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More Than Tongues Can Tell: Significations in Black Pentecostal Thought

Eric Lewis Williams

A Thesis Submitted for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy in Religious Studies
University of Edinburgh

2014
Declaration

This is to certify that the work contained within has been composed by me and is entirely my own work. No part of this thesis has been submitted for any other degree or professional qualification.

Name: Eric Lewis Williams

Date: 1 December 2014
Dedication

Blessed are the dead which die in the Lord from henceforth: Yea, saith the Spirit, that they may rest from their labours; and their works do follow them.
Revelation 14:13 (KJV)

To my blessed mother Mildred (1944-2010), who deposited within her children all good things: an extraordinary human being and a woman of high moral and spiritual development. I shall ever be grateful for the gift of life, her gifts of love and her personification of strength, courage and wisdom. I am her legacy and I bless the Lord for choosing me.

To Sarah Denise Robinson (1963-2008): a good sister, supporter and lover of truth. Thank you for loving me through the darkness and feasting with me at the banquet of life.

To Reverend Loren Lambert (1926-1999): a pastor, teacher and discerner of gifts. Thank you for calling forth my gifts and setting me apart for a vocation of Christian love and service.

To Dr. Dorothy Webster-Exume (1922-2011): a mother, mentor and encourager extraordinaire. Thank you for seeing what I could not see and walking with me until I could see it.

To Reverend Novell V. Woolfolk (1928-2009): a father, friend and moral teacher. Thank you for teaching me to drink life with big gulps.

I will see each of you in the morning...
Acknowledgements

Dissertations do not write themselves nor are such projects written *ex nihilo*, and so this work rests upon the prayers, encouragement, support and resources of so many. The first acknowledgement and word of thanks is to God, my Creator, Redeemer and Sustainer. It is only by God’s grace that I have been able to produce that which you now hold.

It was the late Dr. Benjamin Elijah Mays, in gratitude for what God had done for him through the people God had placed in his life, who entitled his second autobiography, *Lord, the People Have Driven Me On*. Like Mays, I have been so fortunate for my life to have been touched, shaped and influenced by a multitude of people and everything that I have accomplished has been because the people have driven me on. And so after thanking God, it is the people to whom I dedicate this work and that I return thanks.

I thank my parents, the Reverend Elijah Sampson Williams, Sr., and the late Mrs. Mildred B. Williams, for their love and support and for raising their children with “God in our house.” I have been so blessed to have them as my parents and although my blessed mother is gone now, through me and my siblings, our parents and their legacy of faith will always live on.

To my siblings: Elijah Jr.; Marie; Elvis; Elmer; Mildred; Margie; Ernie; Marilyn; Sarah (of blessed memory); Trent; Earstin; Vivian; Michael; Mark; Tim; Andre; and Reggie. Each of you know how much I love you and appreciate you. Thank you for allowing me to take the road I have taken and for loving and supporting me as I have tried to find my way and to be faithful to what I perceive to be God’s calling upon my life. Thank you for being present to attend to the needs of
our family while I was often so far away attending to this work. I owe each of you big time.

Thank you to all my aunts, uncles, nieces, nephews, cousins and my extended family. Thanks especially to my Aunt Rosa and Aunt Henrietta for their constant support and encouragement and for the way that they cared for my mother during her illness, making it possible for me to continue my studies abroad. I shall ever owe the two of you for this. And I know how desperately you want me to get married, but know I am working on this. And my thanks go to my cousins, Karen, Tasha, Kendral, Kewan and Jamal, who cared for my mother as their own, enabling me to do what was necessary to complete this project.

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And thanks to the pastoral leadership of these and other congregations: Rev. Trevor & Mrs. Cherry Spencer; Rev. Dr. Lord-Elorm Donkor & Mrs. Joyce Donkor; Pastor Samuel Earl DeBose; Superintendent Maurice A. West & Mrs. Sharon West; Bishop James & Mrs. Vernesta Austin; Rev. Annie Ruth Davis; Bishop Joseph & Mrs. Fran Clemmons; Bishop George & Mrs. Barbara McKinney; Pastor Christiana Longe; Bishop Alvin Blake; Bishop Loran Mann; Superintendent Geoffrey Folkes;
Pastor Simon & Mrs. Brenda Wallace; Elder Frances Annor; and Pastor Bill Miles.

To my second mother, Mother Bennie V. Summers, whom the Lord has given to me, who has loved me and supported me as though I were the child of her womb. Only God knows the depth of my love and appreciation for you. You are my mother and my friend. I will spend my lifetime repaying you for the many sacrifices that you have made for me. Thank you for always being there and for believing in me. Your kindness will not go unrewarded.

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dogmatic slumber.” Thank you for exposing me to the inner-life of worlds I had not previously known. Thank you for helping me to grasp the indispensible role of the social sciences for interpreting religious experience. I’m grateful for your revolutionary patience during the days when I had more excuses than chapter submissions. You are an amazing doctoral advisor and I will ever be indebted to you for your guidance and critical supervision. Thank you, Baba.

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Abstract

The current study seeks to insert African American Pentecostal theologies as a generative subject of examination for scholars of American and African Atlantic religious history and theology. By providing close and critical readings of newly-found sources of African American Pentecostal theology by four significant African American Pentecostal theologians, this study situates African American Pentecostal thought as a distinctive theological trajectory within both African Atlantic Christianity and North American religious thought. The writings of theologians Ozro Thurston Jones, Jr., Ithiel Conrad Clemmons, James Alexander Forbes, Jr., and William Clair Turner, Jr., will be explored to expose the contours of a distinctive African American Pentecostal theology. An examination of the writings of this cohort demonstrates that African American Pentecostal thought is contextual (marked by an openness to and engagement with various Christian and philosophical traditions) and liberationist (deeply committed to a revitalization of Christian witness in the pursuit of social justice). In this comparative analysis of their respective theological programs, with a focus on recurring theological ideas, values, and themes, this study provides a phenomenology of African American Pentecostal theology.

Within the field of modern black theology, there has been a call by scholars for more attention to be paid to pneumatology, which has been generally neglected; while within the field of North American Pentecostalism, a glossocentric pneumatology has been the dominant theological framework. The four theologians examined in this study resist both limitations, and in the diversity of their methods and theological perspectives, these scholars participate in a broader, more generous
theological enterprise. This project seeks to both unsettle and complexify anew various reductionist readings of African American Pentecostal theologies and to create space for a deepened exchange between the broader traditions of African Atlantic Christian theologies and African American religious thought.

The methodologies employed in this study include biographical criticism, phenomenological analysis, and religious ethnography. Biographical criticism underscores the critical importance of social contexts in the formation of black religious consciousness. Phenomenological analysis allows for an examination of African American Pentecostalism as its own distinctive religious phenomenon. And critical religious ethnography is employed to assess the reception and impact of each theologian’s overall theological production. Given the growth and theological maturation of Pentecostalism, and the social, cultural and ecumenical impact it has exerted worldwide, this dissertation examines what the theology of the African American Pentecostal movement has contributed to contemporary Christian thought amidst the shifting theological contours of World Christianity and North American religious thought.
## Abbreviations

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Abbreviation</th>
<th>Description</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>AME</td>
<td>African Methodist Episcopal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>AMEZ</td>
<td>African Methodist Episcopal Zion</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CDC</td>
<td>Community Development Corporation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>COGIC</td>
<td>Church of God in Christ</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>COOLJC</td>
<td>Church of Our Lord Jesus Christ</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>UHCA</td>
<td>United Holy Church of America</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PAW</td>
<td>Pentecostal Assemblies of the World</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PCCNA</td>
<td>Pentecostal Charismatic Churches of North America</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PFNA</td>
<td>Pentecostal Fellowship of North America</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SPS</td>
<td>Society for Pentecostal Studies</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NARSC</td>
<td>North American Renewal Service Committee</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PCUSA</td>
<td>Presbyterian Church USA</td>
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<tr>
<td>UMC</td>
<td>United Methodist Church</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>YPWW</td>
<td>Young People Willing Workers</td>
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Preface

My initial exposure to the issues raised during the era of Black Power came through my older brother Elmer, nearly 20 years my senior. Like so many other African-American men who had “come of age” during the cultural revolutions of the 1960’s, Elmer, in passing through the revolution, came out “blacker,” more proud and more defiant than before. It was through him (and my other older brothers) that I first heard of the social teachings and political visions of Malcolm X, Eldridge Cleaver, Marcus Garvey, Huey P. Newton and the Black Panther Party, King Larry Hoover and the Black Gangster Disciples. These men were their heroes. They gave voice to the cries and longings of my brothers’ generation. These men were the truly conscious.

My father Elijah Sampson Williams, being nurtured in Mississippi, a State then “sweatering with the heat of injustice and oppression,” came to consciousness within another era. Though the sordid social reality of racial segregation greatly tinted and tainted his social outlook, his interior life was significantly shaped and fortified by the worldviews and spiritualities of his enslaved African forbearers. Within this worldview, in the absence of medical professionals, there were alternative possibilities for the healing of the sick; there was salvation for the truly repentant; and it was not uncommon for those who had no recourse in the face of legal injustice to petition God for mercy and divine retribution. In my father’s world, the “unseen” took precedence over the things that were seen. It was in this world that Black Pentecostal religion took hold of him and he began to proclaim the good news of the Lord who delivered him from his addiction to gambling and raised his oldest
daughter from the dead. It was through the answered prayers of Mother Florence Franklin that my oldest sister Marie, after drinking a goodly portion of kerosene and hovering for a time between life and death, became a witness to the resurrection power of Mother Franklin’s Lord. According to my father’s testimony, it was out of a sincere desire to know “the God of Florence Franklin,” who raised his dying daughter, that he was converted and began to attend what was then called the “sanctified church.”

As the first generation within my family born in the North, I was caught between these worlds: the world of my father and the world of my older brothers. At that time, these worlds seemed so utterly distant. Though in my religious community I was being formed in the faith of my father, the late night conversations with my older brothers also took root in me. And though neither my father nor brother believed that the world we inherited was the world God truly willed, both held very different visions of the world and what role the Church should play in making life more human for our people. I would literally sit for hours listening to my holiness preaching father and my cultural-nationalist older brother going back and forth over God’s intention for creation. Though I had already come to faith through the fires of Black Pentecostal religion, all along I knew my brother had a point that our African-American brothers and sisters were dying and being slain in the streets.

It was in seminary, and later in divinity school, that I was introduced to the discourses of Black and Womanist theologies. It was through the writings of theologians like James Cone, Albert Cleage and Kelly Brown Douglas that I saw in print for the first time a body of literature written about the Black Christ, about whom my brother spoke so passionately. It was also during these years that I was
exposed to the writings of Leonard Lovett, Bennie Goodwin, James Tinney and Cheryl Sanders: theologically trained Black Holiness-Pentecostals, who embraced the praxis of black theology and whose writings seemed to lend more credence to my father's faith perspectives, though much more socially grounded. It was these scholars that provoked my reflection on (what Goodwin called) the social implications of Pentecostal power. I became interested in the theological reasoning that undergirded such a progressive Pentecostal vision, which sought to hold together both spiritual empowerment and humanization.

The generative inclination to write this doctoral project grows out of my own existential struggle of coming to terms with both inherited worldviews. In some way in this project, I continue the unceasing debate of my father and older brother regarding the relationship of the black church, namely the Pentecostal churches, to the peculiar misery endemic to contexts where black people “live, move, and have their being.”
Chapter One

*Whose Report Shall You Believe?: Black Pentecostalism as Curious Object of Examination in American Religion*

1.1 Introduction: Situating Pentecostal Thought in the Study of Black Religion in America

In the third and most recent edition of his widely acclaimed text, *Black Religion and Black Radicalism: An Interpretation of the Religious History of African Americans*, American religious historian Gayraud Wilmore issues an apology to theologians and scholars from African-American Holiness and Pentecostal traditions.\(^1\) According to Wilmore, if he had time to write his text over again he would have paid more attention to their critical insights.\(^2\) For Wilmore, the theological account that black Pentecostals would give of themselves, namely in terms of their understandings and experiences of the sacred, is greatly needed for a clearer and more robust picture of African diasporan religions in North America. Seeing within the movement potential “for revolutionary activism, based not on some secular rationale for political power but on a concept of empowerment by the Holy Spirit…considerably more militant and socially relevant,”\(^3\) Wilmore argues that the black Pentecostals are playing “a more determinative role in movements for social justice and liberation in their respective contexts.”\(^4\) According to Wilmore,

---

1. Insights from scholars in the following African-American Holiness and Pentecostal denominations could have been considered, including: the Church of God in Christ; United Holy Church of America; Church of Christ Holiness; Mt. Sinai Holy Church; Mt. Calvary Holy Church; and Pentecostal Assemblies of the World.


4. Ibid.
these movements have "already challenged, and threaten to eclipse, the mainline black denominations in terms of aggressive leadership and mass participation."\(^5\)

Nominating Black Holiness-Pentecostalism as a remarkable movement, Wilmore believes that the movement must be listed as “one of the most powerful expressions of Black religion in the world and is today outstripping the historic Black denominations both in physical bodies and spiritual dynamic.”\(^6\) According to Wilmore, “[n]o serious history of Christianity in America can be written in the future without a full appreciation of [its] influence[.]”\(^7\) And though Wilmore limited his comments to the movement's spiritual dynamism, rapid proliferation and the creative possibilities of the tradition’s theologies, there is far more to be said about this tradition. Today, the African-American Pentecostal tradition celebrates over one hundred years of presence in American religious life and has been dubbed among the fastest growing and most dynamic religious traditions in urban America. Albeit, because of the dearth of serious scholarly engagement of this tradition and the tragic misreadings of the movement that abound, the study of African-American Pentecostalism remains a critical site of examination for scholars of religion interested in the diversity of religious options within the Black community in North America. Wilmore’s observation notwithstanding, this project seeks to take up the neglected insights of Black Pentecostal thought that Wilmore laments.

The current study seeks to insert African American Pentecostal theologies as a generative subject of examination for scholars of American and African Atlantic

\(^5\) Ibid.
religious history and theology. By providing close and critical readings of newly-
found sources of African American Pentecostal theology by four pioneering black
Pentecostal theologians, this study situates African American Pentecostal thought as
a distinctive theological trajectory within both African Atlantic Christianity and
North American religious thought. The extant theological writings of the late Bishop
Ozro Thurston Jones, Jr. (1923-2008), the late Bishop Ithiel Conrad Clemmons
(1921-1999), Dr. James Alexander Forbes, Jr. (1935-) and Dr. William Clair Turner,
Jr. (1948-), will be explored to expose the contours of a distinctive African American
Pentecostal theology. An examination of the writings of this cohort demonstrates that
African American Pentecostal thought is contextual (marked by an openness to and
engagement with various Christian and philosophical traditions) and liberationist
(deeply committed to a revitalization of Christian witness in the pursuit of social
justice). In this comparative analysis of their respective theological programs, with a
focus on recurring theological ideas, values, and themes, this study provides a
phenomenology of African American Pentecostal theology. In addition to
dismantling prevailing notions of Pentecostalism's anti-intellectualism and lack of
theological rigor, this project seeks to explore the ways in which formation and

8 For the purposes of this study, with reference to Jones, Clemmons, Forbes and Turner, the terms
“scholar,” “theologian” and “intellectual” are used interchangeably, as all can be understood as
religious intellectuals and scholarly theological interpreters of their shared tradition. Whereas Forbes
and Turner work as full-time theological educators and participate fully in life of the American
theological academy, Clemmons qualifies by virtue of his academic training, theological function
within the church and his lifelong scholarly contributions to the Society for Pentecostal Studies and
the discipline of black theology. And while Jones' primary vocational identity was ecclesial, as a
theologian of the church, Jones is interpreted as an intellectual because his writings for the church are
informed by his academic study of Christian philosophy and Protestant theology, and not just his own
religious experience. In addition to his doctoral level theological training, Jones produced theological
literature for the church, bringing to bear the insights garnered from his engagement with the classical
disciplines of philosophy and theology. Moreover, each theologian examined offered a critical
engagement of the Pentecostal tradition and sought to craft a constructive theological revision of
Pentecostalism.
social context influence the construction of theologies by marginalized groups in America.

1.2.1 Early External Observations: Media

Various elements of Pentecostalism as practiced by African Americans in the United States have received a fair share of attention in print literature over the past one hundred years. These references and interpretations have primarily been the writings of journalists, sociologists, religious historians, anthropologists, literary theorists and later by black Pentecostals themselves. Prior to any scholarly engagement of the tradition, the first recorded depictions of Black Pentecostalism were the characterizations and caricaturizations of journalist and newspaper reporters. These journalistic ethnographers captured the birth and immediate aftermath of the Azusa Street Revival, which for many represents the mythic origins of the modern Pentecostal awakening. Birthed in an African American congregation in a Los Angeles ghetto, this local revival later spawned an international movement.

These early chroniclers, themselves products of American racist ideology, in their reporting captured what they deemed as the bizarre and grotesque elements of this revival. By focusing on the religious frenzy, playing up racial stereotypes, and detailing transgressions of American racial, cultural and social mores, these reporters ultimately painted the African Americans who led and participated in this movement in a less than favorable light. Examples of this can be seen in two separate accounts from the *Los Angeles Times*, at the height of the revival in 1906:

Meetings are held in a tumble-down shack on Azusa Street, and the devotees of the weird doctrine practice the most fanatical rites, preach the wildest theories and work themselves into a state of mad excitement in their peculiar zeal. Colored people and a sprinkling of whites compose the congregation, and night is made hideous in the neighborhood by the howlings of the worshippers, who spend hours swaying forth and back in a nerve racking
attitude of prayer and supplication. They claim to have the "gift of tongues" and be able to understand the babel.\(^9\)

In addition to disparaging the worshippers, a September 1906 account attacks the African American leadership of the movement. Calling the movement a "disgraceful intermingling of the races," a local newspaper reporter further states that these early Pentecostals:

- cry and make howling noises all day and into the night. They run, jump, shake all over, shout to the top of their voice, spin around in circles, fall out on the sawdust blanketed floor jerking, kicking and rolling all over it. Some of them pass out and do not move for hours as though they were dead. These people appear to be mad, mentally deranged or under a spell. They claim to be filled with the spirit. They have a one-eyed, illiterate, Negro as their preacher who stays on his knees much of the time with his head hidden between the wooden milk crates. He doesn't talk very much but at times he can be heard shouting, 'Repent,' and he's supposed to be running the thing...they repeatedly sing the same song, 'The Comforter Has Come.'\(^10\)

These early printed accounts in both newspapers and periodicals both biased and prejudiced the early social scientific accounts of the fledgling (though soon to be burgeoning) religious movement, leading often to wholesale and categorical dismissals of both black Pentecostals and the distinctive elements of their religious traditions.

1.2.2 Social Scientific Observations

Immediately following the early journalistic accounts and their caricaturizations of the African American Pentecostal experience, the first scholars to critically examine this tradition were those trained within the fields of sociology and anthropology.\(^11\) Operating largely from empirical epistemologies and employing the

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\(^11\) These scholars include: Elmer T. Clark; Zora Neale Hurston; Arthur Huff Fauset; Melvin Williams; St. Clair Drake; and Joseph R. Washington.
methods of the social sciences, by virtue of their training and modes of analysis, these scholars showed very little interest in religious meaning. Seeking rather to discover what could be learned about cultural and social patterns in African American life, these early studies were particularly interested in the transformation of religion in North America and the attendant dynamics of culture, migration and urbanization.

Because of a lack of sensitivity to differences in theological beliefs, a major problem attending these early social-scientific examinations was the tendency to situate and to interpret Pentecostalism within the sociological taxonomy of urban sects and cults rather than view the tradition as an institutional expression of American Christianity. By interpreting Pentecostalism within this strictly social-scientific gaze, these Pentecostals were often interpreted through theories of deprivation, anomie, millenarianism, and thus were dismissed as otherworldly, apolitical and socially disengaged.

In his 1949 study, *The Small Sects in America*, American sociologist Elmer Clark placed the United Holy Church of America (UHCA), the oldest Pentecostal denomination in the United States, within a constellation of what he saw as other marginal Christian and non-Christian groups. In commenting on the UHCA as an object of serious study, he simply said of the tradition that "there is nothing distinctive about this sect." Clark, like many other scholars, saw Pentecostalism as an aberration within the American subculture and when referencing the tradition, dismissed Black Pentecostalism’s theological significance and its increasing

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13 In addition to Clark, other scholars who viewed Pentecostalism as an aberration within the American subculture included: Arthur Huff Fauset; St. Clair Drake; and Joseph R. Washington.
influence within the larger context of American cultural and religious life. Likewise, cultural anthropologist Arthur Huff Fauset in his 1944 text, *Black Gods of the Metropolis*, a study of urban congregational life in post-migration Philadelphia, labeled the Black Pentecostal denomination founded by Bishop Ida Mae Robinson (the Mt. Sinai Holy Church of America) as a "Negro religious cult in the urban North." Interestingly, Robinson’s church is the only Christian group to be examined in his study and there is no meaningful discussion of the congregation’s theological orientation.

### 1.2.3 Empathetic Observers of Early Pentecostalism

Perhaps one of the first scholars to comment upon the religious and cultural significance of African American Pentecostalism is folklorist and cultural anthropologist Zora Neale Hurston. Hurston, a student of renowned German-American cultural anthropologist Franz Boas, considered the father of both American and modern anthropology, situated her studies of religion, folklore and anthropology among African descendants in Americas. In her anthropological writings dated as early as 1926, Hurston discussed the sanctified church as a highly distinctive form of both African religion and American Christianity. In doing so, she points to the need for further reflection upon the movement. According to Hurston, "the rise of various groups of saints in America in the last twenty years is not the appearance of a new religion as has been reported. It is in fact the older forms of Negro religious expression asserting themselves against the new." Seeing African American Pentecostalism as the ‘return of the repressed’ in New World African

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14 The “sanctified church,” which is the title of the essay for which Hurston’s book is named, is a covering term for African American Christians who belong to Holiness and Pentecostal denominations.

spirituality, Hurston argues that one of the geniuses of this tradition is that it functions as "a protest against the high-brow tendency in Negro Protestant congregations as the Negroes gain more education and wealth." In further lodging Black Pentecostalism within African indigenous spirituality, Hurston went as far as saying that in the ecstasy-filled worship experience, the worshiping Pentecostal “congregation is restored to its primitive altars under the new name of Christ.” In light of Hurston’s observations, a number of scholars began to consider the significance of Pentecostalism within American Christianity and culture; to ponder the relationship between Black Pentecostalism and African religions; and to take seriously the sanctified church as a highly distinctive institutional expression of American religion.

The celebrated African American literary and cultural theorist, James Baldwin, is yet a second major figure, in addition to Hurston, to draw attention to the significance of Black Pentecostalism as a neglected, yet powerful cultural and religious trajectory in American life. Named by one of his critics as “America's inside eye on the Black Holiness-Pentecostal churches,” Baldwin’s writings exposed the world to the very inner life of this tradition, shedding light upon the moral, cultural and theological worlds inhabited by those who belong to the tradition. The 1953 publication of Baldwin’s first novel, Go Tell It on the Mountain, exposed a wider, largely secular, audience to Black Pentecostal beliefs and practices including

16 Ibid.
17 Ibid., 104.
18 These scholars include: Cheryl Townsend Gilkes; James Tinney; David Daniels, III; Cheryl Sanders; and Deidre Crumbley.
the “tarrying” prayer tradition\textsuperscript{20}, holy dancing\textsuperscript{21} and the moral rigor of the holiness codes, which served as a compass for believers to live in the world, but not be of the world.\textsuperscript{22} In his 1963 collection of essays, \textit{The Fire Next Time}, James Baldwin, no longer an adherent to Holiness-Pentecostal beliefs,\textsuperscript{23} still continued to extol the beauty, significance and the indelible imprint left upon him by the tradition when he writes:

there is no music like that music, no drama like the drama of the saints rejoicing, the sinners moaning, the tambourines racing, and all those voices coming together and crying holy unto the Lord. There is still, for me, no pathos quite like the pathos of those multicolored, worn, somehow triumphant and transfigured faces, speaking from the depths of a visible, tangible, continuing despair of the goodness of the Lord. I have never seen anything to equal the fire and excitement that sometimes, without warning, would fill a church, causing the church…to rock. Nothing that has happened to me since equals the power and the glory that I sometimes felt when, in the middle of a sermon, I knew that I was somehow, by some miracle, really carrying, as they said, the “Word” when the church and I were one. Their pain and joy were mine, and mine was theirs – they surrendered their pain and joy to me. I surrendered mine to them – and their cries of “Amen!” and “Hallelujah” and “Yes, Lord!” and “Praise His name!” and “Preach it, brother!” sustained and whipped on my solos until we all became equal, wringing wet, singing and dancing, in anguish and rejoicing, at the foot of the altar.\textsuperscript{24}

\textsuperscript{20}Tarrying is a religious practice and form of prayer in which initiates invoke the Spirit to come down and be made manifest within the ritual space, similar to other traditions of spirit possession with Africa and its diaspora. Please see David Daniel's "Until the Power of the Lord Comes Down: African American Pentecostal Spirituality and Tarrying," in Clive Erricker and Jane Erricker's \textit{Contemporary Spiritualities: Social and Religious Contexts}, New York: Continuum, 2001.
\textsuperscript{21}Holy dancing is ecstatic embodied ritual performance in which the worshipper, being overcome by the Spirit, dances often in a trance-like state.
\textsuperscript{22}“To be in the world, but not be of the world” is a term used by students of the tradition to describe the delicate and difficult way in which Pentecostals seek to live in the world but remain unencumbered and undistracted by the temptations of the world. It is lifted from the biblical injunction found in John 15:19.
\textsuperscript{23}Baldwin's critique of Pentecostalism is significant as Baldwin, in his youth, was once an insider, though he later rejected this tradition and its doctrines. Years later, he provided an aesthetic critique of this tradition from the location of a literary and cultural critic. Scholars of religion picked up on his insightful critiques and began to use Baldwin as a source for interpreting Pentecostalism as a distinctive religious phenomenon. These scholars include: Clarence Hardy; Douglas Field; and David Hempton.
Baldwin’s detailed insider accounts along with his ability to recreate this highly sophisticated moral and religious tapestry that is the African American Pentecostal experience, demonstrated that this tradition both merited and demanded further scholarly attention.

