is to speak against systems that are formed, intentionally and unintentionally, to create and support brokenness and injustice. Voelz says that critical thinking in the teaching-learning relationship "always has in mind a social end, not merely an inward individual one and that critical citizenship seeks the good of all rather than a few."[271] Yang himself, investigating King, shares his commitment to directly confronting the dangers of humanity and the structures that perpetuate brokenness. There is great opportunity to and need in this regard. I found Voelz' call to worshiping communities inspiring:

> Worshiping communities can neither retreat simply to inconclusive spiritual reflection nor engage in knee-jerk actions to issues as they come up…through the lens of critical pedagogy, preachers examine the church's role in taboos and contentious issues, summoning knowledge from a variety of resources, believing that reflection on this knowledge not only can, but must result in emancipatory practices and transformation.[272]

## RESOLVING THE PREACHING MOMENT

The Apostle Paul presses, "For since in the wisdom of God the world through its wisdom did not know him, God was pleased through the foolishness of what was preached to save those who believe" (1 Corinthians 1:21 [NIV]). The preaching moment has the ability to shape and

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[269] Brueggemann, *The Word Militant,* 134.
[270] Brueggemann, *The Word Militant*, 21.
[271] Voelz, *Preaching to Teach,* 11.
[272] Voelz, *Preaching to Teach,* 11.

reshape thought processes and engagements like never before. In Walter Brueggemann's *The Prophetic Imagination* he offers, "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."[273]

To set forth a rubric that can facilitate a congregational posture, that is bold enough to probe and interpret the times from a Christocentric lens, poised enough to interrogate inherited and perpetuated anti-Kingdom of God allegiances, and possesses the creativity and skill to present and embody God's preferred future in a prevailing culture is a difficult task. However, McMickle, Thomas, Tisdale, and Schade suggest real and tangible ways to lead through prophetic preaching.

McMickle fully embraces Neibuhr's *Christ as Transformer of Culture* typology and is an advocate for the involvement of clergy in the public square. Moreover, he encourages the use of the pulpit to highlight the ills and disparities within society, parsing the realities that are diametrically opposed to the message of Christ. More than the actualities of what to say, McMickle is adamant that the message from the prophet should be a call to engagement. "This means that the pastor either embraces Robert McAfee Brown's idea of politics as a means of grace or employs Anthony Pinn's notion of bringing one's religious sensibilities to bear in shaping governmental policies that aid the most disadvantaged persons in society."[274]

Thomas provides a homiletical worksheet in his *How to Preach a Dangerous Sermon*. However, it is Thomas' perspective on approaching the preaching moment from the standpoint of morality that is most useful. He lends four qualities of moral imagination that provide a great help to approaching prophetic moments; "1) Envision equality and represent it by one's physical

[273] Brueggerman, *The Prophetic Imagination*, 15.
[274] McMickle, *Pulpit and Politics*, 167.

presence. 2) Empathize as a catalyst or bridge to create opportunities to overcome the past and make new decisions for peace and justice. 3) Wisdom and truth in ancient texts, the wisdom of the ages. 4) Use the language of poetry and art that lifts and elevates by touching the emotive chords of wonder, hope, and mystery."[275]

## 4.3: CREEDAL BASED ECCLESIOLOGY AS ANCHOR

It can be contended that the Christian creeds were predominantly crafted from European or American thought and championing, and, therefore, may not fully represent the global Christian community nor tend to its needs. Andrew Walls poses, "some missiologists argue that extra-biblical theological resources—including the early creeds and councils—are unhelpful in fostering local, indigenous theologies because such creeds and councils are indelibly formed by the foreign cultural contexts in which they arose."[276] However, it can also be argued that the global community has been instrumental in both the historic and relatively recent creedal confessions which serve as theological and ecclesiological safeguard for orthodox belief, and give way to faithful and contextual proclamation of the gospel.

Proclamation and hopeful practice are difficult tasks in places such as the Bronx, a religiously pluralistic, fast, and ever-changing, global-urban community that subscribes to subjectivism and trends toward valuing cultural appropriation over biblical faithfulness. Creedal-based ecclesiology, therefore, has the potential to anchor communities of faith by emphasizing the fundamental biblical imperatives, critiquing practices that threaten gospel faithfulness, and facilitating contextual theology, while opposing the reinforcement of cultural

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[275] Frank Thomas, *How to Preach a Dangerous Sermon* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2018), 81.

[276] Andrew F. Walls, "The Gospel as the Prisoner and Liberator of Culture," *Missionalia* 10, no. 3 (November 1982): 93–105, https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=lsdar&AN=ATLA0000921473&site=ehost-live.

and contextual norms. Brandon Smith and Matthew Bennett note that "though the patristic theologians and creeds cited lived long before today's missiology, their warnings are vital to contemporary missionaries as they seek to present the timeless and transcultural message of Christ to which the Bible bears witness. Such historical rootedness allows the present ministry to avoid the long-term dangers that the creeds and councils warn against."[277] The Nicene, Chalcedonian, and Apostles' Creeds are foundational and can prove helpful in the Bronx's diverse realities to serve as a dock for biblical faithfulness, contextual sensitivity, and world evangelism.

The Nicene Creed is a compilation of the teachings at the Council of Nicaea in 325 CE and those of the Council of Constantinople in 381 CE. It is made up of three parts corresponding to the triune God who creates the world, redeems the world in Jesus Christ, and brings about the world's eternal life in the Holy Spirit.[278] Smith and Bennett underscore the international inclusion in that the councils' method "brought together bishops from across global contexts to make unified statements that addressed multiple contextual-theological concerns."[279] Green, Pardue, and Yeo's *The Church from Every Tribe and Tongue* underscores that this creedal confession emphasizes the need for global ecclesiological perspectives which prove paramount and constructive for the church. They support and affirm global ecclesiological thought and scholarship in the creedal reflection which facilitates contemplation, distributes authority, and forms timeless and contextual praxis. The foundational Christian confession can serve as a

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[277] Brandon D. Smith and Matthew Bennett, "The Sonship of Christ in the Contexts of Mission: Chalcedonian Retrieval as Missiological Necessity among Muslims," *Southeastern Theological Review* 12 (1) (2021): 61–84, Academic Premiere, EBSCOhost, https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=lsdar&AN=ATLAiGW7210816000185&site=ehost-live.

[278] Sarah Ann Fairbanks, "Greening the Nicene Creed: Liturgical Grounding for Ecological Ethics and Action," *Liturgical Ministry* 20, no. 2 (Spr 2011): 79–86, Academic Premiere, EBSCOhost, https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=lsdar&AN=ATLA0001838851&site=ehost-live.

[279] Smith and Bennett, "The Sonship of Christ," 61-84.

timeless contextual rubric of understanding and engaging in the universal movement of God. The great diversity within Christendom is beautiful and can be both reflective and effective when the worldwide theological and cultural diversity is embraced and deemed collectively invaluable to the global Christian witness. Since theology is contextual, the western church in particular can learn much from a comprehensive theology formed through a regional ecclesiology.

The Nicene confession can serve to inform consistent ministry partnership in which churches are intentional about the unified witness cross-culturally and interculturally. Ministry is contextual, and a solitary cultural interpretation, adaptation, and habitus are in opposition to the Christian mandate and call of God to be unified and unifying. Jesus himself prayed that his followers would be one: "I have given them the glory that you gave me, that they may be one as we are one – I in them and you in me – so that they may be brought to complete unity. Then the world will know that you sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me" (Jn 17:22-23 [NIV]).

It is therefore possible for the people of God, encompassing great diversity, culturally and otherwise to find unity in their diversity. Kim, synthesizes José Míguez Bonino: "the real issue of ecumenism and unity is not based on the tenets of our faith; rather, the real issue for ecumenical unity lies in the way the Church relates with the world in her mission."[280] Further, predominant faith communities of color can become even more mindful of their own dominance and give way to oneness of the church.