In his insightful and provocative study, *A Black Pentecostal Concept: A Forgotten Chapter of Black History: The black Pentecostals’ Contribution to the Church Universal*, Swiss Reformed theologian and missiologist, Walter Hollenweger writes:

The Black communities in the United States have made two important contributions to the universal church; their religious music…and the Pentecostal spirituality which, since its beginning in a humble Black church in Los Angeles in 1906, has swept across the world in a grandiose revival…while the first contribution has been known for a long time and given some recognition, the second one has been undoubtedly ignored even by Pentecostals themselves…It is, therefore, appropriate to uncover these forgotten pages of [world religious] history.  

Though nearly all of the earliest scholarly observers of African American Pentecostalism were from the United States, Hollenweger, a Swiss theologian, whose study was published in 1970, became one of the earliest empathetic scholarly observers of the African American Pentecostal experience.

Whereas many early observers of Black Pentecostalism employed social scientific methodologies in their studies of the tradition, Hollenweger's work was unique in its attempt to uncover the belief structures, theologies and alternative modes of theologizing inherent within the tradition. He used insights from the broad and multidisciplinary fields of missiology, anthropology of religion, Religious Studies, history and theology to ground his research into African American

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Pentecostalism. Central to Hollenweger's thesis was the revolutionary idea that African American Pentecostal theologies offered alternatives to Western literary modes of theologizing by tapping into what he later termed as the broader movement's "black oral root." Drawing from this African spiritual taproot, Hollenweger argues that the genius of the tradition is most clearly manifested in the elements of: an oral liturgy; narrative theology and witness; democratic participation at the levels of reflection, prayer and decision-making; dreams and visions in personal and public forms of worship; and the material dimensions of salvation, best evidenced in bodily healing.  

For Hollenweger, these distinctive dimensions of Pentecostalism have contributed, more than anything else, to its growth, and provided sufficient warrant for further critical theological study in the future. The current study seeks to participate in the critical theological project that Hollenweger envisioned over four decades ago.

Written from his post at Yale University in 1972, American religious historian Sydney Ahlstrom's groundbreaking study, *A Religious History of the American People*, is regarded by many within his discipline as a significant moment within the field of American religious history. Comprehensive in his coverage, yet probing in his analysis, Ahlstrom provides his readership with what one commentator has called a thoroughly "modern, almost anthropological view" of the religious history of the American people. And though much could be said here about Ahlstrom's magisterial work, perhaps the single aspect of his project most germane to the current study is the highly insightful comments that Ahlstrom made

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26 Ibid., 16.
regarding the significance of African American Pentecostalism in the transformation of both the American and global religious landscapes. Ahlstrom states of the movement's founder and leader, William Seymour: "Seymour [and African American Pentecostalism] personifies a process by which black piety exerted its greatest direct influence on American religious history."28

Prefiguring the significance of the movement within the broader context of World Christianity, Ahlstrom remarks: "just as Pentecostal doctrines and church ways answered to the spiritual and social needs of blacks, so [would] they to other disinherited or suppressed people all over the world."29 But not only did Ahlstrom articulate the significance of this tradition in both the broader American and wider global religious theatres, as a highly unique expression of African American Christianity, he went on to say of Pentecostalism: “it constituted perhaps the most dynamic and socially functional element in black Protestantism; and its strict pietistic moral demands made it a considerable factor in the upward social mobility of its members."30 As these quotes indicate, Ahlstrom regarded Black Pentecostalism as a highly distinctive religious trajectory, with both global and local (American) significance. In pointing out this reality, Ahlstrom anticipates the need for further study of the African American Pentecostal community.

29 Ibid.
30 Ibid.,1060.
1.3 Pentecostal Scholarship as Distinctive Trajectory in the Study of Black Religion

Any academic discussion of Black religious thought,\textsuperscript{31} birthed in North America during the 1960’s and 70’s, is incomplete without including the theological responses generated by a small corps of Black Pentecostal intellectuals formed within the tradition. These individuals were the first to provide both second and third order scholarly reflections on a range of topics germane to the understanding of the African American Pentecostal experience in North America. Producing articles, monographs, theses and dissertations within the academic fields of history, social sciences, and practical theology, this cohort of Pentecostals provided the first critical studies of the tradition to be produced by those formed by the tradition. Regarding the significance of this intellectual trajectory, American church historian, David Daniels, has noted that the existence of this small corps of Black Pentecostal intellectuals demonstrates the way in which liberal Protestantism and Black Holiness Pentecostalism intersected during the early years of the Pentecostal movement among African American Christians. According to Daniels, “a significant number of Pentecostal graduates of liberal seminaries from as early as the 1940’s [numbered] among the ranks of the [theological and denominational] leadership [of the movement], graduates of Temple University, Oberlin College, Union Theological Seminary (NYC), [the] Interdenominational Theological Center and Harvard University School of Divinity,” to name a few.\textsuperscript{32} These scholars, interpreting Black Pentecostalism from the interior, chose theologians and intellectual trajectories from

\textsuperscript{31} “Black religion” and “black religious thought” are used by scholars as covering terms for the wide variety of religious beliefs and practices of people of African descent in North America.

various theological and ideological traditions as their scholarly theological interlocutors. With these new perspectives, they provided theological insight into their formative religious tradition.

In creating space for black Pentecostal scholars within the study of black religion, Sanders situates them within a framework offered by African-American cultural philosopher Cornel West. In his highly provocative study, *Prophesy Deliverance!: An Afro-American Revolutionary Christianity*, West sets forth, “a typology of black intellectual traditions that rests on diverse depictions of Afro-American religion and takes a significant step toward formulation of a “unified theory” of black culture and religion.”33 In this typology, the four traditions that West outlines include the *exceptionalists*, who “laud the uniqueness of Afro-American culture,” the *assimilationists*, who “consider Afro-American culture and personality to be pathological,” the *marginalists* who “see the culture as restrictive, constraining and confining” and the *humanists* who “extol the distinctiveness of the culture while affirming that Afro-Americans are not above or below the rest of the human race.”34 For Sanders, “this typology is used as a guide to interpreting the thought of a select group of black intellectuals of the black consciousness era who in one way or another addressed the problem of exilic existence in light of the symbols and meaning of black folk religion as practiced in slavery and in the urban storefronts of the twentieth century.”35 According to Sanders, the black Pentecostals, when examined within this same framework were highly significant in that their

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34 Ibid., 106-118. It is interesting to note that though West includes the humanist tradition there is no accounting of an African-American theist tradition in his typology. Perhaps the theist tradition could have served as a possible trajectory for interpreting the Afro-Pentecostalists.
35 Ibid., 119.
existence brought additional aspects of the notion of exile into focus. In attempting to situate these thinkers within West’s typology, Sanders observed that the Pentecostals’ social and theological perspectives:

have embodied all four categories of the Black intellectual tradition. As exceptionalists, these thinkers exalted the aesthetic of Pentecostal worship; as assimilationists they embraced the core values of American democratic idealism or of Marxist Socialism; as marginalists, they maintained a strong sense of victimization by American racism; and as humanists, they cherished the cultural authenticity and ecumenical appeal of Pentecostalism.36

However, Sanders posits that by virtue of their association with Pentecostalism, these scholars “exemplify an additional dimension of exile on the extreme margins of an American society stratified by race, class and denominational status.”37 It is within the margins of the margins that the black Pentecostals’ unique theological perspectives emerged. These perspectives have yet to be probed by theologians from the larger African-American church tradition. Though modern black theology remains the reigning paradigm for contemporary African-American moral and theological discourse, its analysis has not been critically applied to the study of Black Pentecostal theology. In consideration of what black theology and Black Pentecostal thought have to offer each other, the current study seeks to help facilitate such a much needed conversation.

Although Sanders seeks to situate Black Pentecostal thought as a distinctive trajectory within African-American moral discourse as well as offer the theological praxis of Black Pentecostalism as a model of contemporary Christian moral reasoning, she is not the first to make this call. This observation was made by a young minister/ethicist from the Church Of God In Christ (COGIC), Leonard Lovett.

36 Ibid.
37 Ibid.
Hailed by some as the father of Black Pentecostal thought, Lovett was one of the first African-American Pentecostal scholars to take seriously the question of praxis raised by Black liberation theologians. In his 1978 Emory University dissertation, *Black-Holiness Pentecostalism: Implications for Ethics and Social Transformation*, Lovett issues a clarion call for critical engagement between modern Black theology and Black Pentecostal traditions. Concerned that the basis of James Cone’s theological project was established upon Black power ideology, as an alternative point of departure and corrective, Lovett nominated what he called “pneumatological liberation” as a more faithful starting point.

With his employment of “pneumatological liberation” as a corrective to Cone’s uncritical embrace of Black power ideology, Lovett believed that the logic internal to Black Pentecostal theology provided “a gyroscopical balance for Cone’s theology by pointing him back to grass roots religious experience, rooted in an immanent spiritual encounter with God[.]”\(^\text{38}\) Understanding this encounter as one that transcends “one’s prior commitment to any ideology and inheres in personal transformation,” Lovett maintained that “[a]uthentic liberation can never occur apart from genuine Pentecostal encounter, and likewise genuine Pentecostal encounter can never occur unless liberation becomes the consequence.”\(^\text{39}\) In the spiritual encounter that Lovett envisioned, liberation was not solely for the benefit of the supplicant but the liberating Spirit also propelled the liberated forth into the world in acts of charity, service and humanization. In this regard, Lovett’s vision of black theology,


\(^\text{39}\) Ibid., 145.
accentuated by Pentecostal encounter held the promise of informing both personal and ethical transformation.

Despite Lovett's plea for further development of the theological insights of Black Pentecostal scholars, nearly forty years later, no concerted effort has been made to comprehensively set forth a program of black Pentecostal theology. In the interim, the growth of Black Pentecostal religious discourse has flourished within the fields of history, social science and applied theology.

1.4 **External Critiques and Misreadings of Black Pentecostal Thought**

Though scholars from the broader fields of American religious history and theology have scarcely engaged African American Pentecostal theologians in any critical or sustained manner, several African American theologians from mainline traditions, (mainly participants involved in the scholarly production of black theology), have leveled criticisms against Black Pentecostal theologies. Perhaps the most scathing critiques of the movement have revolved around what these theologians have perceived as the Pentecostal movement’s narrowly interpreted understanding of the Holy Spirit. Assessing the movement’s theology as modalistic, ecstasy driven, otherworldly and glosso-centric, several mainline black theologians, have dismissed African American Pentecostalism as a mere tongues movement, hence denying the tradition validity as a serious theological trajectory within African-American religious thought.

Convinced that all black Pentecostal churches held to a modalistic conception of the godhead, the black Methodist theologian Major Jones in his 1987 systematic theology, *The Color of God*, began his chapter on the Holy Spirit by stating, "Black Theology's view of the Holy Spirit is not to be equated with that of the charismatic
and Pentecostal movements.”40 Jones went on to say, “[t]he understanding of Holy Spirit in the more narrow tradition of Afro-American religion has its roots in more explicitly trinitarian and traditional Christian thought.”41 For Jones, the imbalanced pneumatology of black Pentecostals caused severe distortions in their theological conceptions of the godhead.

In a recent interview with Tim Macaluso and Mary Towler of *Rock City News*, Black Baptist theologian and president of Colgate Rochester Crozer Divinity School, Marvin McMickle, registered his concerns with Black Pentecostal theology. Admitting that "the fastest growing segment of the black church [in America] is within the Pentecostal and charismatic communities" and defining its adherents as "people who believe in what’s called the Third Work of the Spirit, speaking in tongues,” McMickle says of the movement that they are "very heavy into what they call praise and worship and a little light in civic engagement or social activism, because for them it is a theological issue."42 McMickle also asserts that Pentecostals believe that “too much engagement with the world may make you look like the world.”43 McMickle’s unsubstantiated assessment of Pentecostalism as having a theology that is oriented toward social disengagement is especially problematic in light of his position as the president of one of the largest divinity schools in North America and because he is a leading theological educator preparing the next generation of ministers for an increasingly ecumenical religious context.

41 Ibid., 102.
43 Ibid.
Theologians working outside of the academy, who as pastors were primarily engaged in the life and ministry of Black mainline churches, have also provided critiques of Black Pentecostal theology. In his seminal work, *Prelude to Pentecost: A Theology of the Holy Spirit* (2007), an exhaustive treatment of pneumatology within modern black theology, the late Bishop Ruben L. Speaks, former prelate of the African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church (AMEZ), is highly critical of the privileging of ecstatic practices characteristic of Black Pentecostal liturgical and theological praxis. For Speaks, this preoccupation with the ecstatic is a clear outgrowth of what he understands to be the Pentecostal insistence on the doctrine of initial evidence.

Further elucidating his aversion to the elevation of the ecstatic in Black Pentecostal theology and worship, Speaks writes: “a church that makes ecstasy its chief concern, opens the door to the chaotic and disrupting forms of emotion that, in the end, will defeat its spiritual purpose. The ecstatic expression of religion must be balanced with the teaching of doctrine, the insistence upon order, and, above all, on the living of the Christian life.”Speaks’ concern is that ecstasy left unchecked will degrade to a form of crass emotionalism and diminished Christian life. According to Speaks, “The Holy Spirit is not just a matter of subjective emotion alone; it is also objective reality as well. Therefore, speaking in tongues must be verified and substantiated by sound doctrine and moral behavior. The gift of the Spirit must be judged by the fruits of the Spirit.” Although Speaks understands the Pentecostal movement to be “a gift of God to God’s church” the bishop cautions that because of

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its problematic theological perspectives, Pentecostalism “still needs the guidance and the counsel that the [larger African-American] church can give.” According to Speaks, “the Pentecostal experience must be judged by the [whole Black] church. Without the sanctifying influence of the [whole] church, the charismatic movement becomes corrupt, narrow, and nothing more than empty emotion.” Speaks equates the worship practices of Pentecostalism to what he deems as mere emotionalism, thus reducing Pentecostalism to a set of behaviors instead of a system of beliefs.

Of all the criticisms leveled against African-American Pentecostalism by modern black theologians, perhaps the most stringent critique was raised by Black political theologian, J. Deotis Roberts. Roberts, a founding patriarch and senior statesman of modern black theology, in a series of articles published during the mid 1980’s, identifies what he believes to be the major problem of African-American Pentecostal theology: chiefly, a distorted understanding of the Holy Spirit. Roberts is highly critical of what he perceives as Pentecostalism’s shortsighted “tongues centered” or *glossocentric* pneumatology, as well as the movement’s inability to reflect theologically beyond ecstatic speech.

Roberts writes that “the Pentecostal Movement believes that it has found in the [A]cts of the [A]postles…and its own personal missionary experience precedent and authority for [tongues doctrine] as its basic belief.” Identifying “tongues doctrine” as the movement’s principal or core belief, Roberts explains, “Pentecostals assert that Baptism in the Holy Spirit [evidenced by speaking with tongues] is a critical experience subsequent to and distinct from conversion, granting the believer

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46 Ibid.
47 Ibid., 108.
the benefits of permanent, personal, and full indwelling of the Holy Spirit. The believer thus receives power for Christian service, particularly evangelistic service and the equipment of spiritual gifts.\textsuperscript{49} However Roberts maintains that, “with all of its fervent claims to the outpouring of the Spirit in the individual soul, there is little evidence of concern for making life more human for the oppressed.”\textsuperscript{50} At the heart of Roberts’ critique of Black Pentecostalism, one clearly detects his uneasiness with the elevation of ecstatic spiritual gifts at the expense of the humanization and liberation of Black life in America.

As it relates to persons who comprise the Black Pentecostal community, Roberts states that for its adherents:

The indwelling Spirit or second blessing is the result of sinlessness, prayer, obedience, and the laying on of hands. Holiness [to its adherents] is viewed not as growth toward spiritual maturity but as sinlessness. Obedience is absolute and takes little notice of human free will as essential to selfhood. Those receiving the second blessing [feel as though they] have a privileged stance – a kind of inside track on grace. Other Christians and churches are in a second-best position. Pentecostalism is for the “twice-born,” not for those who experience the life of faith as a still small voice or a gradual experience of sanctification, however saintly the life.\textsuperscript{51}

Here Roberts identifies a rather divisive spiritual superiority complex that he discerns within adherents of the Black Pentecostal movement. For Roberts, this superiority complex, being founded upon a pietistic interiority, has caused the adherents of the Pentecostal movement to turn inward, retreating from the world and opting for a disengaged, escapist spirituality. According to Roberts, “in spite of all its emphasis upon personal moral perfection, the virtues of Pentecostalism are often negative and private. It is notoriously short on social conscience and social justice.

\textsuperscript{49} Ibid.\textsuperscript{50} Ibid., 62.\textsuperscript{51} Ibid., 59.
Corporate sins are seldom recognized, and there is little concern for social transformation.”

Whereas Roberts believes that the spirituality of the larger Black church orients and propels Black Christians forward into the world, he finds that Pentecostalism’s spiritual orientation, based upon an insufficient pneumatological understanding, is the root cause of its naiveté toward and disengagement from the perennial threats to contemporary Black life in America.

Regarding the black Pentecostals’ emphasis on glossolalia, Robert comments: “certain conditions are necessary both to explain and obtain baptism in the Spirit with its glos-solalic evidence. Supporters of the doctrine find in Acts and in other biblical passages a connection between the gift of the Spirit and conversion, obedience, prayer, and faith.” While Roberts indicates that the Pentecostals find biblical warrant for the doctrine of initial evidence, he is deeply concerned with the hermeneutical decisions leading to this conclusion. For Roberts, though one finds ecstatic speech being inspired by the Spirit within the text, he is careful to note that this speech which the Spirit inspires is an appendage to faith in Christ and is not to be lifted above or equated with this faith. Regarding the Pentecostals appropriation of the biblical texts regarding glossolalia, Roberts states: “there is a distinct danger. The supplement of faith [speaking in tongues] easily becomes faith’s center [belief in Christ]. This was true of the “circumcision party” in Paul’s day (Gal. 2:12) as well as the “tongues movement” today. The supplement of faith [glossolalia] becomes more important than faith [itself] and claims to be a higher type of Christian experience.”

By making a distinction between the substance of faith and the

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52 Ibid.
53 Ibid., 57.
54 Ibid., 58.
supplements to faith, Roberts is here attempting to provide a more biblically balanced understanding to the Pentecostal claims of ecstatic speech inspired by the Spirit.

While Roberts is highly critical of what he perceives to be the narrowly focused theological agenda of African-American Pentecostal theology, to avoid misunderstanding he is careful to note:

My objection to the claims of Pentecostalism is based upon ethical rather than purely evangelical grounds. I do not have a problem with a faith that includes works as long as it has a gospel foundation – that is to say, as long as God and human beings are co-laborers together for good. A nontheistic humanism is not adequate. But I do seriously question the claim to a superior knowledge of God by any individual or group. Furthermore, this claim is too often accompanied by more heat than light – a zeal not always according to knowledge – or less than exemplary moral life.55

As Roberts understands the Spirit’s work in the larger African-American church, “Black Christians have always been concerned about the relationship of the Spirit’s presence and power to what happens between persons and not what merely happens inside them.”56 And unlike the glossocentric theological agenda characteristic of Black Pentecostal theology in which ecstatic speech is the Spirit's evidence, Roberts says, “in the [larger] black church tradition, the Spirit is not merely a dove but wind and fire also. The Comforter is also the Strengthener. Justice in the social order no less than joy and peace in the hearts of believers is, for the [whole] black church, evidence of the Spirit’s presence and power.”57 Contrary to the claim of the Black Pentecostal adherents who embrace the belief that speaking in tongues is indeed the evidence that one has been filled with or has received the Spirit, for Roberts it is not

55 Ibid., 59.
56 Ibid., 64.
57 Ibid.
the tongues-speech, but “justice in the social order” in which the power and presence of the Holy Spirit is truly evidenced among Black believers.\textsuperscript{58}

Though Roberts’ critique is somewhat compelling at first sight, a critical analysis of his essays on the Holy Spirit in black theology will reveal that Roberts is guilty of reading the African-American Pentecostal tradition through the writings of Euro-American Pentecostal and charismatic theologians and Bible scholars. A closer reading of Roberts’ criticism of Black Pentecostalism’s understanding of the Spirit indicates that Roberts is not quarreling with African-American Pentecostal theologians at all. A simple examination of his sources reveal the fact that Roberts is interacting primarily with the work of Presbyterian New Testament scholar Fredrick Dale Bruner, whose interlocutors are Reformed theology and Euro-American Pentecostal and Charismatic theologians. And much of Roberts’ analysis of Black Pentecostal pneumatology is perhaps based on his understanding of the scholarship of two additional outsiders to the tradition, namely charismatic Lutheran scholars Paul Opsahl and Erling Jorstad. Thus Roberts’ critique of Black Pentecostalism is made under the assumption that no differences exist between African American and Euro-American Pentecostal theologies. Despite the aforementioned critiques, the perspectives and interpretations of notable African American Pentecostal theologians with formal training in the critical disciplines of theology and philosophy have been neglected. This research project therefore provides close and critical readings of under-utilized sources of African American Pentecostal theology.

To this end the following research questions will guide the research:

\textsuperscript{58} Ibid.
1. How does knowledge of the life experiences, ecclesial formations, academic journeys, theological trajectories, and social contexts that formed the four Black Pentecostal theologians of this study, help illumine their respective theological trajectories?

2. What are the images, meanings, ideas and symbols that these four theologians employed to frame their respective theological visions as distinctive modes of African American religious thought?

3. What are the family resemblances and differences inherent within the four trajectories here examined, and how do such commonalities and tensions further complicate and enrich our understanding of Pentecostalism in North America?

4. Finally, what are the future trajectories for the study that will help us to understand the continuing development and contextualization of the black Pentecostal tradition for the future?

1.5.1 Contemporary Trajectories of Black Pentecostal Thought: The Historical Studies School

The first critical academic studies of African-American Pentecostalism were produced largely in the form of denominational histories. Building upon the primary source materials bequeathed from the various denominational traditions (articles of religion, doctrinal statements, oral histories, testimonies, obituaries, program bulletins, congregational histories, judicatory minutes, court reports and legal records) these documents were placed in conversation with texts emanating from the larger African-American church tradition, the larger Holiness movement, and the wider Pentecostal movement. The Bachelor of Divinity theses of both A.W. Lawson (1948)\(^59\) and James A. Forbes Sr. (1950)\(^60\) of the UHCA are two early examples of such attempts. In them the writers elevate the history of the UHCA beyond that of a popular history by providing a more critical interpretation of the beliefs, factors, traditions, and personalities that gave impetus to their tradition.

Although these earlier critical histories of Black Pentecostal movements were exceedingly crucial in paving the way for the scholarship that was to follow, the Historical Studies School found perhaps its fullest expression in the scholarly corpus of the likes of David Douglas Daniels, III. Daniels, an American church historian, ordained within the COGIC, in his 1992 Union Theological Seminary dissertation “The Cultural Renewal of Slave Religion” more thoroughly lodged African-American Pentecostalism within American religious history, African-American Christianity, and both the American Holiness and Pentecostal movements.


1.5.2 Contemporary Trajectories of Black Pentecostal Thought: The Human Sciences School

The second collective of scholars to reflect upon the Black Pentecostal religious experience belong to what might be called the Human Sciences School of African-American Pentecostal studies. These scholars built upon the work of historians, the insights of various social scientific methodologies and their own critical interrogations of the primary source materials. Frederick Ware, who borrows the term “human sciences,” from historian of religion Charles H. Long, sees the notion as an expansion upon the classification “social sciences” in that it includes additional “disciplines related to various aspects and existential problems of human civilization.”

Understanding the designation “human sciences” as a “covering term” for a multiplicity of disciplinary (and multidisciplinary) approaches applied to the study of a chosen religious community, Ware envisions such a term to be inclusive of economical, psychological, sociological, anthropological, historical, religious studies, history of religions and other critical multidisciplinary approaches used in the study of religious phenomena. As “human science” is used here in defining the Human Sciences School of African-American Pentecostal studies, it is inclusive of the political, scientific, anthropological, sociological, ethnomusicological, psychological, history of religions, phenomenological, and

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61 Frederick Ware, Methodologies of Black Theology (Cleveland, Ohio: Pilgrim Press, 2002), 116.
literary approaches to the study of the African-American Pentecostal religious experience.

Perhaps the most significant figure and representative theorist from the Human Sciences School of African-American Pentecostal studies is the late Pentecostal journalist and political scientist, James S. Tinney. Tinney was a former professor at Howard University who spent his early years as a minister of the COGIC. In addition to his own journalistic, political-scientific and racial-apologetic writings on the Black Pentecostal religious experience, in 1977, he became the founding editor of *Spirit: A Journal of Issues Incident to the Study of Black Pentecostalism*, the first academic journal produced by Pentecostals in the world. Prefiguring the multidisciplinary approaches to African-American Pentecostal studies that later emerged in his own writings on African-American Pentecostalism, though grounded in journalism and political theory, Tinney also experimented with feminist theory, Black literature, race theory, theology, church history, queer theory, African studies, economics, and post-colonial criticism.


1.5.3 Contemporary Trajectories of Black Pentecostal Thought: The Applied Theological School

Perhaps the largest theoretical school of African-American Pentecostal studies is the Applied Theological School. This school, which features the articles, monographs, dissertations, theses and full-blown textual treatments written on the tradition by scholars of Black Pentecostalism, is interested in reflecting upon the nature and praxis of ministry within Black Pentecostal contexts. Disciplinary foci within the Applied Theological School include: Christian ethics, preaching, Christian education, women in ministry, pastoral care and counseling, urban ministry, evangelism, housing ministry, youth ministry, Christian leadership, church growth and development and liturgical studies.

The Applied Theological School is composed of a vast number of scholars and ministry practitioners, both ordained and laypersons alike. Perhaps a representative model of this school can be found in activist/theologian-ethicist Leonard Lovett of the COGIC. As the pioneering Dean-President of C.H. Mason Theological Seminary, the world’s first graduate Pentecostal academic institution, in both his scholarship, ministry and mentoring of students, Lovett’s chief concern was
that the practice of Pentecostal ministry sought to make life both spiritually empowering and more human for oppressed people.\(^\text{62}\)


While the studies produced within the aforementioned schools have provided indispensable insights into the Black Pentecostal religious experience, there remains

a need for more constructive theological work, produced internally, which explores the ideas and symbols undergirding the belief structures of Black Pentecostal theologies. Given the need for a constructive theological school of Black Pentecostal thought, the extant theological writings of Jones, Clemmons, Forbes and Turner are here offered for consideration. In undertaking this important task, the following methodological approaches will be employed.

1.6. Research Methodology

The research methodologies employed in the proposed study are biographical criticism, phenomenological analysis and critical religious ethnography. Biographical criticism is used here for its ability to examine the effects of the subjects’ formative social and theological contexts upon their pastoral and theological vocations. Phenomenological analysis is used here for its ability to uncover the religious ideas and meanings that undergird and inform my subjects’ distinctive theological perspectives. Ethnographic research allows me to assess the perceived impact of the theologians’ work upon the church and the academy, also providing me with access to scholars with knowledge of the dialogue between earlier and emergent discourses of African American Pentecostal thought.

In employing these methodologies, extensive use was made of a wide variety of primary source materials and supporting documentation. Primary source materials which were critically examined and theologically probed include: sermon manuscripts, published/unpublished articles, pastoral letters, Bible studies material, masters theses, doctoral dissertations, books, lectures, interviews, devotional writings, prayers, poetry, songs, sermons, book reviews, and other unpublished writings, all written by or about the four individuals under investigation. These
materials were gathered from a variety of private and public collections, including local congregational and denominational archives in the states of New York, Pennsylvania and North Carolina. In addition to materials gathered from private and public collections, a number of primary documents accessed at the Dupree African-American Pentecostal and Holiness Collection housed in the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture in New York City were analyzed. Other archival collections consulted for primary materials include: the Flower Pentecostal Heritage Center (Springfield, Missouri); the James Tinney Manuscript Collection at the Moorland-Spingarn Research Center at Howard University (Washington, DC); the William Clair Turner, Jr. Collection (Durham, North Carolina); and the Pentecostal and Charismatic Research Archive at the University of Southern California (Los Angeles, California). Also, a number of the unpublished writings of both Jones and Clemmons were accessed from the archives of their respective families.

1.6.1 Biographical Criticism

Sustained attention was given to biography in order to underscore the critical importance of social contexts in the formation of Black religious consciousness. In employing biographical criticism,\(^6\) I seek to demonstrate that African American Pentecostal thought is non-hegemonic, but diverse in its orientations. The

\(^6\) While much of contemporary biographical criticism begins with the philosophical and literary critical methods of deconstruction, in seeking to understand the formation of these theologians’ religious consciousness, this study employs a hermeneutic of appreciation. As with the phenomenological analysis offered here, my use of biographical criticism fosters a radical empiricism where my subjects’ own accounts of their lives are accepted as data which preceding deconstruction, is first understood and appreciated within its own contexts. This methodology takes seriously what each theologian has to say about his own life journey and religious experience. For a contemporary theologian who references the term “hermeneutic of appreciation,” please see: Elisabeth Schussler Fiorenza, Empowering Memory and Movement: Thinking and Working Across Borders (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2014): 528.
aforementioned individuals each engage and utilize source materials from their respective contexts. None of these intellectuals undertook a project of rational commensuration, in that they did not attempt to unify all Christian theology under their individual theological programs. However, in seeking a just and compassionate society on earth, each scholar understands human liberation and spiritual empowerment as central to their individual theological projects. And while each of these thinkers subscribe to some notion of Christian eschatology, all believe that the justice of the kingdom of God is possible in human history.

Though biographical criticism has been used for hundreds of years within the field of literary studies to examine the relationship between the events of a writer's life and the writer's literary productions, the approach to biographical criticism employed here is slightly nuanced. For the purposes of this study, biographical criticism is a research method which has been utilized by theologians and other scholars of religion, under the rubrics of either “religious biography,” “psychobiographical criticism” or “theological biography.” All forms of theological biography are the offspring of narrative theology, as each attempts to disclose how sustained reflection on the lives of people of faith can inform and itself be critical theological reflection. In advocating for this mode of biographical criticism for the study of religion, North American religionist David Nelson Duke suggests that this way of interrogating biography can be powerful because it creates a historical narrative which helps to provide a clear approach for understanding religious experience, apart from the formal tenets of doctrine and theology. By focusing on...

compelling life stories, biographies remind us that Christianity is a religion of
community that cannot be understood apart from the individual life stories contained
therein. And while biographies provide excellent case studies about particular
religious convictions, they also point to the dynamic and shifting streams of any
religious tradition.\textsuperscript{65}

In utilizing this methodology, an attempt is made to examine the unique
textures of the lives of each of the four men spotlighted in this study. Attention was
given to each thinker’s childhood and formative years, the formative religious
context out of which each thinker emerges, the formative educational experiences
that nurtured each thinker’s intellectual curiosity and call to religious service, as well
as his distinctive engagement of public ministry. In examining the backgrounds of
each of the four men in this study, special attention was given to their family lives,
the social context from which each person emerges, pivotal educational experiences
and the formative theological influences (persons, institutions and intellectual
traditions) that help to shape their theological thinking. Special attention was also
given to significant relationships with parents and/or mentors that have influenced
each thinker’s conception of God and the unique shading of each person’s respective
conceptualization of Pentecostal thought. These experiences and relationships
provided each of these individuals with a critical lens to critique, (re)interpret and
(re)imagine their own conceptions of the black Pentecostal religious experience.

1.6.2 Phenomenological Analysis

The second major methodological approach employed is phenomenological
analysis. In using this research method, the case is made here that African American

\textsuperscript{65} David Nelson Duke, "Theology and Biography: Simple Suggestions for a Promising Field,"
\textit{Perspectives in Religious Studies} 3 (1986): 138-139.
Pentecostalism is its own distinctive religious phenomenon. Though the tradition shares family resemblances with other expressions of Black religion, it is not to be reduced to or equated with other black religious modalities. Following the lead of Charles Long, a central figure within the Chicago School of History of Religions, this project comes to terms with the 'hierological' or explicitly religious dimension of the distinctive religious reality examined. In applying the gaze of Religionswissenschaft to the study of African American Pentecostal thought, by uncovering and examining the religious ideas, values and social contingencies that inform each theologian’s thought and action, I attempted to excavate the images, meanings, ideas and symbols which undergird the religious experiences of black Pentecostals in North America. Religionswissenschaft as understood here refers to: the mode of analysis used in the quest for sympathetic understanding of and insight into black Pentecostal thought; how these distinctive beliefs shed light on the meaning of religion as a universal human phenomenon; and how an embrace of these beliefs orients Pentecostals within the world.

1.6.3 Critical Religious Ethnography

In addition to biographical criticism and phenomenological analysis, this project incorporated critical religious ethnography as a third mode of research methodology. In an effort to gain further perspective on the impact of the four

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67 Interviews were used to supplement the textual and archival research done, providing an important counterpart to the writings of each theologian. Interviews were conducted with individuals who knew the respective theologians in multiple publics (i.e. as both pastor and scholar or as both professor and bishop, etc.). Key informants’ interviews added perspectives, layers of interpretation and insider knowledge. These interviews included theologians, seminary-trained clergy, former students and informed laity. This deliberate selection of interview subjects was done to provide greater depth and richness to the understanding of the lives of each theologian and in order to highlight the perceived
theologians examined within this study and to help establish a context for dialogue between these four traditions and emergent trajectories for the study of Black Pentecostalism in America, interviews were conducted. In as much as two of the four theologians here examined are still alive, the opportunity to gather perspectives on their journeys within the church and the academy was quite useful for understanding this critical moment in the life of the American church.

I was also interested in gathering perspectives from their ministerial peers and current (or former) parishioners. Two of my subjects were bishops with ministers serving under their leadership and all four men served (or serve) as pastors of local congregations. Information from their congregants and peers provided extensive knowledge concerning the influence and impact of their scholarship and ministries. Though my primary focus was on conducting interviews, I was also able to amass primary materials from these communities, which allowed me to provide a thicker description of this distinctive religious phenomenon in my final analysis.

1.7 Delineation of Study

Beginning with depictions and representations of African American participation in the Azusa Street Revival, for many the mythic origins of the contemporary Pentecostal movement, this very first chapter sought to situate African American Pentecostalism within the broader tradition of Black religion in North America. This chapter also discussed the representations of black Pentecostals in

tensions in their bi-vocational realities and multiple religious contexts.


69 Black religion is used by scholars as a covering term for the wide variety of religious beliefs and practices of people of African descent in North America.
the press, within social scientific literature, and by early sympathetic scholarly
observers of the religious phenomenon, concluding with the advent of academically-
trained Pentecostal representations of the tradition, which emerge within the second
and third generations of the movement.

Chapters 2-5 investigate both the life and work of four scholars: Ozro Jones,
Ithiel Clemmons, James Forbes, and William Turner as exemplars of African
American Pentecostal theology. In choosing these theologians, no attempt is made
here to suggest that they are the only or most important black Pentecostals to study.
For the purposes of this project, they represent four distinctive approaches to doing
theology and are representatives of different schools of theological thought. In
addition to their theological writings which provide a basis for scholarly
examination, these scholars were chosen because of their “pioneering” status, in that
they represent the first generation of African American Pentecostals to engage
theology as scholars within the church and theological academy. They are selected
for the distinctive perspectives that they bring to the social, political and cultural
dimensions of their respective theological projects. What is more, their contributions
illumine Pentecostal theological and ecclesial issues, but they also developed well-
defined perspectives on Pentecostal spirituality, ministry and social engagement.

In Chapter 2, Ozro Thurston Jones Jr., a former bishop from the COGIC, who
completed his doctoral studies in philosophical theology at Temple University in
1962, is interpreted as an existentialist theologian and a forerunner to other Black
Pentecostal theological trajectories that emerged during the era of modern black
theology. By virtue of his formal training in both existential philosophy and
philosophical theology, his disinterest in historical reconstruction and his de-
emphasis of the strong eschatological impulse that animated much of twentieth-century Pentecostal theology in North America, Jones emerges with a pragmatic vision of Pentecostalism. In Chapter 3, Ithiel Conrad Clemmons, also a former bishop and historian from the COGIC, trained at both Union and New York Theological Seminaries, is here presented as a historical theologian who not only provided his tradition with a theological interpretation of its history, but also utilized history to inform and challenge contemporary understandings of Pentecostal theology and ministry. In 1981, Clemmons served as the president for the Society for Pentecostal Studies, the largest international body of scholars of Pentecostalism in the world.

For Chapter 4, James Alexander Forbes Jr., a theologian from the UHCA, trained at Union Theological Seminary and Colgate-Rochester Divinity School, is discussed as a public theologian, who not only broadens his community’s understanding of the Spirit but also utilizes various categories and concepts from his formative tradition to engage in critical emancipatory discourse in multiple religious and non-religious contexts with individuals from various faith traditions. Joining the theological faculty of Union Theological Seminary in 1976, Forbes became the first black Pentecostal to teach in a major American theological institution. Chapter 5 examines the life and work of William Clair Turner Jr., also a theologian from the UHCA. Being trained in theology, sociology and history of religions at Duke University, Turner is presented here as a constructive theologian who understands the preaching event as the primary locus for doing theology within the community of faith. Turner is the first Black Pentecostal to teach on the theological faculty of a major, internationally renowned university divinity school.
In choosing the aforementioned theologians, a number of factors were taken into consideration. 1) The choice of four theologians, from two different denominations, allow for a variety of perspectives even within the same denominational bodies, thus enabling both comparison and contrast of their respective theological projects. The choice of four scholars also provides a manageable subset for comparative theological study. 2) Each theologian examined in this study is of “pioneer” status within African American Pentecostal thought, in that they represent the first generation of Black Pentecostal scholars to enter into serious dialogue about their traditions within the church and the American theological academy. This status predetermined the choice of the specific denominational traditions included within this study. 3) The COGIC is the largest Pentecostal denomination in North America and has had ministers with theological and biblical training since the second generation of the movement. However, the UHCA, a much smaller denomination, is the oldest Pentecostal denomination in North America (founded in 1886), and has historically maintained a commitment to theological education at the ministerial level. It is not surprising that two of Black Pentecostalism’s pioneering interpreters hail from that tradition. 4) And finally, these scholars were chosen because of their extensive theological writings and the different scholarly interlocutors and intellectual trajectories they engage in their reflections, including: public theology, Christian existentialism, history of religions, black theology and liberation theology.

In Chapter 6, I tease out structural similarities or "family resemblances" within the individual projects of the four theologians examined in this study. Utilizing the perspective of phenomenological analysis, I have attempted to construct
and reconstruct their theological ideas within the "webs of beliefs," contexts and communities in which they were formed. In counter to the narrow foci and exclusivist tendencies that dominate the broader scope of North American Pentecostal thought, I argue that these theologians, when read as a cohort, model a "theologically generous" Pentecostal vision. This vision shares a revisionist theological character, a deep ecumenical openness, a progressive social consciousness and a broadened and more dynamic understanding of the Holy Spirit; this "theological generosity" expands Pentecostalism’s theological distinctiveness beyond mere glossohalia. In this chapter, I also highlight three critical trajectories for the future study of African American Pentecostalism, namely: the engagement with the scholarship of Pentecostal/Post-Pentecostal women; the influx of African immigrant Pentecostal communities; and the need to further situate African American Pentecostalism within its broader African Atlantic milieu.

In the final analysis, the primary aims and goals of this project will be:

- To situate African-American Pentecostal thought as a critically important and a distinctive theological trajectory within both African Atlantic Christian theologies and North American religious thought.
- To identify neglected Black Pentecostal theological voices and their perspectives which serve to challenge dominant paradigms of North American Pentecostalism and to unsettle and complexify anew various reductionist readings of African American Pentecostal theologies.

While consciously borrowing from Paul Gilroy’s *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double-Consciousness* (Harvard University Press, 1993) and J. Lorand Matory’s *Black Atlantic Religion: Tradition, Transnationalism, and Matriarchy in the Afro-Brazilian Candomblé* (Princeton University Press, 2005), this current study uses the terms “African Atlantic” and “Black Atlantic” interchangeably. This dual usage can be seen in the work of other scholars besides Gilroy and Matory, including Jason Young’s *Rituals of Resistance: African Atlantic Religion in Kongo and the Lowcountry South in the Era of Slavery* (Louisiana State University Press, 2011) and Ras Michael Brown’s *African-Atlantic Cultures and the South Carolina Lowcountry* (Cambridge University Press, 2014).
• To explore family resemblances within African American Pentecostal theologies, to ascertain the impact of the theologians here examined upon the church and the academy, and to create space for a deepened exchange between the broader traditions of African Atlantic Christian theologies and American religious thought.

1.8 Delimitation of Study

This current study seeks to examine the life and thought of the first generation of African American Pentecostal intellectuals who participated in the American theological academy. Due to the cultural and theological debates during the early years of the movement, which limited the full participation of women in leadership, no individual female theologian is highlighted within this project. This omission in no way is meant to minimize the very important roles that women have played and continue to play within the African American Pentecostal movement. From the earliest days of the movement, even prior to the Azusa Street Revival, Black Pentecostal women were primary actors in the development, growth and expansion of the movement.71

The lack of inclusion of an individual female scholar is more of a commentary upon both the historical moment under consideration and the educational and professional ministry opportunities available for women during the time period for the denominations considered. There existed (and remain) barriers to the full inclusion and participation of women within Pentecostal ministry, with some Black Pentecostal denominations refusing to ordain women and other denominations ordaining women, but not allowing them to be elected to serve within the highest offices of the church. In addition to these ministerial barriers, the academic work of

71 Among these key figures are Mother Emma Cotton, Mother E.J. Dabney, Bishop Ida Robinson, Neely Terry, Julia Hutchins, and Lucy Farrow. For additional information, see: Estrelda Alexander, The Women of Azusa Street (Cleveland, Ohio: Pilgrim Press, 2005).
the first generation of African American female Pentecostal scholars was located primarily outside of the theological disciplines, with many choosing to pursue advanced training in education, the social-scientific disciplines and the humanities (including Dorothy Webster-Exume, Arenia Mallory and Regina Jones). Facing few opportunities for advancement within either their own denominations or within the scholarly academy, this study recognizes the dearth of women’s voices and primary materials which chronicle their labors, which would contribute to a much richer conversation about the development of early Black Pentecostal theology.

While patriarchy was addressed theologically by the scholars in this study (particularly as it relates to the ordination of women), I fully acknowledge there are important implications for excluding the voices of significant female theological representatives. Epistemological blind spots and biases occur when only men’s lives and viewpoints dominate the discourse. Moreover, the lack of women’s voices reifies male-centeredness within North American Pentecostal thought and it also replicates other male-centered studies of black religion during the same time period. While no female theological representative is treated in this particular work, the current study of four male theologians does not seek to be an exhaustive examination of the histories of either American or African American Pentecostalism. These particular biographies, however, are valuable for the insight they provide into neglected aspects of American Christianity as a whole. The analysis of Jones, Clemmons, Forbes and Turner both opens up and initiates an important conversation that needs to continue within the study of North American Pentecostalism as its own distinctive religious modality.
The past 15 years, however, has represented a number of deep cultural shifts, as the black religious academy has witnessed the entrance of an increasing number of female scholars working on black Pentecostal topics, many trained and serving on the faculty of elite American institutions. Some of these women are writing from outside of the Pentecostal tradition, but making the active choice to pursue Pentecostalism as a scholarly field of inquiry including: Anthea Butler, Leslie Callahan, Judith Casselberry, and Deidre Crumbley. Others were nurtured within the Pentecostal tradition, and like the first generation of Black Pentecostal scholars, have chosen this movement as the focus of their scholarly endeavors, including: Estrela Alexander, Keri Day, Michelle Jacques-Early, Yolanda Pierce and Anjulet Tucker. While patriarchy and shifting gender roles represent a major challenge to the future of Black Pentecostalism in North America, the historical moment of the first generation of African American Pentecostal scholarship is still significant within this unfolding movement of Pentecostal history, and the individuals and theologies under consideration still warrant critical attention.
Chapter Two

The Priest: Ozro Thurston Jones Jr. as the Philosophical Interpreter

2.1 Jones as Theologian: The Dialectical-Revisionist

In a sermon delivered at the Holy Temple COGIC in Philadelphia on March 21, 1982, great insight is granted into the pastoral sensitivity and priestly vocational understanding of the congregation’s senior minister, the Reverend Dr. Ozro Thurston Jones, Jr. Having returned to the pulpit following a period of travel, respite and consecration, Jones begins his morning sermon with these words:

This morning I want to illustrate the burden that has come upon me afresh since I have been away…I am your shepherd and I live for you. I believe that when the time comes for me to meet the Lord, He is going to ask me whether I have done, as a shepherd for you, what has been assigned to my hands. I may be a national figure [within the denomination], but I don’t expect to have to answer [to God] too much for my national ministry. I think I’m going to have to answer [to God] for what I have done here as the shepherd of Holy Temple [Church].

On another occasion during this same year, Jones speaks yet again from a place of priestly pathos:

I’d rather be your pastor than anything I know of in this world…When you came to the altar today, I realized that with virtually everyone of you, I remembered some incident in your spiritual life. I thank God for this stewardship…like Jesus…for this cause I sanctify myself. I’d rather be your pastor than anything I know of in this world. I’d rather be your pastor than to be wealthy. I’d rather be your pastor than to be healthy. I’d rather be your pastor than to be anything I know. I’d rather be your pastor than to be happy or famous. So, I’m going to sanctify myself, asking God to help me.

Unlike some ecclesial models in which the minister resides at the center, Jones envisioned and participated in a servant-leadership model of ministry. In assuming

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this model of ministry, Jones understood his occupation of the pastoral office as that of a “priestly” vocation.

In his 1991 study, *Black Religious Leaders: Conflict in Unity*, social ethicist Peter Paris explores what he understands to be the four dominant models of ministerial leadership within African American religious communities. Perhaps the model most germane for understanding Jones is the “priestly type.” As Paris writes:

> The role and function of priests is to serve the temple (that is the house of God). Their ministry is to represent God to the people and to intercede on behalf of the people before God, and/or to instruct the people firmly and authoritatively about the nature of their religious responsibilities and obligations. Their self image, together with the people's perception of them, is that they primarily interpret the symbols of the faith, administer the rituals required by the faith, exorcise demons, and motivate the people to religious conviction via reason, passion, performance, and example. Their ordination involves a commitment to the truths of their religion and fidelity to those truths in thought, speech and deed. Through the act of ordination, the priests choose to inherit and commit themselves to preserve the religious customs and conventions of their religious institutions and vow to promote their expansion.

Jones’ commitment to serving the congregation to which he had been entrusted, through both his firm and authoritative instruction, as well as his deep and abiding love for his parishioners, are reminiscent of a much longer standing priestly tradition within the black religious context. In his 1903 sociological classic, *The Souls of Black Folks*, W.E.B. DuBois also commented on the historical continuity of the priestly office and the priests’ participation in broader traditions of care and cure of the souls of blacks in the Americas, when he writes:

> the chief remaining institution [from Africa within the Americas] was the Priest or Medicine-man. He early appeared on the plantation and found his function as the healer of the sick, the interpreter of the Unknown, the

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3 The four models of ministerial leadership Paris names are: the priestly, the prophetic, the political and the nationalist. Please see: Peter Paris, *Black Religious Leaders: Conflict in Unity* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 1991), 17.