The Chalcedonian Creed (451 CE) was written in light of dissonance between the eastern and western churches, to mediate and clarify the meaning of incarnation. Noteworthy is that it is the first council not to be recognized by the Oriental Orthodox churches. The Chalcedonian Creed, however, maintained the confession of two distinct natures of Christ (fully divine and

[280] Kim, *An Immigration of Theology*, 171.

fully human) over and against a single and mixed nature. This anchoring creed can prove quite helpful in the Bronx amongst its fast-growing Muslim contingency. One related example is found in Smith and Brandon's reference to Timothy Tennet's *Theology in the Context of World Christianity.* Tennet speaks of the potential missiological missteps that lead to Muslim Idiom Translations (MIT) in gospel communication. He asserts that they (MIT) speak of the danger of communicating solely a Christology from above and not from below as to make it more palatable and less offensive to the Muslim. The Chalcedonian Creed therefore reminds that, "both [above and below] require the theologian to wrestle with the biblical language that informs the biblical picture of Christ's person and work as the incarnate Son of God."[281] While to some it may seem staunch, tough to comprehend, potentially offensive, and contextually aloof, Chalcedonian Christology can help to "foster indigenous expressions of Christology that also retain orthodoxy."[282]

The opportunity then, is to critically think and engage the Muslim contingency with sincerity and openness without compromising the integrity of a potentially difficult message. It also helps to present a comprehensive picture of Christ that enlists God's people in the real experiences and needs of the community as evidence of love for neighbor. This can help combat inherent feelings or sentiments of escapism or passivism as some may assume.

The Apostles' Creed also serves as a critical creedal confession towards a healthy and transferrable ecclesiology. While its origins can be traced to the second century, the fourth century revision is most familiar. An example here can stem from Bruce Waltke's *He Ascended and Sitteth: Reflections on the Sixth Article of the Apostles' Creed.* Watlke highlights the importance of the doctrine of the ascension for proclamation of the gospel and for practical

[281] Timothy Tennent, *Theology in the Context of World Christianity: How the Global Church Is Influencing the Way We Think about and Discuss Theology* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2007), 107.
[282] Tennent, *Theology in the Context of World Christianity*, 107.

Christian living. He asserts that the priority purview on things above is an essentiality. The Apostle Paul reminds, "Since then, you have been raised with Christ, set your hearts on things above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. Set your minds on things above, not on earthly things" (Colossians 3:1-2 [NIV]). According to Waltke, Christ's ascension "is crucial for our mission because it guarantees his victory in establishing his kingdom on earth through his church. These realities are important in atmospheres that negate or underemphasize the profoundly critical spiritual component of the church's existence."[283] Therefore, while the church's practical engagement in the world is of great importance, spiritual priority must remain equally important for the local and collective witness in spaces that ask the church to engage as a mere social service entity. This creedal confession helps the church to be careful and intentional in its faithful life and comprehensive appropriation.

These three creeds in tandem can continue to serve as great guides in an ever-changing world and church. It is reasonable to conclude then that a creedal-based ecclesiology can benefit the Bronx and serve as valuable, remaining faithful and thoughtful throughout the changing times and developing cultural landscape.

## 4.4: PRACTICING HOPE: RECONCILIATION, HOLISTIC HEALING, COMMUNAL TOGETHERNESS

### RECONCILIATION

We will look here to identify the hopeful practices that are essential pieces for engagement and championing in the Bronx. While time has been spent on the need for prophetic proclamation, time must also be spent on key hopeful principles, rituals, and routines that should

[283] Bruce K. Waltke, "'He Ascended and Sitteth . . .': Reflections on the Sixth Article of the Apostles' Creed," *Crux* 30 (2) (1994): 2–8, Academic Premiere, EBSCOhost. https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=lsdar&AN=ATLA0000884485&site=ehost-live.

not be overlooked. The Apostle Paul's letter to Corinth is helpful here, highlighting and affirming the necessity of reconciliation as paramount for every believer in every context:

> So from now on we regard no one from a worldly point of view. Though we once regarded Christ in this way, we do so no longer. Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, the new creation has come: The old has gone, the new is here! All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ and gave us the ministry of reconciliation: that God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ, not counting people's sins against them. And he has committed to us the message of reconciliation (2 Corinthians 5:16-19 [NIV]).

While we must understand Paul's direction to the Corinthians as underscoring spiritual renewal, right relationship through Christ, and the message of which all believers are heralds, we would do well not to separate the importance of relational renewal. In a pragmatic sense, opportunities will present themselves to not only consistently call out injustice and deplorable conditions, but ample opportunity will also arise to initiate and broker understanding, commonality, and *shalom* within the community. Bosch reminds that our "conversion is not primarily an emotional experience or an exchange of sentiments, but a new way of life (cf. Luke 3:10-14)."[284] This new way of life according to scripture includes peace-brokering. In a world that approves individualism, facilitates segmentism, and supports cancel culture, there is an otherworldly Kingdom perspective that presses otherwise. Those who are in Christ are bearers of peace, a community of peacemakers who confront discord, dissension, and hostility towards reconciliation. Stephen Knapp in his *Mission and Modernization* speaks of the church-as-community being "sufficiently distinguishable to resist and challenge the homogenizing power of the world. Only as a prophetic minority in the secularized society of

[284] Bosch, *Witness to the World*, 223.

today can the Church remain faithful to her role of being a stranger in the world."[285] Reconciling participation and intentional practice therefore is paramount.

Naturally, such an engagement requires a connectedness and understanding that neither diminish the experiences of the unheard nor create timelines for complete harmony. This is a progressive and slow work that requires patience, longevity, and the ability to sit in great discomfort steadily. Cone remarks, "those who are responsible for the dividing walls of hostility, racism, and hatred want to know whether the victims are ready to forgive and forget – without changing the balance of power."[286] Dissonance is a necessary and germane reality for ministry in the Bronx. It is in the discomfort where growth is found, and relationships are formed. It is in and through reconciliation where individuals are transformed from commodities to people; where personal stories are shared, and empathy is formed. Cone submits, "to know what reconciliation means in the black perspective, we must investigate the black sources of truth – the sermons, prayers, tales of our people. Here we will find that reconciliation is not a theological idea but a human struggle, a fight to create dignity in an inhuman situation."[287] In the stories of the disheartened and disrupted spirits, the presence of the Lord becomes most palpable. An example would be in the struggling area of law-enforcement and policing. Hopeful practice necessitates community galvanizing, and participation in town halls which provide insight, outlets, and solutions. Mediation also becomes an essential practice in dialogue and partnership toward pathways for restored relationships.

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[285] Cf. Stephen Knapp, "Mission and Modernization," in R. Pierce Beaver, ed., *American Missions in Bicentennial Perspective* (Littleton: William Carey Library, 1977), 167-169.

[286] Cone, *God of the Oppressed*, 207.

[287] Cone, *God of the Oppressed*, 224.

HOLISTIC HEALING: A THERAPEUTIC APPROACH

Theology that attends to the totality of the holistic needs serves as a priority for hopeful practice in the Bronx. David Adamo, in *Reading and Interpreting the Bible in African Indigenous Churches*, highlights the African's view of healing as therapeutic, attending to spiritual and physical healing, protection, and success. He helps to frame a far-reaching sense of spirituality that attends to the fullness of the human. The threat here is to conclude that holistic healing is important in the Bronx because it is a city of people who seek to bypass challenge, eliminate struggle, eradicate hardship, or escape death. However, there is a sense in which joy is still found in the hardship and struggles present in the community, and even more joy is found through it. Essentially, the need for a therapeutic holistic experience of healing speaks to the need for a complete Christology. The transcendence of God is in many cases undisputable; however, it is the immanence of God which is of great importance in this context. Ergo, the recitation of Psalm 23 becomes a key text. I submit verses four through six for consideration:

> Even though I walk through the darkest valley,
> I will fear no evil, for you are with me;
> your rod and your staff, they comfort me.
>
> You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies.
> You anoint my head with oil; my cup overflows.
>
> Surely your goodness and mercy will follow me all the days of my life,
> and I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever (Psalms 23:4-6 [NIV]).