4 Ibid., 17-18 (italics mine)
comforter of the sorrowing…and the one who…expressed the longing, disappointment, and resentment of a stolen and oppressed people. Thus, as bard, physician, judge, and priest, within the narrow limits allowed by the slave system, rose the Negro preacher.5

As one who understood his vocation as both priest and theologian within his formative black Pentecostal community, Jones saw himself as one who helped to “interpret the symbols of the faith,” and in addition to “vow[ing] to promote [its] expansion,” sought to “preserve the religious customs and conventions of [his] religious [tradition].”6 From his social location as priest, and by virtue of his training, spiritual and moral development, Jones spent the balance of his pastoral career seeking to provide a philosophical interpretation of the experience of the Spirit, which gave life both to him and to the faithful whom he sought to serve.

In his highly insightful study, Methodologies of Black Theology, Frederick Ware offers a riveting overview of the varying roots and routes of the scholarly production known as modern black theology. Identifying within the broader Black religious discourse three highly distinctive theological trajectories which he calls the “Black Hermeneutical School,” the “Human Sciences School,” and the “Black Philosophical School,” Ware seeks to set forth a “kind of comparative analysis – identifying and describing [varying] schools of thought according to how each school defines the tasks, content, sources, norms, method[s] and goal[s] of black theology.”7

Of the three intellectual trajectories delineated by Ware, the Black Philosophical School has received the least treatment, Ware defines the task of the Black Philosophical School as one of “description, analysis, evaluation, explanation,

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6 Peter Paris, Black Religious Leaders: Conflict in Unity, 18.
7 Frederick Ware, Methodologies of Black Theology (Cleveland: Pilgrim Press, 2002), x.
construction and revision.”\textsuperscript{8} And though scholars within both the Black Philosophical and Hermeneutical Schools share similar tasks in their approaches to the study of African-American religious thought, according to Ware, the Black Philosophical School places greater “emphasis on the task of revision.”\textsuperscript{9} According to Ware: “for thinkers in the Black Philosophical School, the criticism and reconstruction of ideas is most crucial for the achievement of liberation.”\textsuperscript{10} Indeed Ware sees the advent of this highly distinctive theological trajectory as a significant moment in both the history and life of Black religious thought in North America.

Ware cites the 1973 publication of African American Humanist theologian William R. Jones’ \textit{Is God a White Racist} as the crucial point of entry for Black philosophers of religion entering into the Black religious discourse, thus creating “a new forum for conversation in Black theology.”\textsuperscript{11} And though Williams Jones’ philosophical proposal was novel for Black religious thinkers of his day, the fact that before Jones there was an earlier cadre of African-American theologians, trained within the disciplines of continental European and North American philosophy and theology, and who used their theological insights and energies to serve Black congregations (and denominations) in North America, is a truth that often goes unnoticed.\textsuperscript{12} In fact, one of the strongest critiques leveled against modern black theology is that much of it “has developed with a limited awareness of the [learned]  

\begin{footnotesize}
\textsuperscript{8} Ibid., 68.
\textsuperscript{9} Ibid., 69.
\textsuperscript{10} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{11} Ibid., 66.
\textsuperscript{12} For example, individuals like J. Deotis Roberts, Major R. Jones, Charles Long and Martin Luther King Jr., choose as their interlocutors the theologians and philosophers of continental Europe and their North American counterparts.
\end{footnotesize}
African-American [theological] thought that preceded it.”¹³ According to Albert Miller, “little acknowledgement [has been] given to the fact that an earlier discourse dealing with similar issues had taken place among African-Americans.”¹⁴ For Miller, African-American theology will remain impoverished unless “the ideas of late-nineteenth and early twentieth-century thinkers and activists [are] acknowledged and explored.” Miller further argues that, “these figures must also be examined as…religious thinkers” who “developed theological treatises challenging the prevailing racist ideologies of the day and were integral members of their religious communities.”¹⁵ Ozro Thurston Jones Jr. is one such figure who must be situated within this broader tradition of Black religious thought in North America. Jones publishes his first full-length theological text in 1958 and completes his doctoral dissertation some seven years prior to the publication of James Cones’ groundbreaking work, *Black Power and Black Theology*, which for many is the birthdate of Black liberation theology.¹⁶

By virtue of his formal training in both existential philosophy and philosophical theology, his disinterest in historical reconstruction and his conscious downplaying of the eschatological impulse that animated the theology of his formative Pentecostal tradition, Ozro Thurston Jones Jr. is best situated, read and interpreted within Ware’s Black Philosophical theological trajectory. As part of an elite group of formally trained Post-World War II African-American theologians, who served African-American congregations and denominations, Jones used his

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¹⁴Ibid.
¹⁵Ibid.
training in philosophy and theology as a means of providing his formative Black Pentecostal tradition with an alternative vision of the Christian life.

Blacks in North America have been engaged in theological reflection since the involuntary introduction of the first Africans to the continent in 1619. The vast majority of their printed theological literature, both scholarly and pedestrian, has involved and revolved around issues of race, racism and racial injustice. And while this has arguably been the case for over two centuries, a provocative study published in 1985 by Peter J. Paris argues for a dramatic new shift in the way in which theology by African-American theologians should now be undertaken. In his work, *The Social Teaching of the Black Churches*, Paris writes that “within the last two decades, black [religious] scholarship has exhibited a [certain] revisionist character.”17 Unfettering itself from the burden of legitimization and gesturing away from theology as merely Christianized racial apologetics, as opposed to floundering in theories of racial victimization, this “new breed of scholars” says Paris, possess “the capacity to find alternative ways of thinking” evidencing “the tenacity and the resiliency of the human spirit in encounter with [additional] life-threatening conditions.”18

As a philosophical theologian trained in the schools of deconstruction and revision, though working within the confines of his formative Pentecostal tradition, Jones’ “alternative ways of theological thinking” caused him at times to stand outside of his tradition’s circle of faith and at times caused him to stand “at odds with

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18 Ibid.
the very persons and institutions from which he derived his ecclesial authority.”

Regarding the tensions that emerged between his deep-seated loyalty to his faith community and his own personal theological convictions, one of his interpreters suggested:

Jones stood at once both inside and outside of the circle. As the son of the founder’s successor and a leading denominational executive himself, Bishop Jones was not only born at the center of the circle, but he spent his entire life laboring at the center, serving well the denomination that he so greatly loved. But as a prophet, whose loyalty was a critical loyalty, a loyalty to the church, yes, but whose first loyalty was to the God that sent him, Jones also stood outside of the circle. By virtue of his loyalty to God, the bishop was at times forced to raise difficult questions about the order of things within the church, and in classic prophetic fashion the bishop was even compelled at times to speak this truth to the very systems of power that appointed him.

Jones attempted to create an environment that fostered critical theological reflection using the platforms that were afforded him as a leading denominational executive with a significant preaching ministry, as the author of his denomination’s leading theological publication, and as a prominent pastor and bishop. But not only did Jones help to create this environment within the wider church, he himself also participated in the theological re-envisioning of several cherished and deeply held tenets of his community’s theology. His revisionist activity stands squarely in line with what Cornel West has identified as the central task of the African-American philosopher. According to West, the task of the Black philosopher “is to stimulate, hasten and enable alternative perceptions and practices by dislodging prevailing discourses and

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19 Eric Williams, “His Preparation, His Piety and His Prophecy: Bishop O.T. Jones, Jr. as a Model of Progressive Pentecostal Ministry” (paper delivered at portrait unveiling commemorating the life of Bishop OT Jones, Jr., Holy Temple COGIC, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, February 14, 2010).

20 Ibid.
powers.”

Jones utilized both his faith and learning to help his tradition more deeply reflect upon what his community referred to as “the faith that was once entrusted to the saints,” and in doing so emerged as a revisionist Pentecostal theologian.

Jones’ theological project was deeply rooted in a form of Pentecostal revisionism. However, by virtue of the two contrasting religious worlds from which he reflected theologically, Pentecostalism and existential philosophy, Jones’ revisionist theologizing also took on a critically dialectical dimension. In an address given on Jones’ theological vision at Lutheran Theological Seminary, Frederick Ware captures the dialectical nature of Jones’ theological program. Ware locates the two crucial theological polarities from which Jones reflected and he identifies the ways in which each pole influenced Jones’ moral and theological vision. Ware argues:

If hard pressed to offer a [theological] classification [for Jones], I would label Bishop Jones as a dialectical theologian. He is a dialectical theologian influenced ecclesially by Pentecostalism and philosophically by existentialism. Pentecostalism frame[d] his sense of Christian identity and experience and existentialism is the intellectual framework that influence[d] his understanding of human freedom and potential. Bishop Jones’ thought exhibit[ed] a wrestle with tensions between God and humanity, between church and society, between evangelicalism and modernism, between tradition and innovation, between denominationalism and ecumenism, between liberation and reconciliation, between religion and science, and between mythology and empiricism.

Jones is here categorized as the dialectical-revisionist philosophical theologian in that his scholarship served as “a bridge between Pentecostalism and modern

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22 Jude 1:3b: “I find it necessary to write and appeal to you to contend for the faith that was once for all entrusted to the saints.” NRSV.
23 Frederick Ware, “Response to Eric Williams” (remarks delivered for the Urban Theological Institute of The Lutheran Theological Seminary at Philadelphia’s Public Lecture Series, April 17, 2010), 1.
On the one hand, Jones was a revisionist, seeking to provide an alternative vision of his community’s theology and ministry; and on the other hand, we have the dialectical nature of his theological approach, in that he was keen to lift up the infinite tensions, paradoxes and basic incongruities within the sanctified life. It is from this complexity of Jones’ theological vision and from his dialectical-revisionist perspective that Jones etched out his highly distinctive Black Pentecostal philosophical theology.

2.2  **Childhood and Formative Years**

Ozro Thurston Jones Jr. was born on July 2, 1922 in the city of Fort Smith, Arkansas. Ozro was the first of six children born to his parents, the Reverend Ozro Thurston Sr. and Mrs. Neanza Williams Jones. As a child, Jones never envisioned that his life would be spent in the service of Christian ministry. In recalling his childhood thoughts of the possibility of someday entering into the ministry, Jones commented, “I don’t think I had a natural ability to express myself as a child. I was somewhat shy. I think my brothers were better at that than I was. I don’t think I was expected to be a preacher, although I had my father’s name.” Little did Jones know that his entire life was to be spent in Christian service and that he would not only become a pastor, but a trained theologian and “Bishop” within his denomination.

At the time of Jones’ birth, his father was engaged in pastoral ministry, crusading, church planting, evangelizing and establishing COGIC congregations throughout the Mid-South. Jones Sr. was converted under the preaching of pioneering COGIC evangelist, Elder Justice Bowe, in Fort Smith, Arkansas in 1912.

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24 Ibid.  
According to COGIC historian Ithiel Clemmons, “During his momentous conversion [Jones, Sr.] is said to have heard a voice saying, “Go and evangelize the world.”26 In response to his awakening to faith and his call to evangelize the world, Jones Sr., along with “a brother Arthur and a sister, Elsie Jones Grier, formed a powerful evangelistic team.”27 According to one source, this team was responsible for establishing some “eighteen congregations in Arkansas, Oklahoma and Kansas.”28 Jones Sr.’s evangelistic labors and his success as a church planter soon came to the attention of the denomination’s founder, Bishop Charles Mason and in 1920, Jones Sr. was appointed as the assistant overseer of all the COGIC churches in the state of Oklahoma. Jones Sr.’s regional appointment by Mason in 1920 was his entry into a lifelong career as a denominational executive, ultimately resulting in his succession of Mason following Mason’s death in 1961.

While Jones Jr. was born in Arkansas, in 1925, the entire family moved to Philadelphia when he was just three years old, in response to a request by Bishop C.C. Frederick, who wanted Jones Sr.’s assistance with a fledgling prayer band. This small prayer band, formerly known as the Mt. Israel Holiness Church, had been doctrinally dissatisfied with its earlier leadership and had been unable to secure steady pastoral guidance.29 Given his background in evangelism, church planting and ‘tent-making,’ Mason selected Jones Sr. as the minister to advance the work of the

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28 Ibid.
denomination in the city of Philadelphia, the state of Pennsylvania and along the
country’s eastern seaboard.

In addition to building up the congregation in Philadelphia and expanding the
witness of COGIC throughout the state of Pennsylvania, according to one
biographer, the denomination grew and gradually became more institutionalized and
bureaucratic because of Jones Sr.’s sophistication as a churchman, and the soundness
of his spirituality.30 During this time, Jones Sr. also received a series of
administrative appointments throughout the denomination: he was appointed to the
presidency of the International Youth Department in 1914; the editorship of the
Young People Willing Workers Training Manual in 1916; the International Youth
Congress in 1928; and in 1933 he became the first of the original five overseers to be
consecrated to the Office of Bishop by COGIC founder, Charles Harrison Mason.31

In his important historical study of COGIC entitled This is the Church of God
in Christ, COGIC historian Bobby Bean comprehensively listed the various
executive appointments that Jones Sr. also received within the denomination.
According to Bean, Jones Sr. served in the following international executive
positions within the denomination: “President of the Board of Education of the
Church of God in Christ, Member of the Board of Trustees, and Chief Commissioner
of the Special Commission to Assist Bishop Mason[.]”32 In addition to these
specialized administrative appointments, Bean pointed to the fact that “in 1957,
[Jones] along with Bishop J.E. Bryant [jointly] authored the original Official Manual

32 Bobby Bean, This is the Church of God in Christ (Atlanta: Underground Epics Publishing, 1970),
176.
of the Church of God in Christ.”

Jones Sr.’s contribution to the life and leadership of the denomination was so significant that another denominational historian wrote concerning Jones that, “his ministry was so vast and far-reaching that few areas of the church’s life were untouched by him.” It was against the backdrop of his father’s high level of denominational involvement that Jones Jr. was nurtured under the shadow of his father.

Although not much has been written regarding Jones’ childhood and formative years, it is reasonable to surmise that his coming to consciousness within the hustle and bustle of congregational and denominational life had an adverse effect upon him. From statements made by Jones about his childhood, it appears that his growing up at the very nerve center of his denomination’s inner-life produced a certain sort of timidity within him. In a 1985 interview with the editorial staff of He Lives Magazine, when asked to comment upon his childhood leadership qualities Jones remarked, “I don’t think I had the ability to express myself as a child.” Jones went on to say: “I think I was always outgoing, perhaps the correct answer to your question about my innate qualities may be that I was too self-conscious to manifest them. I was so self-conscious to the point that I did not feel that I should express the things I felt.”

With Jones’ father being such an influential and sought-after personality within the church, Jones was forced to share his father’s attention with the denomination’s leaders, ministers and laity. Although it was not the case that Jones felt unloved by his father, because of his father’s responsibilities to the

33 Ibid.
denomination and his congregation, Jones dealt with the reality that the church always had a cherished standing in his father’s affection.

2.3 Formative Social and Ecclesial Contexts

Within the history of African American Christianity, the city of Philadelphia occupies a significant standing due to the 1787 founding of the first independent African American denomination, the AME Church, by free blacks Richard Allen and Absalom Jones and the subsequent construction of the Mother Bethel AME Church (1794) and the African Episcopal Church of St. Thomas (1792). Over one hundred years later, Philadelphia became the destination of a vast influx of Southern migrants. These migrants brought with them their faith and a variety of new expressions of black religion, including those of Pentecostal denominations, such as COGIC, UHCA, and a host of other religious communities, including the United House of Prayer, the Moorish Science Temple, the Black Jews and Father Divine’s Peace Mission Movement. These new movements provided a sharp contrast to the institutional expressions of black religious life that had thrived in Philadelphia since the 18th century. These migrants to the urban North created alternative sacred spaces for worship in the absence of access to church buildings, including former stores, refurbished storefronts, and other commercial properties. However, much of the social scientific and popular literature of this time period made little distinction between what was then known as “sanctified” and “storefront” churches, and those other African American religious communities who identified themselves otherwise.

36 For additional information about the AME Church, please see Richard Newman’s Freedoms Prophet: Bishop Richard Allen, the AME Church, and the Black Founding Fathers (New York: New York University Press, 2009).
In his classic 1944 study of Black religion in Philadelphia, *Black Gods of the Metropolis*, American sociologist Arthur Huff Fauset remarked on this tendency to erroneously classify the entire lot of these new urban faith communities together:

Anyone passing through one of these districts [saturated by storefronts], especially at night, becomes aware of [their] influence [upon the Negro]. The signs are unmistakably present: frequently a store-front church, probably with improvised sign; the sound of tambourines, drums, wind and stringed instruments; the noise of unrestrained singing and shouting; and the dancing silhouettes. Sometimes the meeting place is more pretentious, and on occasion the ritual may be relatively subdued. The underlying pattern is fairly uniform, however, and it requires more than a few casual observations to detect the fundamental differences which distinguish one group from another.37

While Fauset’s study demonstrated the need for closer observation and greater care in the social scientific examination of the varying storefront assemblies, Fauset’s study also explicated, in terms of morphology, aesthetics, and institutional structure, how very similar these doctrinally differing storefront churches appeared to the uninitiated and to casual observers.

It was within this context of Black multi-faith Philadelphia that the Holy Temple COGIC was born (1925) and it was here that Holy Temple emerged as an alternative type of urban Pentecostal community. Holy Temple attempted to walk a fine line between revivalism and respectability by embracing the high brow liturgical and progressive social reforms of Black reformers of the previous century and simultaneously extolling the ecstatic and ascetic dimensions of its own Black Pentecostal heritage. It was within this tension between revivalism and respectability, at the intersection of high church and sanctified church, that Jones’ unique blend of Pentecostal spirituality was forged.

In her 1945 spiritual autobiography, *What It Means To Pray Through*, pioneer COGIC evangelist and prayer-warrior Elizabeth J. Dabney, an early member of the Holy Temple Church, provides us with a greater sense of both the religious world and the worship experience of the congregation in Philadelphia, under which Jones came to faith. In articulating the intensity and the drama of the religious meetings of those early black pilgrims, Dabney explained:

Many times, the presence of the Lord was so great upon them that they walked the aisles of the church and wrung their hands; they rejoiced and praised God out of the very depths of their soul. They requested the Lord to send a soul “redeeming meeting.” The Mothers of the church occupied the “Amen Corner.” They wore long pleated dresses, beautiful white, starched and ironed aprons, slat bonnets and the old famous turban which is very popular today. A few feet from the “Amen Corner” was the “Mourners’ Bench.” Sinners did not go there to look around, nor did they dare play or whisper in the House of God. They did not tell funny jokes or fables to make people laugh; they were sincere in their worship. They acknowledged the glory of the Lord, and their prayers ascended unto the throne of God. The word of God was preached under the power of the Holy Ghost. Stony hearts of men, women and children quaked under the mighty hand of God.

Dabney’s comments give insight into the drama and ecstasy characteristic of the inner-life of early COGIC ecclesial praxis in Philadelphia. Dabney’s depiction of early COGIC ecclesial life could very well be studied alongside other congregations situated within a Black religious sect/cult typology. Some resemblances included the respective congregations’ deeply rapturous atmosphere; revivalistic preoccupation; dress codes; and the seating arrangements.

Even though Dabney, whose autobiography was published two years after Fauset’s study, effectively captures the poignancy of Philadelphia’s COGIC saints in worship, in that same year, the Institutional Prospectus included in the 1945

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Yearbook of the Holy Temple Church offered a sharply contrasting vision of the congregation. Though clearly interested in spiritual renewal, according to information contained in the “Yearbook,” there was also great concern for social reform (and respectability) in terms of the church’s understanding of its position in the world. With regards to the language that the congregation employed to speak of its social responsibility, the Yearbook read:

> As a spiritual institution in a society of materialistic men we have accepted the challenge of our times – to foster an ideal but practical Christian program for our community, especially our youth. It is our belief that the Christian church should provide a Christian program that would develop the whole man, not merely part of him...it is our conviction that if a Christian world is to be realized it must be through Christian men and women. For this cause we have endeavored to provide a comprehensive religious program that is both Christian and attractive to youth.39

From both Dabney’s depiction of early COGIC life in Philadelphia and the comments regarding the congregation’s broader social vision, it is clear that the congregation and community that nurtured Jones were equally concerned with both revivalism and respectability, sanctified worship and social reform. Jones, whose theological and ministerial consciousness was formed within this context and who later served the institution as its senior minister, sought to create an environment that was both priestly and prophetic in the midst of these theological negotiations.

The migration of the Jones family to Philadelphia from Arkansas resulted in a radically different educational experience for the Jones’ children than they would have had if their parents had remained in the South. Substandard school buildings and shoddy educational materials were the norm for the so-called colored children in the South. In Philadelphia, the Jones’ children had the opportunity to attend better-

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resourced, racially integrated public schools in the city. Jones attended public
elementary school in West Philadelphia and went on to secondary school at the then
predominantly Jewish, Overbrook High School also in West Philadelphia.40

Though Jones completed his elementary and secondary schooling in multi-
ethnic Philadelphia, regarding the lack of diversity in his educational experience,
Jones expressed this regret: “I never had a black teacher in my life but one, and I
didn’t have him until I was in graduate school at Temple.”41 By Jones’ own
admission, both the absence of Black educators and the pressures of being an African
American in a predominantly white environment drove him to a state of identity
crisis. In an address given before an academic forum on African American religion,
sponsored by the Urban Theological Institute of the Lutheran Theological Seminary
at Philadelphia in 1986, Jones had this to say about his racial identity crisis:

It is interesting where I learned my racial attitudes, that is, that race
must not be for me a barrier. I learned it from my white teachers…I
learned it from white teachers that I learned, in fact they made me
memorize it…“that all men are created equal, that they are endowed
by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are
Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness.”42

Jones went on to say:

I believed my white teachers so much…that I got to the place…in
those days I did not even want to think of myself as being a Negro,
[or] what you would now call black. In my youth if you called a
Negro “black,” they were fighting words. I learned this from a white
teacher, “race was just an artificial boundary of the mind.” And I
really just got to the place where I wanted to forget all about being
black or being a Negro. So much so until I told one of my Jewish
friends Jerry, his name was Jerry Gerowitz, I said Jerry, "man I’m
tired of thinking of myself as being black, I just want to think of

41 Ozro Jones Jr., “In Christ There is No Difference” (lecture given at Preaching With Power: A
Forum on Black Preaching and Theology, Lutheran Theological Seminary, Philadelphia,
42 Ibid.
myself as being a man.” And he said to me, “Ozro, please don’t get to that place, because everybody you meet, they already know you’re black. And all your friends, we know you’re black. And it would be a shame, Ozro, if you didn’t know you were black.”

It was from his Jewish friend’s rebuttal that Jones began to think more critically about the unrelenting presence of race in American society. These deep struggles with his racial identity and attempts to reconcile his racial identity with his Christian faith later led Jones to the realization that although race in American society is often a controlling category, in Christ there is no difference. This served as a critical hermeneutical principle for Jones in his vocation as a pastor and theologian.

After graduating from Overbrook High School in 1940, Jones chose to attend Temple University in Philadelphia. Commenting on his choice, Jones said:

My education happened sort of naturally. I could not leave Philadelphia because I was involved in the local church here. I felt responsible to stay with the young people that I was a part of, so therefore, I went to Temple. I was very active as a young people’s leader [in the church]. I felt very responsible for them. In fact, I feel that this is the key to any leadership – whether it is youth leadership or church leadership. The leader must be responsible for everybody and everything that happens.

Due to his deep connectedness to his youth ministry at the Holy Temple Church, Jones undertook all post-secondary studies in his hometown of Philadelphia. This decision allowed Jones to remain involved in the spiritual lives of the youth he served in the congregation.

Jones completed a Bachelor of Science Degree in Education in 1945; the Master of Arts in Sociology in 1946; the Bachelor of Sacred Theology in 1949; the

43 Ibid.  
Master of Sacred Theology in 1953; and the Doctorate of Sacred Theology in 1962 - all at Temple University. Regarding his multiple matriculations, Jones said:

I didn’t intend to graduate five times. I got interested in various things because I was thinking of ways of helping my ministry. By the time I went to Africa, I think I had graduated three times. Now while in Africa I gained some new insights and some new interests in the Bible and its message. So I went back and got a Master Degree in Theology, primarily because I was interested in certain things I had learned while I was in Africa. Then I found I was so near a doctorate, I just decided to stay there and get the doctorate. This also came about because of my interest in Kierkegaard.45

By attaining multiple degrees from Temple University, Jones both shattered and defied all stereotypes and charges of Pentecostals as being merely otherworldly and anti-intellectual. In reflecting upon the significance of Jones’ educational trajectory at the historical moment in which Jones engaged in his post-secondary studies, Ware states:

It is quite unfortunate that Pentecostalism is caricatured as a movement of the poor and unlearned. Bishop Jones by thought and practice [defied] this stereotype of Pentecostalism as emotionalism, non-intellectual, or anti-intellectualism. There have always been educated persons in the Pentecostal movement and in the Church of God in Christ. This cadre of intellectuals [included]: David J. Young, Robert Hart, Riley F. Williams, and Arenia C. Mallory. Bishop Jones may be unique in that he…is the first African American Pentecostal and member of the Church of God in Christ who earned a PhD in theology from a national research university. Bishop Jones is further unique in that he articulated, explained, and modeled the life of the mind in the Pentecostal church.46

Given the opportunity they had for quality education, Jones and all of his siblings upon completion of their secondary schooling went on to advanced academic study leading to careers in medicine, ministry, nursing, education, and governmental affairs.

45 Ibid.
46 Frederick Ware, “Response to Eric Williams.”
2.4 Influences

Although Temple University was the primary educational institution to nurture his theological imagination, there were also particular individuals and distinctive theological trajectories that helped to shape Jones’ moral and theological vision. In addition to modeling for Jones a reflective and compassionate ministry, these individuals and trajectories provided Jones with a language for articulating his dialectical-revisionist Pentecostal vision. The first of these theological influences was his father, Bishop Ozro Thurston Jones, Sr. Not only did Jones revere his father as his biological parent, he regarded Jones Sr. as a “Father in Israel.” In defining what for him constituted a “Father in Israel” Jones explains:

A Father in Israel is just a spiritual name for one who has become in the life of a people, the means by which they came into the knowledge of God, (receive their experience of God or their salvation). Now, he may or may not be the one who preached the sermon that brought them to conversion, but he is the one who they now look to for spiritual guidance. They look to him a little differently than they look to anybody else. He has a place in their lives that is not based on simple authority, but based on respect and love.47

For Jones, this respect and love bestowed upon his biological father as a “Father in Israel” was both deep and abiding. In reflecting upon the impact of his father’s spirituality on his own spiritual development, Jones writes:

He impressed upon me the importance of being a for-real person, spiritually and morally. I think he got over to me that I must be authentic as a saint. [And] he got over to me the idea that whatever advantages one has, God gave them to [us] to share.48

For Jones, it was his father’s embodiment of the Christian faith that became for him the consummate example of living a sanctified life.

48 Ibid.
While Jones admired his father, both as a parent and as spiritual leader, his idealization of his father consigned him to a life of striving to be the man his father was, as well as perpetually preventing him from ever becoming his father’s equal. Moreover, this fixation that Jones had with his father was amplified with regards to the pastoral ministry. Although Jones eventually succeeded his father in the pastorate of the Holy Temple Church, when asked about his success in continuing his father’s ministry, Jones replied:

I don’t know to what degree I am conscious of having part of the mantle (so called) of my father. I suppose you mean his gifts. I do covet his spiritual gifts; I do pray that God will give me more of his spiritual gifts.  

When asked about his own personal success in the pastoral ministry, despite his claim that he lacked his father’s gifts, Jones candidly remarked: “I am very aware that there are many things that have to be done…I am not satisfied at what I have been able to give the church, or what the church has been able to do since I have been at Holy Temple[.]” In relation specifically to outreach and programming, Jones further stated, “in terms of programs, I don’t feel very satisfied with the provisions I have been able to lead our church into establishing. That is, the kinds of services [and] the kinds of groups that will enable [experiencing Christ, understanding Christ and sharing Christ].” For Jones, much more needed to be done before he could be satisfied with his service as the senior minister.

In addition to Jones’ perennial dissatisfaction with becoming his father’s pastoral and professional equal, in comparing himself with his father’s ministry, Jones also experienced great spiritual and psychic distress. In a moment of bare

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49 Ibid.
50 Ibid.
51 Ibid.
honesty regarding the spiritual and psychological angst that plagued him during the early years of his ministry, Jones confessed to his congregation:

I was sitting upstairs in my room one day after a year of seeking the Lord earnestly, not to be saved, but to be completely, wholly delivered. I sat there in my chair by the window and I began to talk to the Lord. It seemed that Christ was there and I began telling Him how I’d been trying to handle some things myself. One of those things was fear. I was afraid that because I had a great father, I’d be a failure and would always be compared to his success. I was afraid I’d never be able to attain that kind of success. I told the Lord I’d been trying to fight that situation and couldn’t.  

That Jones sought God for deliverance from the fear of failure at the remembrance of his father’s ministerial success and that he articulated these feelings of trepidation by invoking the language of spiritual crisis, provides us with a greater sense of the severity of the depths of Jones’ idealization of his father. Jones’ over-estimation of his father’s virtues and his under-estimation of his father’s weaknesses created within him an insuperable sense of existential angst as he reflected upon his own vocational identity. Nevertheless, for Jones, his father was the ultimate model of Christian piety and pastoral excellence.

Another early theological influence upon Jones was the charismatic and comedic guitar-playing evangelist, Elder Utah Smith. A national recording artist, evangelist and COGIC pastor, Smith travelled across the country holding evangelistic campaigns and lifting spirits through his song, humor, and preaching. Jones became acquainted with Elder Smith’s ministry as a child in Holy Temple Church when at his father’s invitation, Smith conducted revival meetings in the city of Philadelphia. It was upon being exposed to Smith’s ministry that Jones was converted at the age of twelve. Being deeply impressed with the impact that Smith’s

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rather unconventional ministry had upon youth and young adults alike, Jones upon accepting his call to preach, also incorporated humor in his preaching as a means of more fully engaging his audience in the preaching event.

Jones also used humor among his black Pentecostal ministerial peers as a means of lessening the gap that emerged after Jones’ impressive educational career. Jones’ protégé, theological ethicist Leonard Lovett, writes that after completing his studies at Temple, Jones attempted the “leap of faith,” back to his native Afro-Pentecostalism, as the separation that ensued as a result of Jones’ education, generated an “almost irreconcilable conflict within his fragile and sensitive spirit.”

In further commenting on the function of humor in Jones’ preaching, Lovett suggests:

I speculate that humor enabled O.T. Jones Jr. to weather the paradoxical tensions generated between his elitist education and his attempt to adjust to the lowliness of the sanctified holiness church of which he became heir…Jones had to adjust to being highly tolerated and far less celebrated…as he lived life on the “horns of a dilemma”…he was able to invite [his hearers] unknowingly to share his inexpressible pain through humor as adequate testimony to his bittersweet pilgrimage.”

Lovett further says of Jones’ homiletical hilarity, that in ridiculing his tradition, which he so often did in his preaching:

Jones attempted to process the trauma of dislocation by masking his deep pain with humor. According to Reinhold Niebuhr, humor can also be employed as a form of judgment against vanity and human pride. Jesus cursed a fig tree (the only negative miracle performed) instead of imposing a curse upon the band of greedy entrepreneurs who had abused a Temple that was intended for prayer, but had become a den of thieves.”

54 Ibid.
55 Ibid.
Lovett further stated:

I speculate that Jones nursed within his bosom deep psychic pain that was so overwhelming that he found a way to “live with it and by the Grace of God not die from it.” … Jones found a way to “live life backwards,” as a way enabling him to resolve the paradoxes that pervaded his life.  

Given Lovett’s nuanced understanding of Jones’ employment of humor, as a Pentecostal philosophical theologian, it is quite plausible that Jones resorted “to humor as a form of judgment that enabled him to cope with his perennial conflict” as a sanctified philosophical theologian.

The single theological figure to have the greatest impact upon Jones’ theological and philosophical understanding was the eighteenth-century Danish philosopher and theologian, Søren Aabye Kierkegaard. Impressed with the breadth and depth of Kierkegaard’s theological vision, in 1962 Jones said of the philosopher: “in so far as theology represents the reflections of thought upon the Christian Revelation, Kierkegaard may be classified as a theologian - indeed, as one of the greatest in the history of Christian theology.”

Jones also noted that, “the impact and import of his thought upon contemporary theology have been profound and far-reaching.”

He pointed out, “[I]ndeed he is such a monumental figure on the theological scene that to many he is not less than the Luther of the modern era.”

Jones, upon discovery of the insights of this new Luther, began to offer a new interpretation of his formative African-American Pentecostal experience.

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56 Ibid.
58 Ibid., 18-19.
59 Ibid 18-19.
As it relates to the influence of Kierkegaard’s writings upon Protestant theology within the Western world, one commentary noted:

Kierkegaard’s enduring influence was at first largely confined to Scandinavia and to German-speaking Europe, where his work had an impact on Protestant theology and on such writers as the novelist Franz Kafka (1883-1924). After WWI existentialism was taken up more widely in Europe and the World and his works became increasingly available in translation.60

With respect to the advent of his writings and insights upon the continent of North America, E. Brooks Holyfield in his highly insightful text, *A History of Pastoral Care in America* stated at length:

An early omen of the new emphasis on Christian freedom appeared in 1923 with the first American translation of selections from the writings of the nineteenth-century Danish theologian Soren Kierkegaard. By the mid-1940’s, the translations of Kierkegaard’s works were appearing at the rate of three and four a year, each inveighing against conventional and legalistic religion. Kierkegaard claimed that the leap of faith might well require a break from with the ethical norm; that the dizziness of freedom was so overwhelming that it produced anxiety; but that only narrow-minded philistines would attempt to escape freedom by trying “to be like others, to become an imitation, a cipher in the crowd.” Americans found in Kierkegaard an insistence that “only the exercise of freedom, in the face of life’s contradictions,” can enable one to “discover” oneself.61

It was in the mid to late 1940’s, at the height of the stir of the Kierkegaardian awakening in North America that Jones, having transitioned out of his studies in education and sociology at Temple University, began to embark upon his formal study of philosophy and theology. It was in the hallowed halls of the Religious Studies department at Temple University that Jones met for the first time the German philosopher and existentialist theologian, Richard Kroner, and was introduced to the

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scholarly theological and philosophical tomes of Soren Kierkegaard. It was Kroner who guided Jones’ study of philosophical theology and who helped him to synthesize his Pentecostal faith with his existentialist grounding. Referring to Kroner as Jones’ “primary teacher,” Lovett said of Jones’ initial exposure to Kroner’s thought that, “Kroner wrote a small book that unearthed [Jones’] preoccupation with the problem of speculation in pre-Christian philosophy.” According to Lovett, “Jones was enamored by this theological giant and hastily formulated a proposal engaging Soren Kierkegaard, the Danish philosophical theologian.” It was engagement with Kierkegaard’s thought that provided Jones with new tongues for theological reflections on humanity’s encounter with God.

In a 1985 interview with editorial staff of *He Lives Magazine*, when asked about the “big influence” that Kierkegaard had upon his life and thought, Jones explained at length:

> I have always been interested in being a holy man, not morally holy only but a man close to God. In the course of my studies, I came across Kierkegaard…a scholar and a dedicated Christian. His description of the need for a moment before God caught my interest. When he had his moment before God he was called, if he was going to be totally committed to Jesus, to make the sacrifice that few are called to make. This is, to give up marriage and to give himself totally to communicating the message by writing…and while making the sacrifice, he was to worship God…My interest in Kierkegaard was that he was not outwardly pious. In fact, outwardly he appeared to be a very wealthy ne’er-do-well who simply spent his time in the theatre – I mean the legitimate theatre…I felt that God wanted him to be misunderstood by the world; not as if he was living before God every private moment he had, but he had to live before the world as if nothing mattered to him…he felt that this was the call to the absurd. He had to belong to God only. 

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Jones’ engagement of Kierkegaard provided him with a new lens and a new rhetoric not only for assessing his own spiritual journey, but Jones also nuanced and broadened Kierkegaard’s notion of the “Moment Before God” and utilized it as a theological trope in interpreting his community’s understanding of both the experiences of initially encountering Christ and the experience of God in the Holy Spirit.

When asked as to the necessity of every Christian having such an experience before God as the one that Kierkegaard had, Jones replied at length:

Yes. This is called the supreme moment. Only Christians can have the supreme moment. Jesus had his in Gethsemane - “Father, if it be Thy will let this cup pass from me: but for this cause came I into the world: Nevertheless not my will but Thy will be done (Luke 22:42).” There is always a moment when God is going to ask you, like He did the young me: “But for this cause came I into the world: Nevertheless not my will but thy will be done” (Luke 22:42). There is always a moment when God is going to ask you, like He did the young rich ruler, to give up everything that is important to you for Him. And, of course, He will give you back everything you need. It is not the man that looks holy, but the average man who lives before God. We follow Jesus, we don’t just follow His teaching, (although, of course, that we do). But we follow Jesus not because of the beauty of His teaching or the promises He has made. We follow Jesus for Jesus. We would rather be in hell with Jesus than in Heaven without Him.\(^64\)

In speaking in reference to the moment of decision in which one must choose to follow Christ, Jones unequivocally maintained that this moment is compulsory for all who become disciples of Christ. For Jones, this truth became the central theological touchstone for his dialectical-revisionist vision.

### 2.5 Vocations

As a son of a bishop, who was also a high-ranking denominational executive and pastor of a large urban congregation, Jones had no choice but to be extremely

\(^{64}\) Ibid.
active in church life. Thus, because of his deep engagement in the life of the church, Jones’ entire life can be understood as one long pilgrimage into Christian ministry. This venture into ministry carried Jones to the highest levels of service to the denomination, both locally and internationally. Jones sensed a personal call to ministry at the age of thirteen; preached his first sermon at the age of fourteen; and was ordained to the Christian ministry at the age of eighteen by his father. Regarding his personal call to ministry, Jones said:

I received the call to preach at a prayer meeting that was being conducted by Mother [Laura] Taylor at the noon-day hour. This was shortly after I was saved, or had the experience of being forgiven by Jesus and accepted by Him. Several of us developed a prayer life. We would meet every day after school and pray. Now, one day at Mother Taylor’s noon-day prayer meeting, it may have been a Saturday, I did not have the free access to the Lord that I had had up to that time as a new born babe or convert. Unable to speak to the Lord, I became silent. Then I had the inward awareness that the Lord was saying to me, “I want you to be my messenger.” That happened on several occasions; but that was not sufficient for me at the time, as a child to interpret that to mean, “I want you to preach.” That happened to me one day while my father was in Memphis. Before I got out of bed, I heard the Lord say, “Go Preach” I heard “Preach!, Preach!, Preach!” over and over again. I was referred to the 16th chapter of St. Mark. I knew then that this was my life’s work.”

Jones went on to say:

In speaking to my father about this, he advised me to give myself to consecration, to live right, and that the Lord would make it plain to me. Naturally, I committed myself then in the way I dressed, in the way I walked and in the way I talked. I adopted all the outward signs of being called to preach, and committed myself to getting a clear understanding of the message.

Jones’ acceptance of his vocational calling led him into several areas of ministry within the church, all of which further prepared him for his service as pastor and theologian.

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65 Ibid., 6.
66 Ibid.
In 1941, at the age of nineteen, Jones received his first appointment from his father to serve as the youth minister of the Holy Temple Church. As youth minister of Holy Temple, Jones began his ministerial labors in the single area of ministry that brought him his greatest prominence within the COGIC. Jones sought to create and design for the youth he served “new ways to present Christ and to worship.”67 With regards to examples of the programs and ministries instituted by Jones during his tenure as youth minister at Holy Temple, Jones said of his work:

Fortunately, I had the freedom to propose any organization that I felt we needed. So we developed a prayer group of the young men called the “Sons of Gideon” and a prayer group of the young women called the “Daughters of Ruth.” They alternated on Tuesday nights to be in charge of the devotion. We also developed the “Upper Room Fellowship” which had as its purpose to develop [persons] spiritually in any way one pleased and at one’s own speed.68

To aid him in this work, Jones began to write devotional materials and discipleship literature. Jones’ effectiveness in the area of youth ministry brought him great notoriety throughout the city of Philadelphia, within his denomination, across the state of Pennsylvania and throughout his denomination internationally. Jones’ theological and devotional writing ability eventually created space for him to write devotional literature for his denomination at large. The combination of his writing ability and his effectiveness in ministry to youth and young adults caused him to be elevated to the presidency of the Youth Department of the COGIC in 1964.

After having served as Youth Leader of Holy Temple Church, Jones enlisted for missionary service on the foreign field. In 1949, Jones answered the call to Christian missions and left both his biological and ecclesial families behind for

67 Ibid.
68 Ibid.
Liberia, West Africa. Regarding his initial sense of being led into missionary service to West Africa Jones noted:

I’ll never forget the Sunday when, as a young man, I sat on the front row of this church and heard my father preach from this pulpit a text taken from the story of Jesus coming to a fig tree looking for figs, but found it barren. Jesus touched it and the tree withered and died. I don’t know how many years ago it was that I heard my father preach that sermon, but as a result of it, I started a journey that eventually ended in my re-discovering my faith and becoming a missionary for two years in Africa.\(^{69}\)

And though Jones eventually submitted to the call that he sensed to missionary service abroad, in a moment of transparency regarding his decision to go, Jones said:

At first I did not want to go. I had no calling from the Lord, as such, that is no direct calling. The call came by way of an invitation from a native of Africa who was pastoring Holy Temple Church of God in Christ in Monrovia, Liberia. He asked me to come over and help them. My conscience convicted me. I thought that if I was willing to go to a city in the United States, why not go to a city in Africa, since my calling was to go into the world. So my desire was to answer the call.\(^{70}\)

In answering the call to service, Jones served the church in Liberia as both a missionary from his local church as well as a Liaison Minister from his denomination in the United States. While in Liberia, Jones also served as the Associate Minister of Monrovia’s Holy Temple COGIC, a sister church to his sending congregation, as well as worked closely with the Council of Christian Missionaries in Liberia. Consequently, Jones gained valuable experience that helped to prepare him for ministry within his own context and he served the church in Liberia, West Africa for two years before returning to the United States to continue his ministry alongside his father in Philadelphia.

\(^{69}\) Ozro Jones Jr., “Pastoral Comments on March 21, 1982,” 32.

\(^{70}\) Ozro Jones Jr., “An Exclusive Interview with Bishop O.T. Jones, Jr.,” 7.
After completing his tenure as a missionary to Liberia, Jones accepted a call to help strengthen and lead a fledgling COGIC congregation in Haverford, Pennsylvania as the congregation’s lead pastor. Thus he was appointed to the pastorate of the Memorial COGIC, Haverford Pennsylvania in 1953. By Jones’ own admission, his tenure in Haverford was a significant time of growth for him personally and professionally. Reflecting on the significant insights gained during his tenure as pastor of Memorial Church, Jones revealed:

In Haverford I became responsible for a Church. At first I did not want to go, because I did not want to appear to have been given a church by my father. Especially given a church where others had been and weren’t able to stay there. I remember when the late Deacon [Charles] Thompson asked me to consider coming to Haverford, and I told him I did not feel that I was the person. Then driving home, I thought, “I went four thousand miles to carry the gospel; why not four miles? Now once I got to Haverford, I became responsible for developing a church. This is what gave me a definition of what the church is. A church is three things: It is a body of people who are saved, a body of people who are saving, and a body of people who reproduce such bodies. This is not something I learned in any book; I just saw this at Haverford…I gave myself to the things that worked. Namely, I kept office hours every day. I kept a prayer time every day. Out of those two things came my ministry. When I first went to Haverford, there were eighteen members. When I left ten years later, the church had nearly two hundred members…something spectacular happened in Haverford besides the overflow of my own spiritual leading us into the things that would help pursue knowing Jesus – with the regular prayer services and special services, the church grew and became a very contagious fellowship.  

For Jones, the ten years spent pastoring in Haverford was a very fruitful time for his ministry which prepared him for his future work in his father’s church as well as for his future bishopric. He remained in Haverford until 1963 when he was called back to Holy Temple to work alongside his aging father as Associate Pastor.

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Returning to Holy Temple Church after ten years as lead pastor of the
Haverford assembly, Jones labored alongside his father with clear knowledge of his
father’s intent for him to succeed him in ministry. Nevertheless, Jones was somewhat
disinclined to do so. In a moment of honesty regarding succeeding his father in the
pastorate of Holy Temple, Jones shared:

Once, I said to my father I did not want to be the leader. He said to
me, “Well, you don’t have to be the leader if you don’t want to - just
remember, if you are not the leader, then you are going to be led by
whoever is the leader. So, since somebody is going to lead, you ought
to be concerned enough about the things you believe in to seek to be
the leader.”

Despite his reservations, in 1972, upon the death of his father, Jones was appointed
as Senior Minister of the Holy Temple Church of Philadelphia. Under his pastoral
leadership, the membership of Holy Temple rose above two thousand members.
Apart from his position as pastor of Holy Temple Church, in 1973 Jones was
consecrated to the office of Jurisdictional Bishop with oversight of COGIC
congregations within the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania. Under his bishopric, the
Commonwealth expanded beyond 200 congregations. Furthermore, in 1980 Jones
was elected to serve on the General Board of the COGIC and was also re-elected
quadrennially in 1984, 1988, 1992 and 1996. Due to his declining health, after his
fifth elected term on the General Board, Jones was elevated to Second Presiding
Bishop Emeritus and remained revered within his denomination as a leading pastor
and theologian until his death in 2008.

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2.6 Conceptions of the Tradition

In a sermon delivered before his congregation in November of 1982, Jones lifted up the single teaching that for him constituted the essence of his inherited Black Holiness-Pentecostal tradition. In his concluding remarks to the sermon, Jones asserted: “If there is any legacy that has come to the world through the holiness movement, it is that we say yes to the Lord…we totally surrender to Jesus.”

For Jones, the highest virtue of his tradition was the notion of being set apart and used completely for Christian service in the world. Though Jones saw this radical submission to Christ as the goal of the Christian life, his theological anthropology was broad enough to acknowledge the frailties and capacities attendant to the human condition. Jones indicated his understanding of the complexity of human nature and of the believer’s perennial struggle with the human condition when he observed:

Even Spirit filled folks are still human. No matter how filled with the Spirit you are, you still haven’t shaken off human mortality. You are not yet in that perfected state called Heaven and you are subject to all the things that human beings are subject to.

For Jones, holiness or Christian perfection as he often called it, was not to be equated with attaining perfection, rather Jones believed that personal holiness was concerned with “perfect striving and total effort.” This for Jones was to be worked out in the believer’s daily Christian walk.

Although Jones deeply loved the tradition in which he was formed, among his chief concerns with the broader Pentecostal movement was what he perceived to be the emotional and doctrinal excesses rampant in some segments of the movement.

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75 Ibid., 141.
Jones attempted to present a more scripturally balanced approach to these issues because of his grave concerns with what he saw as scripturally imbalanced teachings on prosperity, healing, confession, financial stewardship, the anointing and the authority of believers. For Jones, these issues needed to be contextualized within both scripture and the sovereignty of God. Jones’ theological understanding of the sovereignty of God was formed within a strong tradition of seeking and waiting upon the Lord. As opposed to the Deity being manipulated by the supplicant, the onus was upon the praying believer to wait upon the Lord in a posture of openness and receptivity, and if God willed to manifest in a given situation, God moved in God’s own time. It was from this perspective that Jones critiqued much of the popular religious rhetoric of his day.

In his pastoral remarks made before his congregation in Philadelphia on July 12, 1981, Jones expressed his concerns with some of the theological claims of the emerging Word of Faith Movement, a movement often mistaken as Pentecostalism. In his remarks, Jones made the following comments about the claims of the so-called faith teachers:

There are folks going around saying if you don’t get healed it’s because you don’t have the faith. They also say that something must be wrong in your life. These folks also tell you that God didn’t put this thing on you and that the devil did, therefore you are possessed. You’ve got to be careful who you listen to when you’re sick. Some brothers on Christian radio programs are telling you every sickness should be healed. Some even say that there are certain sicknesses saints don’t even get. These brothers don’t seem to realize you can get sick overnight. You can be chronically ill and not even know it and still be God’s child. Don’t let people cause you to believe there’s something wrong with your faith if you don’t get healed. Sometimes too, saints can have all kinds of trouble fall on them other than sickness.76

Realizing the significant impact that the prosperity teachers were having among members of the Pentecostal community through radio broadcasting, mass televangelism campaigns, the increased proliferation of print literature and the rise of the faith conference culture, Jones frequently attempted to distinguish the tradition he inherited from that promoted by the “health and wealth teachers.” On another occasion, in a sermon entitled “Don’t Stop Praying,” Jones sought to debunk what he saw as the myth of positive confession. In doing so, Jones strongly admonished:

God doesn’t need you to lie for Him. Don’t allow any preacher to make you claim what you don’t have. If you’re not healed, don’t claim it. God doesn’t need that! Don’t shout to get happy. Wait. God can make you shout and give you something to shout for. Have faith and teach it to others. Faith does not mean wishful thinking, it means trusting that what God says is true for you. Talk to God and be honest with him.77

For Jones, this type of docetic denial of the human body ran counter to what he understood the scriptures taught about the healing of the body. As one nurtured within a more classical strand of Pentecostalism, Jones saw openness to such unscriptural teachings as one of the limits and weaknesses of the tradition.