The reality that God is walking with his people through death is pivotal. The certainty of the Lord's provisional preparation in the presence of enemies, while he assures goodness, mercy, and longevity, is of great need to the population. Though the community may not be able to articulate this in theological or academic terms, the therapeutic need and desire serves as a docetistic protest and refutation. Christ did not put on a charade of human existence, but indeed

understands the totality of the human condition and attends to it. Therefore, healing from vices, generational experiences, systemic injustices, and economic realities are essential for a hopeful people.

According to John Deschner's *Wesley's Christology*, "the language he [Wesley] used to describe God's work of salvation was often therapeutic. For him God is engaged in the cure of souls."[288] Cobb stresses, however, that "Wesley did not think of salvation as directly including physical and psychological healing, but he came close. He thought ministering to the sick is an essential expression of Christian love."[289] Jennings proves helpful in processing and interpreting Wesley as intentional in attending to holistic therapeutic needs. He reminds that "Wesley's habit of preaching in public squares, marketplaces and fields meant that he was able to draw great crowds of poor, most of whom had never voluntarily entered a church (except, perhaps, for baptisms, weddings, or funerals)…but as they were persuaded by his message and became not only hearer, but also followers, they left off former habits of drunkenness and gambling, to the great displeasure of those who gained their living from the vices of the poor."[290] Against this background, we see a priority here as emphasis on freedom from vices and the subsequent resultant effect on systems and industry as derivatives of personal transformation.

We must go further to assert that spiritual and physical healing are requisites for a hoping people. Space for prayer and laying on of hands must be given within the context, attending to both vices and ailments. As present participants of what is to come, there is still room and expectation to experience the manifest signs of the kingdom. The danger in various faith communities, however, can be an unhealthy preoccupation with miracles, signs, and wonders as

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[288] John Deschner, *Wesley's Christology* (Dallas: SMU press, 1960), 29-30.
[289] Cobb, *Grace and Responsibility*, 29.
[290] Jennings, *Good News*, 206.

an end. Conversely, the opposite can foster a resignation to minimal expectations and engagements with the supernatural.

Healing in the clinical sense is also quite important. Attention must be equally placed on the community's physical, emotional, and mental health. Beyond intermittent blood pressure screenings and traditional pastoral counseling, information, direction, and access to services, along with health advocacy, must be a priority of a faith community traversing through this Bronx landscape. According to a 2019 Wakefield-Edenwald Northeast Bronx Community Needs Assessment, led by Wake Eden Baptist Church in partnership with community-based organization, Women's Health, and Educational Development Company (WHEDco), only more than half (55.1%) felt they had access to healthy foods and were dealing with serious health issues at home, the top being diabetes, asthma, mental health issues, or depression, and no health or dental insurance. A more recent survey, according to the New York City Health Opinion Poll, indicated that 35% of adults with children in their household report the emotional or behavioral health of at least one child having been negatively affected by the pandemic.[291]

While every health concern cannot be addressed, the posture of parishoners towards holistic wellness can prove transformative and hopeful. Not only should this be an internal congregational consideration, but also a missional opportunity. In a utilitarian sense, formalized partnerships should be sought out to provide counsel, information, and access to resources. For instance, the sheer potential volume for mental health services could not be fully attended to by one church's staff. Therefore, memorandums of understanding and formalized partnerships with hospitals, independent counselors, and community-based organizations will help to provide direction and support for the myriad of needs. The church then serves as a broker and connector

[291] I. Magas, et al., "Impact of COVID-19 on Mental Health in New York City," *New York City Department of Health and Mental Hygiene*, September 2020.

to these wellness services and institutions. Within a predominantly immigrant population, it is more likely for persons to accept and engage in mental health services by way of recommendation from a pastor or religious leader than most other sources, including the clinicians themselves.

## COMMUNAL TOGETHERNESS

The commitment to communal togetherness and fellowship is an imperative hopeful practice. Native theology's communal theological thread speaks of the interdependent and interpersonal call that is essential to the formation of Christian community. Particularly in this global climate, the revisiting of such an important theological principle could prove transformative in a world that is riddled by heightened individualism and separatism. Éla shares that, "from now on, we can no longer confine ourselves to 'teaching doctrine,' mouthing standard religious instruction in a catechumenate...the primary task is to develop communities that will shoulder the distress of other people who search for more in life."[292]

The COVID-19 pandemic yielded a social distance recommendation which attacked the very fiber of people of color in urban communities. While American identity today is steeped in gross individualism, it is the communal nature which is a unique feature in the Bronx. It is through the collective that many gain strength and receive encouragement to persevere. According to Nouwen's *Compassion*, God's solidarity, servanthood, and obedience, revealed to us in the life of Jesus Christ, are the marks of the compassionate life lived in community. The concept of compassion being realized in our living together and revealing itself in community is paramount. He furthers that, "when there is no community that can mediate between world needs

[292] Éla, *My Faith as an African*, 8.

and personal responses, the burden of the world can only be a crushing burden."[293] The convened community is where the undocumented are affirmed of their humanity, experience empathy, and are advocated for. The convened community is where people shoulder economic realities through community-based savings partnerships, which Jamaicans call "pardner" or "sou-sou." Here is where burdens are shared and carried, as the Apostle Paul renders, "fulfilling the law of Christ" (Galatians 6:2b [NIV]).

A key feature, for example, of burden-sharing is seen in the dealing with death within the Caribbean context. Food, prayer, and fellowship are central to both Caribbean and African communities. The distancing and lessening of post-funeral repasts, due to COVID-19 safety protocols has stripped this hallmark of accepting and negotiating the implications of death together. In a real sense, the priority of communal mourning has been significantly altered. For example, the African's engagement with the dead not only recognizes the dead's continued presence with the community but also recognizes God's ability to transcend time and space. One can recognize God's cosmic and salvific movement in a community from generations past and can still participate in His transcendence. A major trait of the African community and diaspora is the ability to mourn and celebrate together. The need to seal homegoings with presence, laughter, and food as a community is a high one. A hopeful practice is one in which there is a recognition of the high need for physical togetherness and toiling to that end. The writer to the Hebrews reminds us to "not give up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but encouraging one another—and all the more as you see the Day approaching" (Hebrews 10:25 [NIV]).

The realities of the pandemic have impacted large group gatherings. Therefore, now may be the chief time to revisit the implementation or restructuring of small groups. Beyond virtual meetings, there is a deep need to connect at a physical and human level. While many have

[293] Nouwen, McNeill, and Morrison, *Compassion,* 53.

embraced technology and will continue to, a church with great intentionality in the formation and sustenance of small group meetings toward spiritual connectedness, accountability, and missional engagement will prove successful in this highly relational landscape. The megachurch phenomenon in many ways has yielded an understandably high emphasis on Sunday worship gatherings; however, the small group connection points should be of equal priority. As ministry becomes more and more decentralized, these networks will also serve as entry points for potential newcomers to access a Christian community that prioritizes discipleship and lifestyle transformation.

## 4.5: SOCIOECONOMIC AND POLITICAL ENGAGEMENT

In Alfred Krass' *Milligan Missiogram* he renders, "For Christians to opt out of civil society and set up evangelical islands is to confess to a truncated and disjunctive understanding of God's working. It is to arrogate God to the Church much more than God himself has chosen to do. It is the newest form of triumphalism."[294] Hopeful practice in the Bronx embodies an interest in the physical conditions of the inhabitants and the systems that they are subject to. Exodus 3:7 is again instrumental in understanding the connectedness of the Lord to those who are disenfranchised. Scripture reminds that the Lord sees the misery of people and hears them crying out. Furthermore, the Lord is aware of the reason for their cries and has deep concern about suffering. His concern for injustice and his organizing towards justness and newness then, creates an imperative for the Church to follow suit. According to Bosch, "mission takes place where the Church, in her total involvement with the world and the comprehensiveness of her message, bears her testimony in word and deed in the form of a servant, with reference to unbelief,

[294] Alfred C. Krass, "On Dykes, the Dutch and the Holy Spirit," *Milligan Missiogram*, 4:4 (Summer 1977), 5.

exploitation, discrimination and violence, but also with reference to salvation, healing, liberation, reconciliation and righteousness."[295]

The voice from the margins is paramount in the discovery of missional identity. It is this voice that serves as both credible and instructive. The calls and cries of the oppressed are signals for God's beloved and called to respond to God by engagement, not silence. An ecclesiology that is in solidarity with the margins hears God in definitive ways and enters into a dynamic relationship with God. As Valentin shares, "the quality of our lives together in society truly matters; and those integrative perspectives that seek to grasp, and transform the social whole are possible and necessary – is so rarely prioritized in our times."[296]

The church is to be present and engaged in the suffering. I am reminded of the Apostle Paul when he speaks about all that happens when God's people are engaged in suffering a particular way. He says, "I want to know Christ—yes, to know the power of his resurrection and participation in his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, and so, somehow, attaining to the resurrection from the dead" (Philippians 3:10-11 [NIV]). "The mission of Jesus and the church is then in the way of suffering. Only when Christ returns will the victory of the kingdom be made manifest. But until that day the kingdom is characterized by a double character: power and weakness, victory and defeat, mighty works and suffering, faith and hope. Both are manifest in the mission of Jesus; if either is lost, the mission of the church will be distorted either by a triumphalist activism or by a defeatist quietism."[297]

Disengagement, or apathy, is contrary to the theology of the Kingdom of God. In fact, it is diametrically opposed to kingdom theology. Goheen helps again in unpacking the present and future reality of the kingdom. He notes, "when we turn to the New Testament witness, what is

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[295] Bosch, *Witness to the World*, 18.
[296] Valentin, *Mapping Public Theology*, 82.
[297] Goheen, *The Church and Its Vocation,* 45.

immediately clear is that history has not come to a close: the End is present in the middle, but clearly it has not arrived in fullness. The cosmic renewal of the kingdom is both a present and a future reality; it is somehow now and not yet…the Kingdom is both present and future."[298] Therefore, believers engage presently in what we expect for the future. Stone himself presses, "kingdom is a gift – something to be received by human beings and not the product of human effort or striving. We must receive the kingdom as a little child (Mark 10:13-16), and how the kingdom sprouts and grows, we do not fully know (Mark 4:26). The irony of the Kingdom is that receptivity does not mean passivity. We might say that receiving the kingdom and actually participating in the kingdom, while distinct, are inseparable matters."[299]

Contemporary American society is complex and dynamic. Its beginnings have set a foundation that is difficult to engage. While it is rooted in secularism, theological difference, and socio-economic complexities, there are great opportunities for the modern-day church to press forward a credible prophetic witness. I suggest the first responsibility of the Bronx church leader is to be a student of its context, while embracing its unique ability to shape and reshape a society that points persons to the redemption of God. As bearers of the presence of God and vanguards of a faith perspective, it is the church's responsibility to carry a mantle of prophetic involvement within, throughout, and around society. Leah Schade lends, "the prophet speaks on behalf of and before God and God's people, particularly those who are most vulnerable to the systems and leaders that abuse power."[300]

Foundationally, it is the preacher's task to seek to bring the realities of the context to the congregational limelight. This takes intentionality, prayer, wisdom, and skill. In a functional sense, Tisdale offers a design strategy that is very helpful for the preacher wrestling with

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[298] Goheen, *The Church and Its Vocation,* 45.
[299] Stone, *Compassionate Ministry*, 73-4.
[300] Schade, *Preaching in the Purple Zone*, 14.

bringing political and controversial realities to the fore. She reminds that ministers are to first and foremost speak truth in love, but goes on to assert the following:

- Start with the familiar and moving forward to the unfamiliar
- Stand in the shoes of another and viewing the world from a different perspective
- Stand with the congregation rather than opposite the congregation
- Using the congregation's history as bridge to a prophetic vision for its future
- Use the congregation's current mission involvement as a bridge for prophetic witness
- Invite someone personally involved in the concern to participate in preaching it
- Articulate the opposing viewpoint in a manner that is fair and accurate
- Lampoon the Principalities and Powers
- Taking the long view[301]

Significant is the consistent message of balancing the pastoral with the prophetic. For the minister, the two must co-exist. Tisdale's reminder that we are to "stand with the congregation not opposed to it" rejects an adversarial and antagonistic approach opposed to humbly moving together. Personalized, it anticipates that when the preacher does not "get it right" themselves, there is grace and the willingness of the community to stand with him or her as well.

Tidale's *Long View* approach is one that does not see this prophetic work as a sprint. It is he or she who can endure the tough road and remain faithful that will succeed. Barber presents a similar response: "resist the one moment mentality; we are building a movement! No victory will usher in beloved community; no single setback can stop us. We are building up a new world, moving forward together toward freedom and justice for all."[302] Each moment, we are to engage

[301] Lenora Tubbs Tisdale, *Prophetic Preaching: A Pastoral Approach* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2010), 41-62.

[302] William J. Barber II, *The Third Reconstruction* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2016), 130.

and embody the politics of Jesus to give direction for interaction, teaching, and lending voice to margins. This task is far from easy and takes heart, dexterity, longevity, and the power of God to sustain such work.

For the Bronx church leader, being well-informed of the United States' political structure is a necessity. While much happens at both the federal and state levels, what should not be missed or devalued is the impact at the local level. Involvement in the local elections is just as extremely critical. While the church will not be able to endorse any particular candidate, it should work diligently to keep the community informed of the electoral process, its candidates, and platforms on which they are campaigning. The political arena can prove challenging to engage in a densely populated area of undocumented residents, who are desiring to remain unnoticed more than critiquing and engaging the bureaucratic melee. It becomes even more crucial, then, for there to be advocacy where persons are unable to advocate for themselves. The church's commitment to speak up for the voiceless, the unheard, and the uninquired is a stance that even those desiring to remain incognito can see and appreciate. This is a hopeful practice.

There are five major political offices that the Bronx church leader must connect to and build relationships with: the New York State Assembly; New York State jurisdictional Senator; New York City Council representative; Bronx Borough President; and the Bronx District Attorney. These are key offices and leaders whose decisions and commitments have a direct impact on the residents. They should not only be engaged at times of great displeasure but should have a sense that the church can serve as an advocate for decisions that are positively impacting the community. Even more so, church leaders should develop these relationships to become sought-out sounding boards and prayer partners. Their work is not easy, and they are riddled with critique and judgment. The grace of God is simultaneously extended to these leaders, who are

too wrestling with their own faith-commitments and the burdens of leadership. These offices are in many ways concerned with what the local church community may also find urgent. There becomes an opportunity for partnership and alignment to work together and access resources. In instances where there is lack of funding, these officials can steer communities of faith to alternative means to fund the mission. For instance, the State Assemblyman was unable to include a church in his annual budget because of their late ask. However, he was able to steer a church to a private company who had a shared community strategy. That church was able to access resources with less regulatory restrictions and enlisted a new partner for years to come. There is, however, the threat of co-option. There must be wisdom and discernment in approaching, connecting, and partnering with political offices. The faith leader can find themselves "indebted to" an office or so "fully-funded" that it jeopardizes his or her ability to critique, admonish, or speak prophetically to those in positions of power.

The district community board, jurisdictional police precinct, and clergy meetings are also non-negotiables. Here is where the realities of the myriad of dynamics and interconnectedness of the community are truly understood. No issue is isolated and unto itself but is a part of an interrelated matrix or grid.