In addition to countering what Jones understood as theologically questionable teachings in various sectors of the movement, Jones was also exceedingly concerned with what he saw within the broader tradition as the manufacturing of physical religious experiences. While ecstasy, spontaneity, and physicality have long been benchmarks of the Pentecostal movement, Jones was gravely concerned with performativity devoid of genuine spiritual inspiration. In an attempt to counter the

over-emphasis upon emotionalism that deeply troubled him, in a lesson delivered
during a pastoral teaching on the book of Acts, Jones forcefully posited:

You can’t bring the Holy Ghost [down] by hand clapping, hollering
and pumping up the [worship] service. When you attempt this, you’re
trying to get God to operate on a schedule you’ve set. God sets His
own schedule. What you can do is get on one accord in one place.
Forget about time and just praise Him. Thank Him, tarry and
wait…Get on one accord with your neighbor and with God so that
when God’s time comes, nothing will block your blessing.78

In Jones’ theological framework, it was not the emotion or the physicality that made
one spiritual, rather it was the spirituality that at times could cause one to emote.

Jones explained this tautologically in a sermon when he preached:

You’re not filled [with the Spirit] because you feel it. You feel it
because you have it. You’re not saved because you heard something.
No, you heard something because you’re saved. You may think
you’ve got the power of the Holy Ghost because your hands are
trembling. No, your hands are trembling because you got the Holy
Ghost. It’s not the other way around. You don’t have the power
because you speak in tongues. No, you speak in tongues because you
have the Holy Ghost.79

Believing that there was no singular routinized means by which the Spirit was
manifested, Jones sought to create space for demonstrative forms of religious
experience, as well as more contemplative and meditative expressions. Jones was
sensitive to the varying temperaments of believers in regards to the Holy Spirit’s
manifestation. In fact, it was this tendency to routinize the Spirit that was for Jones
one of the greatest limits of his tradition.

Given Jones preoccupation with the practical implications of holiness, which
he saw as a virtue of his religious inheritance, and his deep concern with doctrinal

78 Ozro Jones Jr., “Teachings From the Book of Acts: September 18, 1981,” To God Be the Glory Vol
79 Ozro Jones Jr., “Don’t Doubt It, Even If You Don’t Feel: September 20, 1981,” To God Be the
and emotional excesses, an appropriate descriptor for Jones’ spirituality is that of a pragmatic vision of Pentecostal piety. As a dialectical-revisionist theologian with a pragmatic Pentecostal vision, Jones imagined a mode of spirituality that wedded holiness piety with patience and practicality. In a 1982 sermon entitled “Stop Making Excuses,” Jones rendered a sobering dose of pragmatism to his Pentecostal brothers and sisters. According to Jones:

“[t]oo many of us [Pentecostals] today are depending on some great outside miracle or windfall to come along and solve our problems and circumstances when we should be relying on Jesus and what he has already made available to us. Instead of just lying there in our problems, we should be making use of what we already have.”

Believing that his tradition, with its emphasis upon transcendence and religious encounter, had inadvertently created a culture of over-reliance upon supernatural intervention, Jones consciously attempted to deconstruct this ideology, advocating for a form of piety that was simultaneously rooted in the believer’s relationship with Christ and the Spirit’s leading in their lives. Jones was not closed to the possibility of divine intervention, because for him, Christian life was precisely life in the Spirit. Jones believed that the Christian had already been given, “all that pertained to life and to Godliness” and thus only needed to rely upon the resources, grace, and guidance given by the Spirit in the workings of their own individual lives of faith. It was this pragmatic understanding of Pentecostal piety that Jones offered to his broader religious community as an alternative mode of Pentecostal spirituality. In doing so, Jones attempted to help his fellow Pentecostal brothers and sisters re-negotiate the sanctified life within the modern world.

81 Ibid.
2.7 Pneumatology

One who reads Pentecostal theology written by North American Pentecostal theologians, soon realizes that a great majority of the scholarly theological literature on the Spirit has focused almost exclusively on the ecstatic practice of tongues-speaking. There appears to be an unwillingness among Pentecostal theologians to engage in any critical form of theological reflection which does not privilege or over-emphasize tongues-speaking. This unwillingness may stem from a narrow construction of the biblical materials, the privileging of moments of heightened charismatic manifestation in the history of the church or their own personal experiences with glossolalia.

Jones believed that this narrow way of doing pneumatology has contributed to the construction of a misleading theological meta-narrative. Given his revisionist theological agenda, the perspectives of Jones are here offered as one mode of deconstructing this grand theory of Pentecostal dogma. Jones was unwilling to privilege tongues speaking (or any other charismatic manifestation of the Spirit) in his own theological program and took exception with Pentecostal theologians who did. Whenever Jones was given the opportunity to address the denomination at large, he said, “I’m not a tongue-talker, but I’m filled with the Holy Ghost!”

For Jones, the problem with the doctrine of tongues as “initial evidence” of Spirit baptism was its misdirected focus; it “emphasiz[ed] the package and not the content.”

According to Jones, “[t]his [tendency] has caused many [Pentecostals] to be hung up on tongue speaking. This is not to say we shouldn’t have tongues, but it has caused

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82 Eric Williams, “His Preparation, His Piety and His Prophecy.”
people to seek the sign of tongues instead of the gift of the Holy Ghost.”

Jones further maintained: “what throws a lot of us off today [is] we’re looking for the wrapping instead of what’s in the package.”

Though Jones could appreciate ecstatic speech as a gift of the Spirit, the undue fixation with tongues speaking (as initial evidence), characteristic of many traditions of North American Pentecostalism, constituted for him a distraction. Jones referenced his own denomination’s official teaching, recorded in the 1956 manual of the COGIC, which reads:

Though we do not presume to teach that no one has the Spirit that does not speak with tongues, yet we believe that a full baptism of the Holy Ghost as was poured out on the day of Pentecost, is accompanied by speaking with other tongues.

Jones found this 1951 statement exceedingly helpful in that it provided an avenue for discourse about the Spirit independent of ecstatic religious experiences. The statement also avoided the language of evidence in talking about the work of the Sovereign God in the life of a believer, seeing as God did not require human verification for God’s activity in the world. In clarifying the distinction between the religious phenomenon of tongues speaking versus the reception of the Spirit, Jones based his argument upon his interpretation of the second chapter of Acts.

Wrote:

The first outpouring of the Holy Ghost came in a package. That is to say, it had lots of sounds, physical signs and the people spoke in tongues or the languages of those around them. All of this was for a purpose. But what came in the package were not just the sounds and the wrapping. What really came was in the package was the Holy Ghost!

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84 Ibid.
85 Ibid.
For Jones, the Lukan narrative affirmed that Pentecost was not simply about tongues speaking, but about the advent of the Spirit.

Yet another important aspect of Jones’ understanding of the Spirit was his theology of the xenolaic or missionary character of speech inspired by the Spirit. In his reading and interpretation of the Pentecost narrative recorded in Acts 2, Jones deduced that the function and purpose of Spirit-inspired speech was the communication of the gospel. Differing from the account found in St. Paul’s writings to the church at Corinth, in which an interpreter is compulsory to clarify the ecstatic utterance spoken under the influence of the Spirit, in Acts 2, no interpreter is required as the Spirit enables those present to hear the gospel communicated in their own languages. According to Jones:

When the Holy Ghost works on your tongue and gives you what to say, you can address everybody about whatever condition they are faced with…the Spirit can bridge the language barrier between you and someone you are trying to help.\(^88\)

In Jones’ analysis of the Pentecost event, the tongues that were spoken by the believers on the Day of Pentecost were given for the purpose of communicating the gospel to others. As it relates to tongues speaking and communicating the gospel today, Jones said:

We have teenagers we don’t know how to address, but the Spirit knows…Young people, old people, welfare people, middle class people, drug addicts and alcoholics all represent different languages, but if you let the Spirit come in, [the Spirit] knows how to get their attention.\(^89\)

For Jones, the very grace to communicate the gospel to those that are outside the community of faith is the very gift that is given to the church at Pentecost.

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\(^88\) Ibid.
\(^89\) Ibid.
Jones’ understanding of the missional character of Spirit-inspired speech bears a strong resemblance to what Mae Henderson has referred to as “heteroglossia.” According to Henderson, “heteroglossia describes the ability to speak in multiple languages of public discourse.”90 Henderson, also of Black Pentecostal heritage, contends that, “[i]f glossolalia suggests private, nonmediated, nondifferentiated, univocality, heteroglossia connotes public, differentiated, social, mediated, dialogic discourse.”91 For Jones, the importance of tongues speech is the ability to communicate to people in multiple publics, and as Henderson suggests, ecstatic speech must speak to the depths of the human experience. In encouraging his parishioners to seek the Lord for the infilling of the Spirit, Jones was known to tell them that some of the phenomena recorded in Acts 2:

...just may not be repeatable, so don’t listen for a sound and don’t look for fire, you may not speak with tongues either, but one thing is certain, when God sends his promise you will be filled with the Holy Ghost.92

We see that within Jones’ revisionist Pentecostal theology of the Spirit, the experience of Spirit baptism is not routinized or evidenced by any one particular normative manifestation of the Spirit, such as ecstatic speech. Concerning the experience of Spirit-inspired speech, Jones affirmed that the Sovereign God communicates through whom, to whom and in whatever manner the Sovereign God wills.

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90 Ibid.
2.8 Ecclesial Identity

In his highly engaging essay “Of the Faith of the Fathers,” included in his 1903 classic work *The Souls of Black Folk*, W.E.B. DuBois argued that there were three things that historically characterized and animated the religious life of nascent African Christianity in North America: “the Preacher, the Music and the Frenzy.”\(^93\)

For DuBois, the preacher was “the most unique personality developed by the Negro on American soil” and he understood the preacher as the community’s “leader, politician, orator, boss, intriguer and idealist.”\(^94\) With regards to the Negroes’ religious music, DuBois maintained that “despite caricature and defilement,” their music “still remain[ed] the most original and beautiful expression of human life and longing yet born on American soil.” DuBois labeled this music as “the one true expression of a people’s sorrow, hope and despair.”\(^95\) But of the component perhaps most germane to our study, “the frenzy,” DuBois noted:

> The Frenzy or “Shouting,” [occurring] when the Spirit of the Lord passed by, and seizing the devotee, ma[king] him mad with supernatural joy, was the last essential of Negro religion and the one more devoutly believed in than all the rest. It varied in expression from the silent rapt countenance or the low murmur and moan to the mad abandon of physical fervor - the stamping, shrieking, and shouting, the rushing to and fro and wild waving of arms, the weeping and laughing, the vision and the trance…[S]o firm a hold did it have on the Negro, that many generations firmly believed that without this visible manifestation of God there could be no true communion with the Invisible.\(^96\)

Seeing these African retentions embraced by the African-American church as having a firm hold on black religious life, DuBois sought to challenge Black Americans to

\(^{94}\)Ibid.
\(^{95}\)Ibid.
\(^{96}\)Ibid.
orient themselves to a this-worldly form of salvation, something to save them from
the terrors of Black life in America.

However, by the time COGIC had reached Philadelphia in the wake of the
Great Migration, it was precisely the frenzy, or the ecstatic dimension, that became
the normative lens through which the tradition’s preachers and music was
interpreted. This “frenzied” caricature of the Pentecostal worship experience and its
adherents was relegated as ecstatic, uneducated, bombastic, unreflective, irrelevant and
otherworldly and became the dominant way in which both Pentecostalism and
the Pentecostal worshiper came to be understood. 97 The ministry of Jones and that of
his father countered prevailing notions of Pentecostal identity as they consciously
sought to overcome this caricature, thereby helping to broaden the contours of
twentieth-century African-American Pentecostal ecclesial identity. Through an
emphasis on an educated ministry, the embrace of an alternative ecclesial material
culture and the adoption of a more formalized liturgy, Jones and his father sought to
overcome the storefront model of ministry that was so prevalent among the new
Pentecostal congregations worshipping in the urban centers of the North.

Around the same time that Zora Neale Hurston (while explicitly naming the
COGIC), attempted to define the sanctified church and its worship as “a protest
against the high brow tendencies in Negro Protestant congregations as the Negroes
gain[ed] more education and wealth,”98 the Joneses of Philadelphia and a broad
network of ministers throughout the country were working equally as diligently in
the hopes of succeeding in what Ithiel Clemmons referred to as bringing COGIC

97 For additional information on Pentecostalism as ecstatic religion and religion of the poor, see
Arthur Huff Fauset, Black Gods of the Metropolis: Negro Religious Cults of the Urban North
“out of its sectarian isolation.” This intergenerational network of new black Pentecostal ministers included the Joneses of Philadelphia, the Roberts’ of Chicago, Riley F. Williams of Cleveland, D. Lawrence Williams of Newport News and the Clemmons brothers of Brooklyn (to name a few). COGIC historian David Daniels writes concerning this alternative Pentecostal ecclesial culture:

Many of these clergy preached from a manuscript and intentionally went beyond the so-called storefront model, with its emphasis on ecstatic worship through testimony service, preaching as hooping, [and] tarrying service…These congregations also began to emphasize the working class mix of their congregations, the fact that government workers or schoolteachers were members.

In addition to the more structured type of manuscript preaching and other liturgical innovations designed to make their worship services both more seeker and working class friendly, there also emerged within these congregations an alternative material culture that dramatically shaped the way in which these congregations worshipped. The artifacts of this material culture included hymnals, choir robes, pipe organs, preaching robes, sermon manuscripts, and orchestras; even candles were often used in the creation of this new Black Pentecostal liturgical ethos. By virtue of his formal theological training, Jones did not merely engage in liturgical reform for the sake of a broader appeal, but he made the modest fruit of his theological reflection available to his entire denomination through his theological writings.

Jones’ theological defense of order in African-American Pentecostal worship began around the same time that James Baldwin, “America’s inside eye on the Black

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Holiness and Pentecostal churches,” uplifted the ecstatic spirituality of the sanctified tradition through such works as *Go Tell it On the Mountain* and *The Fire Next Time*. While Baldwin, in reflecting on the energy of sanctified worship, stated “[t]here is no music like that music, no drama like the drama of the saints rejoicing, the sinners moaning, the tambourines racing, and all those voices coming together and crying holy unto the Lord,” Jones remarked that “[a]ll too often in emphasizing the primary importance of Spirit in worship, we [Pentecostals] forget the secondary importance of form.”

He further commented:

> Obviously, form is not the essential thing in worship, but it does have a real place – a God-given place. Everything – including worship – should be done “decently and in order.” (1 Cor. 14:40) Psalms and hymns, as well as spiritual songs, have a place in the worship service. (Col. 3:16) Therefore, in its proper place, far from being a hindrance, form and ritual can be a true help to true worship.

While Baldwin extolled the beauty of ecstasy within the Pentecostal worship experience, Jones attempted to create space for a trajectory of Black Pentecostal worship where both static and ecstatic forms could exist alongside of each other.

Believing that there was indeed a “proper” way for believers to approach a holy God, Jones envisioned a liturgical format in which the Pentecostal worshippers passed through four distinctive moments in worship. According to Jones:

> A complete worship service moves through four stages: 1) Adoration and praise, which is the purpose of hymns; 2) confession and intercession, which is possible through prayer; 3) receiving grace, which is imparted by preaching the gospel; and 4) dedication, which is the true purpose of the offertory and the altar call. Like a meal, by serving it in orderly courses, the receiver is able to both enjoy it and to be helped by it. The receiver is given a “balanced” diet. Only form

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104 Ibid.
without godliness denies the Spirit’s power. Form with godliness conveys that power to believing worshippers.\textsuperscript{105}

Believing that a beautiful God deserved beautiful worship, for the duration of his ministerial career Jones advocated for beauty, order and decorum in worship. In doing so, Jones contributed to a wave of liturgical reforms throughout the entire denomination.

2.9 Theology of Ministry

Since the Azusa Street Revival in 1906, the experiences of women in the Pentecostal church have been strained and varied. As time elapsed and the movement became more institutionalized, in many Pentecostal churches in North America, the roles of women became increasingly restricted. The ministry of women in African-American Pentecostal churches today serves as a constant reminder of the wide range of conditions and situations under which Pentecostal women have historically continued to negotiate, re-negotiate and reinterpret their call to Christian ministry in light of the “stained glass ceilings”\textsuperscript{106} established by the denominations in which they have sought to respond to their vocational calls. As he did with so many other theological issues, Jones challenged the prevailing social traditions and that even of his own denomination regarding the role of women in ministry.

According to the Official Manual of the Church Of God In Christ, “COGIC recognizes the scriptural importance of women in Christian ministry...[though] nowhere can we find a mandate to ordain women to be...elder[s], bishops, or pastors.”\textsuperscript{107} The manual further states: “after all, [St.] Paul styled the women who

\textsuperscript{105} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{107} Official Manual with the Doctrines and Disciplines of the Church of God in Christ, 159-60.
labored with him as servants or helpers, not elders, bishops or pastors.”  

Realizing the significant challenge that the issue of women’s ministry would pose for the church in the years to come, Jones offered his perspective in a commemorative publication honoring the denomination’s fiftieth anniversary in 1956. According to Jones:

The proper place of women in the church is an age-old debate and from all appearances, it seems that it perhaps will be an eternal one— for most mortals at least. This is because too often humanity has looked to the misty heights of theory rather than among the lowly foothills of practical and necessary human service.  

Over and against the prevailing anthropological, biblical, biological, sociological and gynecological arguments that were frequently raised in restricting women from ordained ministry, Jones advanced a democratic theology of ministry rooted in his robust understanding of the work of Christ and a theology of the indiscriminate outpouring and empowering presence of the Holy Spirit for the work of Christian ministry.

For Jones, the lack of access to ordination by women called to serve constituted a scripturally-unfounded gender inequality which both hindered the work of God in the world and created division within the broader church. As an early male voice breaking the silence created by the suppression of women’s voices, Jones embarked upon a lifelong commitment to the public affirmation and empowerment of women for Christian service and did so by staking his claim theologically. In advancing his theological position regarding the full inclusion of women within ministry, Jones contended:

108 Ibid.
Christianity has insisted that women are not commodities or an inferior breed, or something like factory rejects of the human race, conceptions which held (and hold) sway wherever humanity has lived in the era of B.C. (before Christ). For persons for whom Christ died any accidental physical condition is no longer a barrier to freedom, or dignity, or value as a person – whether that physical condition be social distinction, be race (Jew or Gentile), class (bond or free), or sex (male nor female). For [we] all share one spiritual destiny and nature and value in Christ. [We] are all fellow heirs of the promise in Christ.\(^{110}\)

For Jones, it was because of the vicarious death of Christ on the cross that all of humanity, both male and female, have equal standing before God. In noting Jones’ radical Christological claim of full equality for all people, New Testament scholar Demetrius Williams, in his text, *An End to This Strife: The Politics of Gender in African American Churches*, noted that Jones’ “positive assessment of Christian women’s work” could be made “because Christianity had addressed the status of women more profoundly than other religions by insisting that Christ died for all people indiscriminately.”\(^ {111}\) Williams went on to say that the significance of Jones’ reading of Galatians 3:28 provided “the basis for a new vision of human relationships in the church and society.”\(^ {112}\) It was this very revelation and theological insight that served as the motivating ideology behind Jones’ embrace of women in both lay and ordained ministry.

Regarding his perspectives on the full inclusion and affirmation of women in the ministry of the church, Jones wrote to both his congregation and jurisdiction:

> Without a doubt the church must now deal with the whole problem of the equality of the genders…as far as I am concerned, I feel that God

\(^{110}\) Ibid., 36.

\(^{111}\) Demetrius Williams, *An End to This Strife: The Politics of Gender in African American Churches* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2004), 181.

\(^{112}\) Ibid., 187.
has not mocked our sisters by giving them talents, abilities and callings that their gender should prevent them from fulfilling.\textsuperscript{113}

He also stated:

The church must open its doors for whatever ministries our sisters have that are God given. The Bible says “in Christ there is neither male nor female” it does not mean that in Christ there is no distinction. But that the maleness and femaleness do not represent barriers or things that will block whatever their work is. So this means our church must make room for women in an executive capacity as well as administrative…Our church under my leadership must find a way to allow our women to express their God given gifts and callings in whatever capacity they may lead.\textsuperscript{114}

It was this conviction that not only enabled Jones to ordain female ministers, and he ordained nineteen in all, but also allowed him to commit himself to the full inclusion of women in every aspect of the church’s life as well as recommend and refer women he ordained for ministerial service within other denominational traditions. In respect to Jones’ controversial stance on women in ministry, COGIC ethicist, Robert Franklin stated that it was Jones’ affirmation and ordination of female ministers within COGIC which caused him to be “stigmatized by his peers” within the denomination. Franklin nevertheless affirmed that Jones’ position was a sign of hope that inspired some of his “protégés to be open-minded and accepting of their female peers.”\textsuperscript{115} For Jones, these actions and reforms were grounded within his democratic theology of Christian ministry, and he held on to this conviction as long as he lived.

Because of Jones’ early openness to and encouragement of alternative forms of ministry within the COGIC, he was named by one of his critics as perhaps the

\textsuperscript{114} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{115} Robert Michael Franklin, \textit{Another Day’s Journey: Black Churches Confronting the American Crisis} (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1997), 67.
most liberated minister his denomination had produced in one hundred years.\textsuperscript{116}

Being from the vanguard of a progressive Black Pentecostalism, Jones inspired both his peers and succeeding generations with his alternative vision of ministry and through the profferance of his alternative model of Pentecostal spirituality. One young minister who stood in the shadow of Jones, residing some one hundred miles away in Brooklyn, New York, was deeply inspired by Jones’ preparation, piety and priestly ministry. Ithiel Conrad Clemmons, seeing himself in a similar trajectory as Jones, employed his prophetic reading of black Pentecostal history as a means of informing contemporary Pentecostal theology and ministry.

\textsuperscript{116} Eric Williams, “His Preparation, His Piety and His Prophecy.”
Chapter 3

The Hierophant: Ithiel Clemmons as the Historical Interpreter

3.1  Clemmons As Theologian: The Contemplative-Prophetic

North American theologian David Tracy, in his highly provocative study, *The Analogical Imagination* contends that within the Western theological tradition, there are three distinct publics into which every theologian must speak in and to; *the church, the academy, and the larger society*. According to Tracy, each theologian resolves this great *intellectual and existential dilemma* by choosing one of the three aforementioned publics as his or her primary reference group, leaving “the other two publics at the margins of their consciousness.”¹ For Tracy, the faithful theologian is torn asunder by this dilemma and a vocational decision must be reached. And though Tracy’s comments about the theologian “leaving two publics at the margins of their consciousness” may be an overstatement, a glimpse into the public theological career of Ithiel Conrad Clemmons demonstrates this feeling of *intellectual and existential dilemma* was quite real for Clemmons, the late Pentecostal bishop, ecumenist, historian, and theologian.

In a moment of honesty regarding his desire to write for wider public theological consumption, Clemmons stated: “many pastors I know, especially pastors of the black church, are frustrated that their primary obligations allow so little time for serious and sustained writing.”² Clemmons further explained:

In the pastoral ministry, as one prepares to preach once, twice and often three times in one day, illuminations occur, insights clarify, and

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convictions crystallize...[i]deas for books form in the mind. These are put on back burners, however, as the tyranny of the urgent takes over and immediate duties demand priority. Time gets away, hundreds of pages of broodings and ruminations never become the clearly organized, sequentially ordered chapters of a publication. This has been my continual nemesis.3

Clemmons chose the church as his primary public, beginning his pastoral career in 1955 until his death in 1999, although he determined never to allow his service within the academy nor the society to be pushed to the “margins of his consciousness.”4

Remaining engaged within the church, the academy and the broader public sphere until his death, Clemmons became one of the principal interpreters of African-American Pentecostal thought. Grounding his theological insights within the critical disciplines of Church history, political theology, and Christian spirituality, Clemmons’ distinctive vocation as a pastor-scholar provided him a unique vantage for interpreting the tongues of his native African-American Pentecostal tradition to his interlocutors in each of the publics he engaged. As a Black Pentecostal theologian with an orientation towards history and Christian mysticism, in his own life and ministry, Clemmons endeavored to discern, embody and bear witness to the unique deposit of faith bequeathed to him by his enslaved African progenitors and his Black Holiness and Pentecostal forbearers. With this explicitly theological vision of his community’s salvation history, Clemmons emerged on the North American theological scene as an early interpreter of African American Pentecostal history, theology and spirituality.