The community board gives insight into the socioeconomic dynamics and educational actualities. It also assists in understanding where and how community development is happening and facilitates questioning while providing the ability to speak into the processes and plans. Monthly precinct meetings are also available and serve as necessary. While community statistics and surveys prove helpful, the legitimate experiences of law enforcement can give a picture of what is happening in real time. For instance, during the latter part of 2020 and early part of 2021, the local police precinct reported to clergy a domestic violence crisis rising in the Bronx. They

furthered that the Wakefield-Edenwald neighborhood was top in the increase of incidents in the entire borough. This provided key information for pastors to rally around for prayer, counseling services, and alternative programming for children who are undoubtedly caught in the middle of such challenges. The church in the Bronx does not have the luxury of guessing or assuming what is happening in this fast-changing landscape. Rather, it must engage these resources to understand what may be harsh realities and tough pills to digest, so as to work toward solution-based initiatives.

Further, partnership with community-based organizations (CBOs) helps in increasing affiliation and guards against duplicating efforts and the reinvention of wheels that are already in motion. In most cases, CBOs have done significant research into the varying dynamics that are at play within the Bronx. They have employed inclusive community-based statistical acquisition techniques, have onboarded residents, and brought the breadth of the constituency to the table. Aligning with these organizations is a necessary and strategic practice that a Bronx church leader and his or her laity should employ. The threat here is that CBOs may not share the same faith commitment, overarching values, and even sexual ethic, to say the least. However, it is in these spaces where we find and experience the grace of God who is already working and who provides redemption in unlikely spaces and unlikely partnerships. Again, as Goheen reminds, "the gospel, the good news, from God's own mouth, is that God intends to bless all nations, and to do so through Abraham and his descendants."[303] When these sociopolitical engagements become priority, it sets the stage for gospel effectiveness, spiritual faithfulness, and missional presence.

[303] Wright, *The Mission of God's People*, 64.

# CHAPTER V: CONCLUSION

## 5.1: A MISSIONAL THEOLOGY

The North American contemporary church has viewed itself as foundational in global Christian witness. Rooted in Euro-colonialism and privilege, white evangelicalism has proven to be in cahoots with power structures that are inherently anti-gospel. The US demographics have rapidly changed. There is a staggering decline in mainline denominations and traditional evangelicalism, however, an astonishing increase of immigrants particularly from the global South. With the radically changed landscape, North America should no longer be viewed as the missiological authority, but rather the mission field itself. God, the initiator of mission, is using the global community to give leadership to faithful Christian witnesses through missiological engagement. These witnesses are those who are experienced in marginalization, practitioners in navigating religious pluralism, engrossed in scholarly work, and yielded to supernatural impartation.

As I reflect on both the universality of the body of Christ as well as the uniqueness of my particular congregation, there are a few ways I would guide the church in the process of embodying a more biblical and contextual theology. I offer various methods highlighted by James Nieman, Mark Branson, and Juan Martinez.

First, as Nieman suggests in *Attending Locally*, it is imperative to collect and clarify the existing local theologies that have and continue to shape a congregation. Varying thoughts, ideas, practices, and expectations frame theology, understanding, and engagement through what he calls “scripted and unstructured practices.” While there may be issues with existing theologies that could threaten both character and assignment, there may be others that are paramount in bringing congregational clarity of identity and mission. Nieman notes that when “theologies are

undervalued or unrecognized, leaders lose track of a powerful way by which congregations claim their truest role as church, a role that can orient them through challenges and crises and link them to larger historic and global realities."[304] It is the task, then, to interrogate thought, speech and practice to ascertain causality, function, and ramification of theologies that could prove critical to the continuous formation of the community of faith.

Over the years my local church has had a "book nook" that occupies relatively significant space within the facility and draws on a few human resources. While some may see it as a simple store, it is shaped by a theology of discipleship and an ethos of scholarship so as to support spiritual formation and adequately resource the laity for active ministry. To bypass its origin or diminish its significance without thought could prove as a disregard that inevitably yields great pushback. It is for educational opportunities that many in this immigrant community have come to America. It is clear that excellence in education and clear and cogent thought are of great value to my community. While it is still my desire to close the store to reimagine and maximize the space, it would behoove me to paint a picture for leadership and the congregation of an alternate means to facilitate this critically important feature of being a teaching and learning community. This is an example of resisting the temptation to be cavalier when interrogating a seemingly simple practice.

Nieman goes on to give direction on how to determine the differing theologies. I would move forward with the necessary explorations of the diverse facets he suggests: "in demography, location, history, organization, activity, and means as ethnographic study."[305] These components bring light to the undercurrents that birth and perpetuate theology and practice. Ethnographic study can bring to the fore the theological realties that shape practice. Branson asserts, "cultural

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[304] James Nieman, "Attending Locally: Theologies in Congregations," *International Journal of Practical Theology*, 6(2) (2002): 199.

[305] Nieman, "Attending Locally," 212.

differences and immigrant narratives shape how churches understand and practice their relationships with their neighbors and neighborhoods."[306] For example, a predominantly undocumented immigrant congregation in the United States would generally operate and engage markedly different than a congregation without even one undocumented family present. Spiritual, congregational, and missional formation can be shaped significantly by this demographical understanding.

Further, I would seek to determine theologies by focusing on the set of practices that have both pervasive use and emblematic impact, then analyze them. Starting with the most prominent activity of worship (which has changed drastically due the COVID-19 pandemic), I would explore the *non-negotiable* parts of the worship moments to help to ascertain values. I would review the current work we are a part of, under the banner of missions, to gain clarity on effectiveness and also to discover its crisis points. Branson indicates that corporate identity and agency are interactive fluid continuums and maintains that what we do shapes our identity and who we are shapes our activities. To investigate our worship and missional activities are first steps that can yield great insight. Additionally, since we are part of a denomination, I would cross-sect our widespread local practices with the denominational emphases to note synergy, deviations, and incongruence, to help determine if our practices were birthed out of our context or as a result of association and affiliation.

Toward a biblical and contextual theology, I would give time to consistently teach and affirm the realities of the call to the ministry of reconciliation (2 Corinthians 5:18) which is the contrary to a theology of conservation. It would be important to also frame specifically and regularly for key leadership: "congregations facing fragmentation, depletion, or extinction often

[306] Mark Lau Branson and Juan F. Martinez, *Churches, Cultures and Leadership: A Practical Theology of Congregations and Ethnicities* (Downers Grove: Intervarsity Press, 2011), 69.

devote considerable theological energies toward group preservation and rebuilding."[307] Through focused and intentional curriculum design facilitated through preaching, teaching, and practice, persons can be continuously reminded of the *Missio Dei* and their own call to participate in the work of God. It would be important to ensure new believers who are progressing through membership classes are apprised of this non-negotiable mandate. There would be ample space dedicated to an orientation and reorientation of missions on a whole. I would agree that mission is "wherever we are, we know ourselves to be sent into the world as a church of God for the sake of the gospel."[308]

Moreover, ensuring that existing members continuously review their own involvement is foremost, because there are inherent preexisting theologies that have shaped congregational culture and are easily transferred to new membership and those on the periphery. As Branson and Martinez remind, "our ethnic heritage brings narratives, habits, vocabulary and mental frameworks to our formation as we seek personally and corporately to pay attention to God."[309] Further, Branson also presses that a missional church first asks, "What is God already doing in our context, and how do we participate? A church then also asks, what does God want us to do in this context?"[310] I concur that these questions should be primary in acknowledging and participating in the grace of God. Our theology should be predicated on the prevenient moving of God not only in theological thought but practical application. Leading the church in a contextual exploration toward partnership is key. I would form a committee of persons to engage with people and organizations that have aligned their platforms with the heart of God, to learn and speak into the redemptive work already occurring in our particular area.

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[307] Nieman, "Attending Locally," 216.
[308] Branson and Martinez, *Churches, Cultures and Leadership*, 66.
[309] Branson and Martinez, *Churches, Cultures and Leadership*, 63-64.
[310] Branson and Martinez, *Churches, Cultures and Leadership*, 66.

There are ever-changing contextual, cultural, and ethnic actualities within the context where we serve. Therefore, for us to be both prudent and effectual, I would lead in a contextual exploration to understand the differing ethnicities, cultures, and subcultures that form the landscape. Exploring culture to find ways to appropriately participate is key. We are not only present to share the gospel, but to love people and participate in the lives of those whom God has already been working on and working through. My hope is that through the fluid symbiotic movement of establishing *corporate identity* and *corporate agency* the congregation would experience spiritual, congregational, and missional formation that would prove faithful to the contemporary Christian witness and *Missio Dei*.

## 5.2: ETHNICITY MATTERS

There can be a pervasive sense that the goal of oneness and unity is to work towards sameness. However, the model and call of Christ is to be unified amidst our diversity. Even more so for the universal church, the global Christian witness that recognizes, facilitates, and participates in equity and agency will be in the center of God's direction. Scripture helps us:

> Now in the church at Antioch there were prophets and teachers: Barnabas, Simeon called Niger, Lucius of Cyrene, Manaen (who had been brought up with Herod the tetrarch) and Saul. While they were worshiping the Lord and fasting, the Holy Spirit said, "Set apart for me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them." So after they had fasted and prayed, they placed their hands on them and sent them off (Acts 13:1-3 [NIV]).

We not only see here the ministerial designations of prophet and teacher, but have also been made privy to the diversity of the grouping. In this identifiable ethnic assortment, the Holy Spirit became present amongst the assembled leadership and revealed his direction for the church while empowering the community to release Barnabas and Saul.

To underscore further, we should be reminded of the Apostle Paul's framing of the church as a vision of the new community. He makes a point to categorize people to illustrate the broad range of distinctions with superior-inferior implications that the gospel confronted in the days of the early church: "Here there is no Gentile or Jew, circumcised or uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave or free, but Christ is all, and is in all" (Colossians 3:11 [NIV]).

This people grouping comprises ethnic exclusivity, religious pedigree, and non-religious pedigree—the foreigner (barbarian), the Scythian (the least civilized), the ones with no dignity or rights and considered as property (slave)—as well as the socio-political elite and aristocracy. The text is not about dispelling diversity and eradicating ethnic identification because of Christ, but rather the opposite. The New Testament goes to lengths to identify the beauty of diversity and culminates in the new creation worshiping together. Paul here, then, is directly speaking of the socio-political, economic, ethnic, classist, national, biased, religious barriers that are a threat to commonality and mutuality that the church breaks down.

This has additional implications. First, the church is to be inclusive, an affirming place for everyone, featuring not who belongs outside of God's grace, but whom God is extending his hand to bring in. There are fundamental fears when the word *inclusivity* is used. It is believed that this connotes acquiescing to the abolition of sexual ethics. However, Paul previously addresses the sexual and moral ethic in Colossians 3:5-7, and is in no way suggesting an abrogation. Here, he underscores that a Spirit-filled, barrier-breaking church can transcend and subvert homogeneity and segmentism. While the pagan society is marked by lines of demarcation, it is different in Christ's church. The church can, and should, become the most aware of what divides, what marginalizes, what disenfranchises, what makes us skeptics, what gives us false pride, and become intentional and resilient in its dismantling, so that in a

community where Christ is in all, Christ is all.

For persons and churches looking toward hopeful practice, culture cannot be bypassed. God's people need to be seen in the totality of their creation and structure. A body that is spiritually devoid of humble discovery, appreciation, and affirmation will find ministry in the Bronx and the urban context difficult and impotent. The Lord has provided gems in the ambience to which he has called us that transcend human understanding. In my context, it is an immigrant, illiterate, aged church mother who consistently possesses the most wisdom, insight, and appropriate responses to the difficult ministry times and tasks.

Cultural differences can assist the church to learn how to approach the converged spiritualities of the day. For example, understanding the role and function of ancestors within culture can shape and reform our understanding of the comprehensive and integrative practice as well as the faithful and full witness of the church. These insights of the liberative dimensions in African society, ancestors, the person of Jesus Christ, and the church, will prove helpful in all facets of experience and practice. Again, African theology must relate to and be connected full stream with the multifaceted revelation of God in and through Christ Jesus.

The theology is a practical one that is wholly integrative. Rice's sentiment is that theology is to be a living, dynamic, active and creative reality in our societies. In Jemar Tisby's *Color of Compromise*, he shares Charles Finney's thoughts of social reform happening through individual conversion and not institutional reconstruction. Tisby, however, rebuts Finney, pressing that the fixation on individual conversion to the exclusion of changing policies and practices related to race is a practice that perpetuates division and ideology within the church. He submits that Black theology does not segment but inherently includes policy and practices as necessary in an authentic Christian expression.[311]

[311] Jemar Tisby. *The Color of Compromise* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2019), 69.

As the herald, preacher, and theologian considers the good news to and through the culture, it must be appropriated accordingly. While there are threats to having culture interpret scripture as opposed to scripture interpreting culture, there are inherent misconceptions, biases, and prejudices that discount the beauty and function of many cultural practices and peoples who do not conform to western Christian practice. There is ample opportunity to embrace the cultural perspective so as to better understand scripture and appropriate its truest expression in the world. For instance, Latino/a theology has the ability to process its genesis and formation through trauma, migration, and disenfranchisement and become hyper-localized, insular, and disengaged from the totality of the global human experience. Contrarily, it possesses the ability to see itself as essential and poised to scrutinize and voice the racial and sociopolitical inequities within the national and global spheres. With access to and influence over human, financial, and experiential capital, there can be overcoming of social injustice by its whole-hearted engagement.

Pragmatically, beyond superficial ways of meeting racial quotas and self-commendation through tokenism, there must be an attempt to forge and foster relationships with new people and communities with sincerity. This highlights the importance of longevity when ministering within the urban context, which is often overlooked. The work of rapport and trust cannot be hurried or accomplished in the usual three to four year stint of a local pastor. It takes the commitment of the minister and the church to be present for a significant time, and in ways that cultivate and gain trust.

## 5.3: COMPASSION AS ENTRY POINT

The priority for many North American churches has been and continues to be overwhelmingly tied to corporate Sunday worship services as the primary faith entry point. In

this ever-changing landscape, however, it is reasonable to conclude that the entry doors for new believers are shifting. This does not present a problem as some may suspect, but provides a potential opportunity for true discipleship, congregational decentralization, and leadership ontogeny. In this season and age of religious pluralism, agnosticism, or religious disheartening, people are more likely to onboard and participate in the compassionate work of the church than attend its worship services.

The reality that God's compassion reveals itself in servanthood and solidarity and that servanthood is God's self-revelation is both powerful and principal for now. Nouwen reminds us that true servanthood is wrongly appropriated when it is not determined by God. Further, he frames Christ's compassion as centered in hearing and obedient love which leads him to and through pain and suffering and continues that, "when information about human suffering comes to us through a person who can be embraced, it is humanized."[312] Nouwen expounds on the definition of compassion as the "womb of God," expressing God's in-tuneness with the deepest of identifiable human experiences, and continues that "the compassion that Jesus felt was different from superficial or passing feelings of sorrow and sympathy...but extended to the most vulnerable part of his being."[313]

Éla lends that the prophetic priority for the African is to relate to the God of justice, who sees oppression and delivers for healing and restoration. The indifference to suffering, inability to heal, and rejection of community are seen as failures for the African Christian. Éla states, "it is no longer sufficient to bring a basket of provisions to people; rather, we must help them discover their ability to organize themselves to protect their fields and prevent arbitrary actions...it is much easier to dig wells or to provide primary health services than to face up to oppressive

[312] Nouwen, McNeill, and Morrison, *Compassion*, 59.
[313] Nouwen, McNeill, and Morrison, *Compassion*, 16.

situations in the name of the gospel, or rethink our mission in terms of the requirements of justice and equity."[314]

Bosch quotes Ronald Sider who says, "only if we biblical Christians throw ourselves into the struggle for social justice for the wretched of the earth so unequivocally that the poor and the oppressed know beyond all question that we will risk all in the struggle against economic and political oppression – only then will Third World theologians be willing to hear our critique of unbiblical definitions of salvation. And only then will the oppressed of the earth be able to hear our Good News about the risen Lord Jesus."[315] Stone posits, "the very logic of a ministerial commitment to all humanity is precisely the foundation of making a preferential option on behalf of those who are being excluded from full participation in the human community."[316]

There is, then, space to conclude that a holistic spirituality can and must attend to and facilitate elevating the manifest presence of God to the people and the places that are commonly overlooked and disregarded. Nouwen speaks of the concept of voluntary displacement, where solidarity with those who have disrupted lives leads to compassionate living which moves us from positions of distinction to positions of sameness.[317] Attention then must be given to the missional direction and the manifestation of the presence of God in the community through the church. Beyond an attractional model, it serves as a way forward for gospel faithfulness, impact, and transformation. Compassion is neither arbitrary or capricious, but intentional and thoughtful.