3 Ibid.
4 Ibid.
In their groundbreaking study, *The Black Church in the African-American Experience*, American sociologists of religion C. Eric Lincoln and Lawrence H. Mamiya build upon the work of sociologists Hart Nelsen and Anne Kusener Nelsen⁵, by setting forth a dialectical model for examining six recurring primal tensions that animate and complexify the institutional life of African-American congregations in North America. According to Lincoln and Mamiya, a “dialectical model of the Black Church” holds that “Black churches are institutions that are involved in a constant series of dialectical tensions. This dialectic holds polar opposites in tension, shifting between the polarities of historical time.”⁶ Lincoln and Mamiya further argue: “[t]here is no Hegelian synthesis or ultimate resolution of the dialectic.”⁷ Among the six dialectically related polar opposites explored in their study, perhaps the single tension most germane to understanding Clemmons as an interpreter of Pentecostal theology is the tension that exists between the priestly and prophetic poles of the Black church’s inner-life.

In defining the crucial tensions that exist between the priestly and the prophetic dimensions of contemporary African-American Christianity, Lincoln and Mamiya explain:

> Every black church is involved with both [priestly and prophetic] functions. Priestly functions involve those activities concerned with worship and maintaining the spiritual lives of members…prophetic functions refer to involvement in political concerns and activities in the wider community; classically, prophetic activity has meant pronouncing a radical word of God’s judgment. Some churches are closer to one end than the other. Priestly churches are bastions of survival and prophetic churches are networks of

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⁷ Ibid.
liberation…much of the discussion of black liberation theology has tended to neglect the priestly element within black churches.\(^8\)

Regarding the cleavage that exists between the priestly and prophetic modes of spirituality within the African-American church, Clemmons acknowledged that “there is usually an inner tension that causes some suspicion between those whose major emphasis is on the Church’s activism in society and those whose major emphasis is on the Church’s spiritual accent.”\(^9\) Identifying himself as one “committed to the prophetic tradition which…goes beyond critique and oppositional political struggle, to the dimension of discerning God’s new that is present,”\(^10\) Clemmons later admitted that “[s]ocial action without prayer lacks adequate discernment and attempts soulless revolution and prayer without action lacks integrity.”\(^11\) In terms of situating himself alongside of any so-called priestly versus prophetic divide, Clemmons maintained “[f]ortunately, we don’t have to choose between the two. Neither is valid without the other.”\(^12\) Because of his interest in bridging the divide between piety and activism, Clemmons’ life-long theological project would be situated squarely between the priestly and prophetic poles of Black Church existence. Because of Clemmons’ emphasis upon spirituality and social engagement, the organizing visions or root metaphors unifying the crucial threads of Clemmons’ theological thought may be best characterized as a contemplative-

\(^8\) Ibid., 12.


\(^10\) Ithiel Clemmons, “And Still the Church Triumphs: Although Challenged, The Nation’s Last Best Hope,” (St. Paul Baptist’s Church 100th Anniversary, New York, March 27, 1993).


\(^12\) Ibid.
prophetic Pentecostal vision. Within this vision, Clemmons provided a crucial and much needed interpretation of his tradition’s theology and history.

While Clemmons’ theological style is simultaneously contemplative and prophetic, a critical historical sensibility governed his theological perspective, which is evident in both his ministry and scholarship. In an address given before the Annual Meeting of the Society for Pentecostal Studies in 1974, Clemmons, always preoccupied with history and its importance for doing theology, describes his task as a chronicler of his tradition’s history:

While Pentecostalism is committed in principle to give some kind of interpretation of the inward, individual spiritual experience…it must also account for its influence on, and how it is influenced by, the social and corporate life of [h]umankind in history. It is part of my task as a historian to challenge and assure the [person] of faith, the theologian, [and] the practical [layperson] that methodology which subjects mystical experience and truth to what appears to be a relativizing analysis [historical, sociological or what have you] does not reduce religious experience ipso facto to anthropology.  

In consideration of Clemmons’ appreciation for history, religious experience and the analytical tools provided by the theological disciplines and the human sciences, Howard University theologian Harold Dean Trulear argued that Clemmons was “concerned to show that even intensely personal spiritual experience[s] [are] both informed by historical context and contemporary circumstance.”  

Clarifying Clemmons’ position further, Trulear noted that in the theological writings of Clemmons, “the immediacy of religious experience never operad in a vacuum; it always sp[oke] in conversation with historical forces that shape[d] tradition, and in dialogue with social and cultural forces that inform the hermeneutical enterprise and

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even the nature of ministry itself.”

Perhaps the single most outstanding feature of the role of history in Clemmons’ theology was his desire and ability to read history hierophantically. Popularized by historian of religion Mircea Eliade, the term *hierophany* “expresses no more than is implicit in its etymological content, i.e., that something sacred shows itself to us.” Eliade used the term as an alternative to the more limited notion of “theophany” to explain varying manifestations and inbreakings of the sacred into human history. Clemmons' tracing of the activity of the divine in human history was critically aligned with the hierophantic nature of the larger tradition of African religion throughout the diaspora. According to Wilmore, within the wider African diasporan religious experience,

> there [has always been], from the beginning, a fusion between a highly developed and pervasive feeling about the hierophantic nature of historical experience flowing from the African religious past, and a radical and programmatic secularity, related to the experience of slavery and oppression, which constituted the essential and most significant characteristic of Black religion.  

Clemmons saw himself as one who sought “to point out the hidden but powerfully present footprints of God in the affairs of [humankind] and nations.” Trulear also argued that Clemmons “desired to strengthen the witness of his beloved [tradition] through the profferance of the spirituality of its founding fathers and mothers as a

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15 Ibid.  
model for contemporary ministry.”19 For Clemmons, history was the arena of the activity of God and the faithful would do well “to earnestly contend for the faith once delivered to the saints.”20

The notion that God had manifested Godself to his foremothers and forefathers was central to both Clemmons’ historical and theological projects. Clemmons embraced a high view of history, and envisioning a constructive theological use for this history, he asserted that “[t]he recovery of a meaningful [contemporary] faith includes the discovery and the interpretation of God’s activity and power in the past and the discernment of how this same activity and power continues today.”21 Believing that the testimonies of his forbears were crucial to this particular theological enterprise, Clemmons contended that “through the use of narrative, the [contemporary] faith community [was] attempting to interpret and reinterpret the experiences of its foreparents and interface these interpretations with the contemporary black experience. In this, the faith community attempt[ed] to live out its historical faith in the contemporary context.”22 Any critical reading of Clemmons as a contemplative-prophetic theologian, must first contend with the hierophantic awareness inherent within his theological vision, for it is in this regard that Clemmons’ theological use of history is most clearly revealed.

3.2 Childhood and Formative Years

Ithiel Conrad Clemmons was born on December 2, 1921 in Washington, North Carolina to Reverend Frank and Mrs. Polly Clemmons, the third child of seven

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20 Jude 1:3b: “I find it necessary to write and appeal to you to contend for the faith that was once for all entrusted to the saints.” (NRSV)
22 Ibid.
and the oldest “to survive the childhood years.” Those who nurtured him as a child noted his fascination with his father’s preaching and at the tender age of five, Ithiel had already earned the designation of “the little preacher.” Ithiel’s father Frank, having been converted “under the preaching of the late Reverend Randall Walker,” was spiritually nurtured within Walker’s Chapel Holiness Church in Washington, North Carolina. His mother’s relatives, the Williams family, attended the John Anderson Baptist Church in Oak City, North Carolina where his maternal grandfather, Dempsey Williams Sr. was a deacon. When the Williams family moved to Washington, North Carolina, they became members of the Spring Garden Baptist Church. We learn from the autobiography of Ithiel’s aunt, Sweetie Little, that the Williams family was first introduced to the doctrine of holiness in 1913, through the ministry of an evangelistic team of which the young Minister Frank Clemmons belonged. According to Little, it was not until 1916, that Sarah Williams, (Ithiel’s maternal grandmother), accepted the holiness message and that Sarah Williams and her children joined the ‘sanctified' church, leaving her husband Deacon Dempsey Williams behind in the Baptist church. Frank Clemmons and Polly Williams were later united in holy matrimony on February 7, 1918 by the Elder S.B. Davis, an alumnus of the Azusa Street Revival, and it was from this union that Ithiel was born.

27 Ibid.
28 Ibid., 2.
At the time of Ithiel’s birth, Frank Clemmons had already become both a member and lay minister within the COGIC. Though he had not yet received ordination, by the time of Ithiel’s birth, Frank Clemmons had already been appointed to his first pastorate over a fledgling COGIC assembly in Plymouth, North Carolina. Frank Clemmons received his pastoral appointment from the late Overseer A.J. Reid and he pastored the Plymouth congregation from 1918 to 1922, although he was not ordained by COGIC until 1924, under the leadership of the late Bishop J.E. Bryant of New Jersey.

In 1923, at the urging of his hometown friend, the Reverend Peter J. F. Bridges, Frank Clemmons ventured from his home in North Carolina to explore opportunities for ministry and personal advancement in New York City. Bridges had come to New York in 1917 to establish a holiness mission and discovered how fertile the urban landscape was for the Pentecostal ministry. Alongside Bridges, Clemmons, “for three years (1923-1926) prayed, worked, preached and saved [money]. For two years the Plymouth pulpit was vacant as they hoped for their pastor’s return. But this was not to be.” In New York City, Frank Clemmons found both a new home and a mission field, never again residing in his home state, North Carolina. In an interview some time after their father’s death, one of the Clemmons children commented on his father’s attachment to New York: “he

developed a love for Brooklyn and didn’t care very much about going down South…on holidays and what have you, [Dad] would say ‘No, I don’t want to go to North Carolina, I don’t want to go to Washington, I don’t [even] want to go down South.’”

Though Frank Clemmons’ early ministerial labors in New York were alongside his friend Peter Bridges, Clemmons and Bridges differed significantly in terms of their theologies of the godhead. Bridges, unlike Clemmons, did not subscribe to a trinitarian conception of God. Dissatisfied with his friend’s teachings, Clemmons parted company with Bridges, and in 1926 moved his young family to downtown Brooklyn where along with his wife, mother-in-law, sister-in-law, and children, he began convening the prayer meetings that would eventually become Brooklyn’s historic, First COGIC. Though the two friends parted company for doctrinal differences, both Bridges and Clemmons eventually became bishops in two of North America’s largest Black Pentecostal denominations: Bridges was consecrated to the office of bishop within the Church of Our Lord Jesus Christ (COOLJC) and Frank Clemmons, to the COGIC. In 1959 at the recommendation of Bishop O.M. Kelly, Frank Clemmons was consecrated to the office of Jurisdictional Bishop within COGIC and given the charge of advancing the denomination’s work within the state of Vermont.

In his father’s church, Ithiel continued to be nurtured within and exposed to a very spiritually rich, ethically rigorous and highly dynamic spiritual and moral universe. The imprint of Ithiel’s tradition upon his own personal spiritual formation

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was both profound and pervasive. He was deeply influenced by the intensity of the preaching, the frequency of prayer, the spontaneity of the singing and religious dancing, and the rituals around prayer and fasting. His moral character was influenced by the taboos around social and sexual abstinences and his community’s dogged doctrinal and evangelistic preoccupations. His community’s traditions, such as the all-night prayer vigils and bi-weekly fasting on Tuesdays and Fridays not only kindled within him a yearning for personal consecration and moral rectitude, but it also shielded him from many of the harsh realities, hostilities, and inhumanities of the broader urban social landscape.

Commenting on how frequently they attended church services, Joseph D. Clemmons, Ithiel’s young brother stated: “the expectation was that when there was church, as there was on Tuesday night, Friday night, Sunday morning, Sunday School, Young People Willing Workers in the afternoon, that we would be there. We got dressed and we went.” Joseph Clemmons went on to say: “when they had all night prayer [meetings], we were at church. Of course they would make us put chairs together and put pillows on the chairs and we would go to sleep. And how many times did I fall off those chairs on to the floor? But that was expected.”

Joseph Clemmons also noted that they got “an occasional reprieve on Tuesday nights, because it was a school night, but on Friday nights when there was no school on Saturday, the children were in tow.” It was during these long and intense hours of prayer and consecration that Clemmons would first become a student of his

34 Marlon Milner, “We’ve Come This Far,” 2.
35 Ibid.
tradition's spiritual practices and that his life-long intrigue with Pentecostal spirituality would begin.

With regards to the rigors associated with growing up in the Clemmons' household, Ithiel Clemmons humorously recounted:

[w]hen I came up in the church, they had to tighten down on me. Sometimes my mother was so rigorous, in terms of our perfectionist standing, that even when I got married, I was sleeping with my arms folded. Back in those days whenever anyone mentioned the word “sin,” what they really had in mind, more often than not, was “sex.” Contrariwise as well, whenever they talked about sex, what they always had in consideration was sin.\textsuperscript{36}

It has been noted that the Black Pentecostal’s dogged insistence on abstinence, both socially and sexually, and the community’s preoccupation with safety was “salvation for many African-Americans who were seeking ways to buffer themselves against the oppressive and destructive pathologies of urban life.\textsuperscript{37} According to journalist Marlon Milner:

the fanatical insistence on an ascetic lifestyle: of abstinence from alcohol, or cigarettes, sex outside of marriage, dance music and other forms of worldly “pleasure”; along with an emphasis on work ethic, discipline, particularly living a life focused on the felt, active, relational and personal presence of God, actually prepared many black Pentecostal believers for higher education, politics, corporate America and middle-class lifestyles.\textsuperscript{38}

For Ithiel and his siblings, the safe-haven of Black Pentecostal existence can be partially credited for their matriculation into institutions of higher learning and their entry into fields such as politics, ministry, school teaching and mortuary science.

3.3 \textbf{Formative Social and Ecclesial Contexts}

One reason for the Clemmons family’s migration from rural North Carolina to New York City was that in New York, the Clemmons children were afforded the

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\textsuperscript{37} Marlon Milner, “We’ve Come This Far,” 2.
\textsuperscript{38} Ibid.
\end{flushleft}
opportunity of receiving a much higher quality of education. The North Carolina public school system at the time of the family’s migration, as the majority of the public school districts in the American South, was highly segregated with black students being educated in substandard educational situations. In New York, Ithiel had access to an excellent education; he matriculated into the New York City Public Schools System, graduating from Brooklyn’s Alexander Hamilton High School in 1939. He left New York City for Philadelphia to begin his undergraduate studies at Temple University, the same institution where his childhood mentor and role model Ozro Jones was a student. Clemmons entered Temple when Jones was in his final year of undergraduate studies. After two years at Temple, Ithiel returned to New York City to work more closely alongside his father in the rapidly growing Brooklyn congregation. Having returned to Brooklyn, Ithiel completed his undergraduate degree at Long Island University in 1948.

Upon completion of his bachelors’ degree, Clemmons enrolled into the Master of Arts in Education Program at the City College of New York and graduated in 1952. Though he never utilized his Master of Arts degree for school teaching or educational administration, the insights garnered from this time of preparation proved vital to his success in the pastoral ministry. In a series of open pastoral letters written to his parishioners towards the end of his life, Clemmons writes, “[g]ood pastors are duty bound to stay close to [educational] issues.” The bishop explained that this is, “why I as a pastor, have, through[out] my career, stayed close to education[al] issues. So many human social outcomes hinge [upon] economic

40 Ibid.
opportunity and economic opportunity, in turn, hinges upon [proper] schooling and training.”42 Clemmons firmly asserted that “[n]o significant changes can occur at the bottom of our society without the positive impact of public education and [that] public education cannot have its positive impact as long it is mired in racist and more subtle neo-racist policies.”43 For the entirety of his pastoral career Clemmons saw himself as a crusader for social equality, as is demonstrated in his advocating for equal opportunities in public education. Upon matriculating from the Master of Arts program at City College and realizing that his life’s work would be spent in the service of the church, Clemmons began his formal theological studies at the Union Theological Seminary in New York City. As the first African-American Pentecostal to attend the institution (1952-1956), it was at Union that Clemmons was intellectually challenged and theologically stretched in ways he had never imagined.44 At Union, according to Daniels, Clemmons was “challenged [to] the [very] core, especially with the conflicting doctrine of scripture and the liberal exegetical method, which influenced how [he] interpret[ed] texts in preaching and teaching.”45 Challenging though it may have been, Clemmons’ time at Union was critical to his theological and ministerial development in that it provided him with the intellectual space and spiritual context for what one of his theological protégé’s, Alonzo Johnson, referred to as “find[ing] different ways to model [his Pentecostal] spirituality.”46

42 Ibid.
43 Ibid.
44 Ithiel Clemmons, Shaping the Coming Era of the Church, 66.
45 Marlon Milner, “We’ve Come This Far,” 5.
46 Ibid.
It was at Union that Clemmons worked out in great detail both his contemplative-prophetic Pentecostal spirituality and theology. Upon completion of his formal studies at Union Seminary, Clemmons was admitted into the doctoral program in American Church History at the same institution. Though admitted years earlier, Clemmons did not complete his doctoral studies until 1992 through a special arrangement made between Union Theological and New York Theological seminaries. During the interim between receiving his Master of Divinity degree at Union and his doctorate from Union and New York Theological seminaries, Clemmons also served as a fellow at the College of Preachers of the National Cathedral, Washington D.C. and at the Urban Training Center for Christian Missions in Chicago, Illinois. Clemmons was also awarded the honorary Doctor of Divinity degree from the Charles Harrison Mason Theological Seminary of the Interdenominational Theological Center in Atlanta in 1991.

3.4 Influences

While Union Seminary proved to be a critical fount of Clemmons’ spiritual, intellectual and theological formation, the varying contexts of his life also provided him with several persons, intellectual traditions, and influences that would indelibly shape and mark his spiritual and moral development for the duration of his life and ministry. Undoubtedly the first of these major spiritual tributaries came from his parents and extended family members. The lives of his father, mother, prayer-warrior aunts and grandmother were certainly among his first models of both holiness and Pentecostal spiritualities. It was through their examples that Clemmons initially came to faith and his parents and extended family were most responsible for his personal commitment to faith.
Clemmons also drew much inspiration from an ecumenically inclined uncle, Bishop D. Lawrence Williams, a COGIC bishop from Newport News, Virginia, who was “trained from a Bible College” and described by Ithiel “as a scholarly and pastoral mentor.” 47 Williams’ ecumenical adroitness led him to become the first Pentecostal minister to serve as president (for a total of two terms) of the nationally acclaimed, predominantly Baptist, Hampton Ministers’ Conference. The same ecumenical openness that led to his election as president of the Hampton Ministers’ Conference, was also responsible for Williams’ becoming an early participant in the Pentecostal World Conference, along with Bishops C.H. Mason and Samuel Crouch, also from COGIC. In regard to his development, Clemmons stated, “Black Pentecostal bodies were at first reluctant to take official membership because they were fearful of a kind of theological, ethical and cultural domination that they could not abide.” 48 According to Clemmons, it was the “guiding spirit” of people like Williams that “refused to allow these fears to become barriers that would prevent the participation of the COGIC in the Pentecostal World Conference at all.” 49 Clemmons held the uttermost regard for his uncle’s ecumenical ministry.

In an unpublished essay entitled “Historical Implications of Pentecostalism in the Third World,” given before the 1974 Annual Meeting of the Society for Pentecostal Studies, Clemmons noted that “in 1949 when the Pentecostal Fellowship of North America (PFNA) held its second convention, all of the eight denominations that it claimed to make up its membership were white bodies.” 50 According to Clemmons, his uncle “tried to interest the leaders of [COGIC] in the work of the

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47 Marlon Milner, “We’ve Come This Far,” 4.
48 Ithiel Clemmons, “Historical Implications,” 15.
49 Ibid.
50 Ibid.
PFNA, but no official invitation was ever received and thus no action was ever taken.”51 In 1994, it was Clemmons himself who took up his uncle’s unfinished business and this move led to the dismantling of the “46 year-old exclusively white PFNA” in favor of a more racially inclusive fellowship, the PCCNA (Pentecostal Charismatic Churches of North America).52 It should be noted that Williams was one of the first delegates from COGIC to address the World Pentecostal Conference in 1961 with a lecture entitled “First Century Pentecost.”53 For the remainder of his ministerial career, Clemmons continued to build upon the ecumenical heritage bequeathed to him by his beloved uncle.

Clemmons was also influenced by friends, senior clergy from his denomination, as well as other ministers from the larger New York City religious community. Attempting to define the rather peculiar contours of his spiritual and theological formation, Clemmons said of his distinctive journey:

As a Holiness-Pentecostal young person just beginning college, brought up in a morally rigorous environment of home and church: a church with a dialectical vision of being “in but not of the world,” with a circle of friends who placed great emphasis on the “life of the mind,” [I was] embarked upon a project of “faith seeking understanding.”54 This “project of faith seeking understanding” connected Clemmons with many of the great leaders of his denomination, both past and present. Relationships with these men and women would mark his life in rather profound and significant ways.

51 Ibid.
During the two years Clemmons studied in Philadelphia, he was mentored by Bishop Ozro Thurston Jones Sr., first assistant to Bishop Charles Harrison Mason (the Senior Bishop of the COGIC). Clemmons viewed Jones Sr., as “an outstanding bearer of the Gospel” and in the years following Jones’ death in 1972, he said of him, “seldom has God given so much to so many through one individual.” Jones, who delivered the keynote address at the World Pentecostal Conference, Toronto 1958, was a pioneer Black Pentecostal ecumenist, a denominational executive par excellence, as well as a strong advocate for a trained Pentecostal clergy. It was through Jones’ proposal to the General Assembly of COGIC in 1968, that plans were approved for the founding of the Charles Harrison Mason Theological Seminary, the COGIC affiliate of the Interdenominational Theological Center, Atlanta, Georgia, which opened in 1970 as the first accredited Pentecostal graduate theological institution in the world.

Among those who had theological and ministerial influences on Clemmons’ development were the late Bishops Samuel Crouch, Otha M. Kelly and Frederick Douglas Washington. Crouch impressed Clemmons very early on in his development because of his acumen and dexterity as a denominational executive, his deep-seated concern for missions and his broad ecumenical inclinations. Crouch was an avid supporter of foreign missions within his denomination as well as an early participant in the World Pentecostal Conference.

With respect to Bishop Otha Kelly who ordained Clemmons to the ministry in 1943, Clemmons observed that he possessed all of the “Horatio Alger qualities –

56 For a discussion of ITC, see Cheryl Sanders, Saints in Exile the Holiness-Pentecostal Experience in African American Religion and Culture (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), 119.
inexhaustible energy, dauntless courage, incredible zeal [and] burning ambition.”\(^{57}\)

Clemmons said that though Kelly was gifted with great “depth of thought and vision,” he was “less capable of expressing himself through words.”\(^{58}\) While Clemmons saw Kelly as being somewhat inarticulate, Clemmons nevertheless highly commended him by pointing out that when he “saw leadership in persons, he sought them out and appointed them to office…[m]any… [who]…did not know their own potential but were obedient…and went to work, many doing a fine job.”\(^{59}\)

Very early in Clemmons’ ministerial career, Kelly discerned Clemmons’ gifts for Christian leadership. Clemmons served Kelly as his special assistant from 1976 until Kelly’s death in 1982.\(^{60}\)

Another minister from Clemmons’ tradition who served as a critical source of inspiration for the emergent young pastor-scholar was Bishop Frederick Douglas Washington, also of Brooklyn, New York. Bishop Washington was a leading denominational executive and legendary preacher within the Black church tradition. In a memorial tribute to Washington written nearly a year after his death, Clemmons referred to Washington as “the preacher which God was proud of, and one which [God] would that many of our preachers would become.”\(^{61}\)

In addition to Washington’s extraordinary preaching gift which kindled Clemmons’ own homiletical imagination, Washington had the gift of identifying, inspiring and empowering others to lead. According to Clemmons, Washington was extremely


\(^{59}\) Ibid.