There is the threat however of serving for serving's sake, business as congregational culture, attempting to address every need identifiable, and providing only social services. John 5 is helpful in reminding us that Jesus himself was surrounded by a great number of disabled

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[314] Éla, *My Faith as an African*, 9.
[315] Sider, Ronald J. *Evangelism, Salvation, and Social Justice* (Bramcote: Gove Books, 1977), 19.
[316] Stone, *Compassionate Ministry*, 16.
[317] Nouwen, McNeill, and Morrison, *Compassion*, 66.

people but chose to heal just one man. Despite all that Christ had opportunity to be involved in, the Lord rendered to the Father, **"**I have brought you glory on earth by finishing the work you gave me to do" (John 17:4 [NIV]). In Will Mancini's *Church Unique* he highlights his *Kingdom Concept*, a tool to help to determine a local faith community's possible missional direction. Through the identification and exploration of the church's collective potential, its local predicament, and Apsotolic *Esprit*, a faith community can be helped in identifying the unique Kingdom of God opportunities before them. Each church is full of graces and gifts. According to the Apostle Paul, the church has been "blessed in the heavenly realms with every spiritual blessing in Christ' (Ephesians 1:3b [NIV]). An analysis and understanding of the congregational makeup is significant. It would be foolish for a professional sports team to be unaware of its assets and unique abilities. Similarly, leadership would be silly in failing to commit time exploring the capital of God.

Investigating and discerning the dynamics that are at play within the particular area where the Lord has placed a local church is crucial. Churches can find themselves more committed to historical practice as a way to preserve culture than grasping how the very landscape around them continues to transmute and their peculiar impact. There are convergences of streams of challenges, some more prevalent than others, in each area. While formalized statistics help to formulate a contextual mural, there are learned and experienced truisms that transcend the facts. The intentional discovery of a church, led by the Holy Spirit, puts both situational actuality and spiritual discernment in dialogue. This can inform prayer, change organizational structures, and encourage conference and partnership, while impacting recruitment and potential enlistment. Note that it is possible that the local predicament can even help to inform a church's national and global commitments.

Moreover, Apostolic *Esprit* is the hearing, realization, and recognition of the Lord's distinct direction and task in light of the realities that are before the community. It is likely that the posture required and the task that the Lord calls the local church to are indeed bigger than they can imagine. However, this difficult task is the church's compassionate identification and engagements. Compassionate posture will change a congregation's indices of success. Undoubtedly, traditional church attendance will cease to be the only benchmark for success.

In 2019, I had the opportunity to interview Rev. Dr. Leslie Mullings, Lead Pastor of Far Rockaway Church of the Nazarene and Executive Director of Bright Future Community Inc., as the subject of exploration in compassionate innovation. Far Rockaway Church and Bright Future are responsible for two charter schools in the community. They were then in the early construction phases to house three additional schools, while breaking ground on a multi-million-dollar community development initiative that will house an additional charter school, a universal Pre-K program, affordable housing, creative and co-working spaces for entrepreneurs, a commercial kitchen, media studios, and a new worship facility.

There are three things that helped to shape Dr. Mullings' vision and desire to innovate. First, as a junior high school guidance counselor, he experienced first-hand, the contentious learning environments in schools, and found it almost impossible for children to learn in these settings. At the time of his employment, the school where he served was rated the worst junior high school in New York City. Second, there were consistent requests from community members approaching the church for help with everything from rent arrears to educational support. Third, the natural disaster of Hurricane Sandy in 2012 laid waste to a great part of the Far Rockaway area; however, the church facility was untouched because of its distance from the coastline. The

hurricane displaced people, and the church made the decision to open the doors for shelter, which additionally quickly transitioned to include a feeding program. Almost instantaneously the church became a compassionate ministry site. Like the Jones' example of the innovator Maggy, "Love made him an inventor." Sunday worship was moved to the school auditorium as the priority became serving the community in real and tangible ways. Dr. Mullings speaks passionately about how great the needs were in the area and the lack of responsiveness of the organized communities of faith.

The leadership understood their context as "asset-based," with a need to address issues both comprehensively and holistically. As Jones reminds, "wicked problems typically have multiple dimensions, so that if you work on only one aspect of the problem, it creates new problems in other aspects. And frequently those who are working on the problem also often unwittingly, contributing to its wickedness."[318] Far Rockaway's region possessed such rich resources and possibilities that it was necessary not to wait for community revitalization, rather to spearhead it. It was equally important to advocate for and personally provide a place for the marginalized to remain. Dr. Mullings asserts, "We're here to give voice to the voiceless. The people want to stay and thrive here and just need a little help." This organization saw that broad and localized relationships and partnerships were paramount in gaining both understanding and creating buy-in. They grasped signs of gentrification well and saw the great interest of developers in the downtown area's available properties.

Dr. Mullings saw the Gospel expressed tangibly in the world as his anchor. He shared his "given goal is to win souls." He calls that, "the baseline; the root…his holiness theology is his

[318] Jones, *Christian Social Innovation*, 9.

inspiration to look for ways to express the love of God to those who are marginalized and disenfranchised."[319] It is noteworthy his emphasis on early, primary, and secondary education. He believed that if children were cared for and parents felt and knew that there is a vested interest in the children, that they are loved by the church, the results would yield exponential connectivity. Mullings, like Jones, believed, "the most innovative organizations and cultures tend to 'invest' in young people like those young people in Epworth League in Indiana at the dawn of the twentieth century."[320]

Dialogue with Dr. Mullings quickly revealed his desire to do what seems to others as both impossible and unsustainable. He shares his personal call to think bigger and pursue the seemingly impossible because of the magnitude of God. There is an embodiment of Jones' assertion to, "think big to enable others to flourish by providing possibilities for younger generations to do astounding, life-giving work in the future."[321]

I believe this innovation to be birthed from great grace. Through the challenge of a failed school system, the uncovering of deep community needs, and a natural disaster, came a responsiveness that has made significant impact in a challenging urban area. Mullings embodied Jones' *second skill in nurturing improvisation* by simply saying, "Yes" when presented with an opportunity to care for people in the community in a tangible way.

They became risk takers, who were more concerned with an impact than packing pews with congregants. As a result, the two have become their reality, more impact, and more commitments to Christ. Partnerships and relationships with community leaders and elected

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[319] Rev. Dr. Leslie Mullings, Personal Interview, November 25, 2019.
[320] Jones, *Christian Social Innovation*, 72.
[321] Jones, *Christian Social Innovation*, 40.

officials have become a way of life. Persons experiencing these initiatives as participants or providers see this lifestyle as normative. People are more apt to see the church as innovative and true contributors to the welfare of the people.

The church of God would do well to reframe its understanding of and engagement in what we know as missions. There is a story of God's creative and redemptive activity within the world that requires prayerful openness and availability. A deeper theological exploration of God's intent and activity early serves as a basis and framework of our own call. While activity and productivity have been the church's *modus operandi*, there is both a breadth and specificity that is rooted in the exploration of the comprehensive mission of God. God loves his creation, and the contemporary church is to not only proclaim the Gospel, but also proclaim God's whole story as redeemed representatives and witness-bearers who are sent to every sphere of life to bear witness to the transformative desire and power of the living God.

## 5.4: KEEP PREACHING

The Apostle Paul reminds us, "For in the wisdom of God the world through its wisdom did not know him, God was pleased through the foolishness of what was preached to save those who believe" (1 Corinthians 1:21 [NIV]). Extensive attention has been given to aspects of prophetic and effective preaching. In an environment riddled by misinformation, heresy, and scandal, however, it is easy to be resigned to its shrinking importance and capability. As the pandemic has expedited the decline in congregational in-person worship, questions inevitably arise about the efficacy of the traditional herald. True preaching, however, is needed more now than ever.

The gospel is not feeble, but remains potent, ultimate, and boundless. While the pandemic and post-pandemic realities have and will adjust sermonic frequency, length, and access, this vocational function should not be abandoned. The Holy Spirit's activity and animation amongst the gathered brethren within the homiletic moment is beyond an exercise of oration. It includes but supersedes and transcends skillful artform. It is a holy and sacred time of grace extended by the Lord to his beloved creation. Preaching is salvific, a means of rescue, "from the dominion of darkness and bringing us into the kingdom of the Son he loves" (Colossians 1:13 [NIV]) as people are encouraged, convicted, and wooed into the Kingdom of God. Additionally, it continues to be an important means for congregational formation and participation.

Preaching can reframe morality and address social issues through both personal transformation and the faithful engagement of the civic domain. It is a gift for the world that, when guided by the Holy Spirit, can reimagine, and reframe realities which change trajectories now and in the hereafter. The contemporary preacher should view engagement within the United States political sphere as a grace and means for God's prophetic word and witness in the world. The church, preacher, and laity can be poised to induce, combat, and affect value systems without being co-opted by the political party machinery. By addressing the needs of people and the inequities within society, the church can be both voice and advocate that brings the values of the Kingdom of God to the fore when its principles and ethics are non-existent and or compromised within civilization.

The steadfast will honor and preserve the office and opportunity as God's strategy in the world for transformative presence. While the task is great, the possibilities are endless. Preaching has been and continues to be how the world will know.  The Apostle Paul reminds us:

> For "everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved." How, then, can they call on the one they have not believed in? And how can they believe in the one of whom they have not heard? And how can they hear without someone preaching to them? And how can anyone preach unless they are sent? As it is written: "How beautiful are the feet of those who bring good news!" (Romans 10:13-15 [NIV]).

There are areas for today that should occupy the preaching opportunity: hope, holiness, and dexterity. These areas, of course, should not be seen as an exhaustive checklist, but rather as important considerations that are needed for a diverse, perverse, and contumacious generation. Generous time has been expended unpacking hope. However, it must be reiterated first that hope remains a priority of proclamation. In an age of uncertainty and a time flooded by the indefinite, the promises of God and the assurances we have in Christ are both urgent and important. Hope is not a tagline for the precarious, but a reality we are bound to that when embraced will create firm foundations and an experience of freedom. The preacher must affirm it much like the prophet Zechariah, "we are prisoners of hope" (Zechariah 9:12).

Second, preach holiness. A perfecting love marked by singleness of heart is an underrepresented proclamation in these times. Rev. Dr. V. Seymour Cole, founder of Bronx Bethany Church of the Nazarene, would consistently submit, "Preach holiness, for that is what the heart longs for." Scripture reminds, "For the grace of God has appeared that offers salvation to all people. It teaches us to say 'No' to ungodliness and worldly passions, and to live self-controlled, upright and godly lives in this present age, while we wait for the blessed hope—the appearing of the glory of our great God and Savior, Jesus Christ, who gave himself for us to redeem us from all wickedness and to purify for himself a people that are his very own, eager to do what is good" (Titus 2:11-14 [NIV]). The extension of grace toward evidential character change, a feature of hopeful living, is key. Mildred Bangs Wynkoop renders, "perfection is integrity at any point along the line of maturation. It is the process of ripening

Christian character. It begins in the genesis of Christian life and continues so long as integrity is essential to love."[322] This message of lifelong priority love for God, which yields a transformed character and the expressed love for neighbor, is not a popular sentiment. Although this perspective is a minority one in today's context, it is essential.

Third, preach flexibility. Just as the context is changing rapidly, the courier and prophet must not be tied to methodology and must communicate the same to his or her constituents. In this season, the church must be nimble, agile, and responsive. Stone remits, "the practice of Christian ministry today then, must be creative and flexible in its attempts to move beyond the ever-increasing tendencies toward barrenness or apathy, on the one hand, and destruction or unrestricted autonomy, on the other. Both of these tendencies threaten our existence in Christian hope."[323] Structures will be modified, programs will be added, and some will cease. Even personnel will cycle in and out. As time and ministry progresses, we are to look forward to methodological changes while we keep the message sacrosanct. There must be a great shift in the perspective, engagement, and leadership of the church within North America.

## 5.5: CELEBRATE

We have seen that hoping is participatory and marked by expectation steeped in biblical promise. For the universal church, it cannot be lost that a hopeful feature is to celebrate. The celebratory nature is a distinguishable and essential feature of hopeful people. In this time in human history, joy and celebration must continue to permeate the fibers of the church as witness to God's immanence and transcendence. It is incumbent upon every leader to not only interrogate to ascertain the wrongs and ills that need adjustment, but to work even more diligently to lead

[322] Mildred Bangs Wynkoop, *A Theology of Love: The Dynamic of Wesleyanism* (Kansas City: Beacon Hill Press, 1972), 301.

[323] Stone, *Compassionate Ministry*, 75.

God's beloved in consistent identification and magnification of what is right and blessed. A lifestyle proclamation of joy must not be overlooked but regarded as a chief principle. Scripture reminds us of the reason for our celebration: "May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace as you trust in him, so that you may overflow with hope by the power of the Holy Spirit" (Romans 15:13 [NIV]).

When the Apostle Paul writes to the church in Rome he knows well about suffering under Nero and the horrid realities of living in the Roman Empire. It is likely that he recalls the story of the beheading of John the Baptist in Matthew 14:13-21 by Herod per Herodias' request. Such an act paints a panoramic view of the conditions the church was subject to. It represents a government void of moral rectitude, an absence of due process (suspect imprisonment, without conviction, sentencing, or trial), heartless and humiliating murder, and a system that condones whimsical homicide of the minority or anyone who opposed persons in positions of power. However, despite all these realities, the Apostle speaks of the *God of hope* who fills his people with all joy and peace as they trust him.

To conclude, we celebrate because God conceives, defines, and embodies hope. He is the creator, designer, and sustainer of its truth. My wife and I have the privilege of two very imaginative children. Whatever they draw, build, or create per their inventiveness can supernaturally transform into whatever is needed, no matter the potential obstacle. When we are playing a game using a cardboard box as a car, if we reach an obstacle, these little creators change the box's function to accomplish their mission. At the point I think and wish the game cannot proceed, my children become even more overjoyed due to the transformative nature of this now utility box in their hands as fabricators. Similarly, we celebrate because the God of hope brings all things to fruition no matter the circumstance. Earthly conditions are no threat to hope.

Whether pandemic, civil unrest, economic challenge, racism, political divides, or deep evil, the Lord prevails. In fact, we can celebrate all the more, and overflow with hope by the power of the Holy Spirit.

Intentionality in celebration amongst the community is pivotal. We have looked previously at the need for presence and solidarity within the process of grief, and the struggles of life within our context. However, to celebrate is to embody the inherent joy that we have in Christ Jesus. A close church sister struggling with the difficulties of stage four cancer shared the importance for her to be amongst people who have the joy of Christ and can celebrate. Congregations now more than ever must create opportunities to celebrate life together as practitioners of hope. Celebration is beyond a feature or staple of African American preaching, but a disposition and commitment as witness. As Frank Thomas reminds us, "the mission of the celebrative community is to proclaim that the dominion of death has been overcome and the dominion of God rules."[324] Again, it does not end there. Homiletical hope is beyond the reversal of power; it is a renewed experience of harmony, where there is "righteousness, peace and joy in the Holy Spirit" (Romans 14:17 [NIV]).

[324] Thomas, *The Like to Never Quit Praisin' God,* 42.

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