\(^{60}\) Ibid., 2.

generous in always giving to “persons that freedom to speak, enact and emerge as leaders [based] on their own personality and ability.”\textsuperscript{62} It was Washington’s bishopric over the COGIC congregations of Eastern New York that Clemmons occupied upon Washington's death in 1988.

According to COGIC historian David Daniels, with respect to Washington and others whom Clemmons sought to emulate, “these clergy preached from a manuscript and intentionally went beyond the so-called storefront model with its emphasis on ecstatic worship.”\textsuperscript{63} The models of ministry and service provided by such exemplary men helped Clemmons to begin to re-imagine the Black Pentecostal ministry. Clemmons continued to build upon the foundations laid by these leaders and for the duration of his life, he offered their lives and witnesses as faithful models of progressive Pentecostal ministry.

Perhaps the single person from Clemmons’ faith tradition who influenced and inspired him above any other was his denomination’s founder, Bishop Charles Harrison Mason. Clemmons became a life-long student of Mason’s spirituality and ministry; he utilized Mason as the subject of both his masters’ and doctoral theses and undertook the writing and publishing of Mason’s biography and a number of articles on various aspects of Mason’s spirituality. In doing so, Clemmons became Mason’s principal theological biographer. Clemmons understood Mason as a transitional figure whose spirituality was tethered to what American religious historian Albert Raboteau has classified as “slave religion,”\textsuperscript{64} and that of contemporary African-American Christianity. Clemmons perceived Mason’s

\textsuperscript{62} Ithiel Clemmons, “Bishop O.M. Kelly and Bishop F.D. Washington,” 1.
\textsuperscript{63} Marlon Milner, “We’ve Come This Far,” 4.
\textsuperscript{64} See Albert Raboteau’s, Slave Religion The Invisible Institution in the Antebellum South (New York: Oxford University Press) 1978.
creolized piety as being grounded within the religious ethos and spirituality of his enslaved African ancestors.

Clemmons believed that Mason, along with the church he founded, helped to preserve what he himself once referred to as “the oral-ecstatic pneumatology” of African Christianity in North America. According to Clemmons:

Mason was not only a child of black slave parents. He also viewed himself as particularly called by the Lord to preserve the “spiritual pneumatological richness of the invisible institution.” In bearing Mason’s vision of a Spirit cosmology the Church of God in Christ became the preserver of “the spark,” [and] “the soul” of Black Religion [in America]…the theology of the Slave Church that Mason was representative of was rooted in God’s paradox, providence, moral rigor and wonder. Mason stood constantly in awe of the “mystery of God’s wonder” in the universe and in history.65

Clemmons conceived of Mason’s spirituality as both a critical site of examination, as well as a window for understanding the gift of African Christian spirituality to the church universal and to American Christianity in particular. It was largely because of Clemmons’ theological fascination with Mason’s embodiment of both African Christian and Pentecostal spiritualities, that he began to engage in the study of Christian mysticism.

Although Clemmons was intrigued with the whole of Mason’s spiritual life, the single area that most arrested his theological imagination was Mason’s prayer-life. Clemmons argued that: “Mason was the classic and consummate example and model of allowing the agonizing longings of the poor and oppressed to pass through him to God.”66 Seeing Mason as an extraordinary intercessory prayer warrior, Clemmons began to examine Mason’s prayers in terms of both their form and

content. The type of analytical scrutiny under which Clemmons subjected Mason’s prayers can be seen in the following comments concerning Mason’s deliverance prayer. Clemmons argued:

Mason developed a formulaic approach to talking to God, and incorporated into [his denomination’s] worship and prayer tradition a ritual methodology of battling the demonic taken from Mark 16:15-20. His approach included: (1) the rebuke and casting out of Satan in the name of Jesus, (2) the rebuke of illness and death, (3) submission of the self to the will of God (Yes Lord), (4) healing and laying on of hands, (5) praying biblical passages, (6) thanksgiving and praise, (7) petition and (8) the acknowledgement of the Spirit’s presence and anointing of God.67

Finding within Mason “a marvelous and powerful example of how the experience of resurrection life in Christ delivers Christ’s followers from the power of death and enables them to live a life of self-giving through the gifts of the Spirit,” Clemmons’ endeavored to engage in a life of critical reflection upon the disciplines of the same life-giving Spirit.68

In addition to the faith that Clemmons learned from his parents, extended family members and mentors within his denomination, by growing up in New York City, Clemmons “found the opportunity to influence and be influenced by various black and white church traditions.”69 According to Milner, “unlike the stereotype of sanctified church folks living in isolation and damning others to hell, Frank Clemmons [Ithiel’s father] interacted with some of the prominent black church leaders of Brooklyn at that time, including the late Rev. Sandy Ray of Cornerstone Baptist, and later the Rev. Gardner Taylor of Concord Baptist and Rev. William

69 Marlon Milner, “We’ve Come This Far,” 4.
Augustus Jones of Bethany Baptist Church." Joseph Clemmons commented with regards to their father’s ecumenical openness and appreciation of other mainline clergypersons within the city:

My father always had the greatest respect for men like Sandy Ray, [and] the pastors of Mt. Sinai and Berean Baptist Church. And those folks had a great deal of respect for us because they came to our church on Sunday nights. My father was praying for the sick and the sick were being healed, lame folks being made to walk.

It was largely because of his father’s openness to the ministry gifts of other denominations that Ithiel would be exposed to many of the leading African-American ministers serving along the nation’s eastern seaboard.

In addition to his fascination with preachers from the African-American community of his youth, Clemmons was also significantly influenced by the evangelical liberalism of the Reverend Harry Emerson Fosdick, former Senior Minister of Riverside Church of New York City. According to Clemmons:

I was exposed to Dr. Fosdick’s ministry as a very young adult in 1948-49 by my…uncle…and two friends; Philip Leatherbury and Rev. Bernilee Faison…these brethren got me into the habit of getting up to Riverside Church on a Sunday morning to hear Fosdick and getting back to my church in Brooklyn in time to hear my father preach. In the Holiness-Pentecostal churches the preacher was up to preach around 12:30pm. Philip Leatherbury would send copies of Fosdick’s sermons to our circle of friends around the country. Through him any number of us Holiness-Pentecostal young people were exposed to Dr. Fosdick’s ministry. Dr. Fosdick among others, became an important resource and fount of Christian thought.

Though Fosdick was an important resource for his own Christian thought, Clemmons was careful to note that it was not Fosdick’s signature sermon, “Will The Fundamentalists Win?” that impacted him. While understanding the significance of this sermon in the study of American Christianity, as a member of the Black church,

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70 Ibid.
71 Ibid.
Clemmons did not see the sermon as being very "significant…because the Black Church was not a part of the fundamentalist-modernist debate." Rather, Clemmons said it was Fosdick’s “meditations and musings on prayer; that segment of his prophetic ministry that did the most for [his] own personal life and vocation over the course of [his] ministry.” Clemmons later noted, “since I first read Dr. Fosdick’s volume, The Meaning of Prayer in 1950, I have continually kept a copy with me, and I have kept a cassette of the sermon, “When Prayer Means Power,” in my library and have my own frayed copy of that sermon.” Clemmons continued to feature the manuscript of this particular Fosdick sermon as required reading at his Annual Prayer and Life Clinic in Greensboro, North Carolina, over 40 years after he had first encountered it.

Clemmons’ fascination with Riverside Church, Evangelical liberalism and Fosdick’s preaching followed him throughout his life. In fact, Riverside Church became for him a “frustrating model” for Pentecostal ministry. According to Alonzo Johnson: “I remember [Clemmons] telling me on several occasions that [Riverside] set a model of ministry for him. For what liberal Protestantism offered through Riverside, I think [Clemmons] thought that there could be a counterpart to that, within the COGIC tradition, [a] counterpart in terms of building institutional ministry. A church that could meet the needs on every level: culturally, economically, socially, theologically and otherwise.” However, Johnson concluded that this particular model was “frustrating” for Clemmons in that his goal was never attained. According to Johnson, “it [was] clear that certain things weren’t happening

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73 Ibid., 3
74 Ibid.
75 Ibid., 6.
76 Marlon Milner, “We’ve Come This Far,” 5.
with First Church. He still had the dream, he still wanted it to happen, but no
Riverside was emerging in Brooklyn.”77 Attempting to further locate the cause of
Clemmons’ frustration, Milner says that Clemmons “was struggling to create a
Pentecostal Riverside, but without the Rockefeller millions, and with a congregation
of working class holy rollers, and not affluent middle class parishioners.”78 A
frustrating model though it may have been, the impact that the Riverside Church and
its late pastor (Fosdick) had upon Clemmons was profound.

Along with Riverside Church and the preaching of Fosdick, the wealth of
knowledge from the various theological traditions that he was exposed to by different
members of the theological faculty during his studies at Union Theological Seminary
significantly impressed Clemmons. Though remaining deeply engaged with his
formative black Pentecostal tradition, at Union Seminary, Clemmons developed, as
Milner rightly notes, “quite a fascination with evangelical liberalism.”79 Arguing for
the specificity and particularity of Clemmons’ engagement of liberal Protestantism,
Milner goes on to say: “unlike the so-called “liberalism” of today, that is defined in
narrow political terms, evangelical liberalism was for Ithiel Clemmons an
opportunity to develop and interpret his sanctified spirituality in a much broader
context than how it was being defined by primarily white Pentecostals seeking
acceptance from Fundamentalist Christians.”80 It must be underscored that this re-
interpretation and re-modeling of his Black holiness and Pentecostal spiritualities
while at Union was aided by his scholarly tutors from radically differing theological

77 Ibid.
78 Ibid.
79 Ibid.
80 Ibid.
traditions and commitments. During his time in seminary, Clemmons was stretched and shaped in ways that it was not possible for him to imagine.

Chief among his teachers at Union Theological Seminary was theologian and then president of the institution, Dr. Henry Pitney Van Dusen. Van Dusen, Clemmons’ “mentor and teacher,” helped move him beyond the limitations of what was then described as “storefront religion,” by assisting Clemmons in reinterpreting the values and virtues of the inner-life of his native Pentecostal tradition. Of all of his tutors at Union, Van Dusen was perhaps the most sensitive to the issues and the context from which Clemmons emerged.

Van Dusen’s sympathies, admiration, and interest in the scholarly study of the international Pentecostal movement emerged after spending a summer holiday in the Caribbean and being exposed to the vitality and dynamism of the worship of autochthonous charismatic communions throughout the region. With almost prophetic acumen, Van Dusen was among the first scholars to portend the significance that Pentecostalism would someday have upon World Christianity. Naming the Pentecostal tradition as “the third mighty arm of Christian outreach,” alongside Roman Catholicism and Protestantism, Van Dusen later expanded upon his thesis by referencing the movement as “the third force in Christendom.” Clemmons greatly benefited from his studies and time spent with Van Dusen, as the scholar guided Clemmons into both a greater awareness of and a deeper appreciation of his

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community’s dynamic understanding of the Spirit.83 Other scholars at Union who would significantly enrich his experience at the seminary were theologians Paul Tillich, Reinhold Niebuhr and John Bennett, as well as Professor of World Christianity and Ecumenism, Robert McAfee Brown.

Clemmons also received tremendous theological insight, challenge and inspiration from the theological and spiritual writings of political theologian Jurgen Moltmann, Roman Catholic theologian Henri J.M. Nouwen and African-American Christian mystic Howard Thurman. Clemmons referred to Nouwen as a “prayer warrior and pastor” and said that he knew “of no present scholar/pastor who with more clarity and power [brought] together the worlds of prayer and [prophetic] criticism, spirituality and activism.”84 From Nouwen, Clemmons learned that one who is seriously engaged in prayer “cannot help but have critical questions about the great problems with which the world is grappling and cannot avoid the thought that a conversion is not only necessary for [ones]elf and [ones] neighbor, but for the entire human community.”85 It was also from Nouwen that Clemmons learned that, “the conversion of the world call[ed] for a prophetic witness who dare[d] to criticize the world.”86 As a contemplative-prophetic theologian, Clemmons dared to criticize the world, bearing witness to the truth as he saw it. For the remainder of his ministry, the tradition of prayer and prophetic social criticism bequeathed to him by Nouwen was central to Clemmons’ public ministry.

It was the Christian mystic, Howard Thurman, who according to Clemmons, remained “the single most prolific writer on the life of the Spirit and the single most

84 Ibid.
85 Ibid.
86 Ithiel Clemmons, ”When Prayer Means Power,” 16.
Thurman, whose magnum opus, *Jesus and the Disinherited*, Clemmons read as a teenager, was perhaps the single religious thinker to have the greatest impact upon Clemmons’ own religious thought. Thurman’s writings were crucial in helping Clemmons understand the critical symbiosis between spirituality and social change. According to Clemmons: “Thurman devoted much of his life and thought to laying before the church and society the richness of pneumatology, its empowerment in the black experience, and the social demand to bring all people together beyond race, color, caste or class.” And though Clemmons remained indebted to Thurman for many of his pneumatological insights, he simultaneously criticized Thurman in that he “could not ultimately overcome the imbalance between pneumatology in the black church or Western society. Nor was he ever able to reach the black church at a pedestrian level.” Despite this criticism, for Clemmons, Thurman “continued to be [a] valuable resource for a theological-pneumatological formulation of praxis.”

Through critical engagement with Thurman, Clemmons was challenged to think more deeply about the social and political implications of the Spirit-filled life and the work of God in the church and the world.

Though Clemmons’ had always been a quiet admirer of Moltmann’s political theology, during the latter years of his career, Moltmann entered into a series of critical theological conversations with a number of scholars from the global

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89 Ibid.
90 Ibid.
Pentecostal and Charismatic theological community.\textsuperscript{91} These very lively discussions that ensued between Moltmann and these younger Pentecostal scholars renewed Clemmons’ interest in following the evolution of Moltmann’s theological program. Moltmann’s writings became so central to Clemmons’ thought and work that in the years preceding his death, during his Annual Prayer and Life Clinic in Greensboro, North Carolina, Clemmons selected a conference theme that corresponded with the various burning theological issues raised in Moltmann’s writings, using them as a means of expanding the theological conversation among the faithful within his tradition. Moltmann’s writings were critical in providing Clemmons with insights and the language for both broadening and better articulating his own socially engaged contemplative-prophetic theological vision.

3.5 Vocations

Having been deeply involved in his father's church for his entire life, in 1955 Clemmons accepted his first lead-pastorate at Gethsemane COGIC, Clairton, Pennsylvania. After eight years pastoring this congregation, due to the declining health of his father, Clemmons returned to Brooklyn and was appointed as co-pastor of the First COGIC in 1968.\textsuperscript{92} It was during this same year that Clemmons began his broader labors within his denomination, being appointed as an International Intercessor and leading the denominational prayer initiative during the annual convocations until 1992. In May 1975, Clemmons was consecrated to the office of auxiliary bishop within his denomination and appointed as the Director of Armed Forces and Institutional Chaplaincies. In these positions, he rendered invaluable

\textsuperscript{91} Please see: Jürgen Moltmann and Karl-Josef Kuschel’s \textit{Pentecostal Movements as an Ecumenical Challenge} (London: SCM Press, 1996).

\textsuperscript{92} See Frank Clemmons, “Pastoral Letter in to the Members of the First COGIC,” in Ithiel Clemmons’ \textit{The Church Faces the Space Age: State of the Church Address} (February 10, 1963), 1.
service to both his church and his nation. In 1978, alongside his administrative work as Director of Armed Forces and Institutional Chaplaincies, Clemmons was appointed the morning exhorter for the COGIC annual International Women’s Convention and served in this capacity until his physical incapacitation in 1998. Clemmons also served for a time as the International Field Secretary for COGIC’s Home and Foreign Missions Department as well as the interim jurisdictional prelate of COGIC for the Republic of Germany.  

In July of 1988, upon the death of Bishop Frederick Douglas Washington, and upon the recommendation of the General Assembly of Pastors and Elders of New York State, Clemmons was appointed to the office of jurisdictional bishop of Eastern New York. Clemmons served as the state overseer for one of the largest jurisdictional entities within the denomination internationally. As bishop of Eastern New York, Clemmons was positioned for denominational leadership at the highest level.

In November 1991, after serving for nearly three years as a jurisdictional bishop, Clemmons was elected by the International General Assembly of Pastors and Elders to occupy a seat on the twelve-member General Board of his denomination. In this capacity, Clemmons functioned as a major interpreter of both his denomination’s and the larger tradition’s histories and theologies. In May of 1990, upon being recognized by his denominational leadership as perhaps the leading historical interpreter of the tradition, Clemmons was appointed as Chairman of the

93 Details concerning the various offices Clemmons occupied can be found in Cecil M. Robeck’s “Ithiel Conrad Clemmons,” in Dictionary of Pentecostal and Charismatic Movements, ed. Stanley Burgess (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1988), 555. Also, please see: A Celebration Service of Triumph For The Late Bishop Ithiel C. Clemmons: An Obituary,” (First Church of God in Christ, Brooklyn, New York, January 13, 1999), 2.
Rediscovering Our Heritage: COGIC Oral History Project by Presiding Bishop Louis Henry Ford. A major component of his work for this initiative required him to serve as chairman of the denomination’s inaugural International Holy Ghost Conference. The historic Holy Ghost Conference listed among its chief goals “the recovery of the Church of God in Christ[’]s story.”94 This conference, in addition to “equipping the saints for ministry” and “broadening the leaderships’ understanding of the church’s historic vision and implications of this vision for future ministry,” also named as a goal: correcting “the mis-readings of [the church’s] history and misrepresentations of [the church’s] practices.”95 The central doctrinal matter discussed at this conference was the church’s historic confession of faith in God the Spirit and the Spirit’s role within the church’s life, work and witness within the world. At the Birmingham conference on the Holy Spirit, Clemmons provided a platform for a number of emerging scholarly theological voices from within the denomination, including: Drs. George McKinney, Joseph D. Clemmons, Robert Asbury, Donald Wheelock, Robert Michael Franklin, Alonzo Johnson and David Douglas Daniels III.96 Clemmons also continued to advocate, integrate and create space for informed theological voices both internal and external to the tradition to speak into the life of both COGIC and the larger ecumenical church.

In addition to his work as parish minister, denominational executive and historian/theologian, Clemmons was called upon to dialogue within wider theological and larger ecumenical circles. The activities of the theologian’s impressive ecumenical career included his involvement with both the Council of

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95 Ibid.
96 Ibid.
Churches of the City of New York and the Committee on Denominational Executives of New York City. In both organizations, Clemmons not only represented his denomination, he also represented Pentecostalism, as a whole. Clemmons’ involvement in the leading ecumenical organizations within New York City ensured that the Pentecostals of the city were not left without an advocate. Both organizations, the Council of Churches of the City of New York and the Denominational Executives of New York City, had as one of their goals the intent, “to manifest ever more fully the unity of the church” in the city of New York. Clemmons was a critical part of these conversations.

In addition to his ecumenical activities in New York, Clemmons participated in two important ecumenical moments within the history of the Black Church of North America. First, Clemmons was selected in 1978 as a charter member of the Washington, D.C.-based, National Congress of Black Churches (NCBC). The NCBC was highly significant in that it was, “an ecumenical coalition comprised of the eight major historically-Black denominations in North America. Together, these denominations represented over 65,000 churches and comprised a membership of over 20 Million.” This organization, which was formed “to promote justice, wholeness and fulfillment,” would advocate for programs such as, “children and family development, economic development, access to [affordable] healthcare, [and] anti-drug and anti-violence campaigns.”

98 Ibid.
represented, COGIC was the first and only Pentecostal body to be invited to participate.

Secondly, in 1989, Clemmons was called upon to provide a Pentecostal perspective on the widening chasm between the African-American Church and the modern Black theological academy. This ecumenical gathering, *Black Theology and the Black Church: A Continuing Conversation*, was one of the first conferences of its kind as it brought together some of the foremost interpreters of modern black theology and the African-American religious experience in America. Among the participants were: Drs. J. Deotis Roberts, Samuel Proctor, Jeremiah Wright, Renita Weems, Prathia Hall, Peter Paris, Floyd Flake, and Jamie Phelps. Clemmons was again the only Pentecostal to participate in this dialogue.

Perhaps the single area of ecumenical concentration that engaged Clemmons’ spiritual and intellectual energies was his involvement in the various North American and global Pentecostal and Charismatic ecumenical councils. Clemmons was concerned with the shortsightedness of the Pentecostal movement’s theological and social vision; the historical amnesia that plagued the movement; the perduring racial exclusivity; and the hermeneutical identity crises characteristic of many of the theological proposals emanating from the North American Pentecostal context. Clemmons entered these exchanges with the hopes of providing new spaces for alternative readings and creating counter-memories of the broader tradition’s theologies and histories. Though Clemmons approached such opportunities for ecumenical exchange “with some trepidation,” he dared to proceed with an

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100 “Black Theology and the Black Church: A Continuing Conversation.” Recorded at Riverside Church, New York, October 23-27, 1989 (8 sound cassettes).
“approach” that was in his own words, “one of love and cautious optimism.”

According to Clemmons, this posture was absolutely necessary in that “[i]t [was] not always clear…what such groups mean[t] by brotherhood or unity,” yet, he remained “open to find[ing] out.” It is with these feelings of “trepidation” and “cautious optimism” that Clemmons continued to participate in some of the premier Pentecostal ecumenical dialogues in North America until his death.

In 1977, Clemmons represented COGIC in the planning of the North American Conference on the Holy Spirit in Kansas City, Missouri. According to Vinson Synan, at this conference, Clemmons’ “wise counsel brought to the forefront such major speakers as Dr. James Alexander Forbes and the Bishop J.O. Patterson Sr.” By creating space for Bishop J.O. Patterson (then the presiding bishop of COGIC) and Dr. James Alexander Forbes, a leading pastor/theologian from the UHCA, Clemmons afforded these African American men the opportunity to speak to a major segment of the Pentecostal/Charismatic world. Growing out of his work with the planning of the Kansas City Conference, in 1984, Clemmons became a founding member of the North American Renewal Service Committee (NARSC), an umbrella organization connecting Pentecostal and charismatic communities throughout North America, where he would serve on both the Planning and Steering Committees. It was by virtue of his seat on the Planning Committee of NARSC that Clemmons created space for other gifted African-American Pentecostal and charismatic thinkers to be invited to present at the North American Congress on the Spirit and World

101 Ithiel Clemmons, “True Koinonia,” 47.
102 Ibid.
Evangelization in New Orleans in 1987. Clemmons himself presented a paper at the historic conference in New Orleans, theologizing from his experience and perspective as an African-American Pentecostal.

Perhaps the single most definitive moment of Clemmons’ ecumenical career occurred in 1994, when as one scholar observes, Clemmons “allowed his ecclesiastical office and his acumen as a churchman to play a unique role in a bid for racial reconciliation between Pentecostals.” It was at this time that Clemmons challenged the forty-six year-old, all white, Pentecostal Fellowship of North America (PFNA) on the basis of the fellowship’s historic racial exclusivity. Clemmons’ courageous confrontation led to “the dismantling of the all white Pentecostal Fellowship of North America” in favor of a new, racially inclusive fellowship, the Pentecostal/Charismatic Churches of North America (PCCNA). Clemmons was elected to serve as the Chairman of the Executive Committee of the PCCNA in both 1996 and 1997. The PCCNA’s founding document, the “Racial Reconciliation Manifesto,” was jointly-authored by Clemmons, his fellow Black Pentecostal theologian/ethicist, Dr. Leonard Lovett, and white Pentecostal historians, Drs. Harold Hunter and Cecil Robeck. In summation of Clemmons’ expansive and ecumenical career, a close friend of the scholar shared: “I always thought that Ithiel, while deeply immersed in the Church of God in Christ, felt called to ecumenical ministry.” Any critical examination of Clemmons’ protean theological imagination must take seriously the varying ecumenical contexts of his life and ministry.

104 Ibid.
105 Cecil Robeck, New International Dictionary of Pentecostal and Charismatic Movements, 555
106 Ibid.
107 Marlon Milner, “We’ve Come This Far,” 6.
Though deeply committed to the life, health and mission of the church, Clemmons also managed to remain very close to the religious academy. Understanding himself both as a black Pentecostal church historian and theologian, Clemmons chose North American Pentecostal scholars as his primary academic interlocutors. In doing so, Clemmons helped to define the intellectual trajectory known as “African American Pentecostal thought” as he reflected upon both neglected theological themes and the varying theological perspectives bequeathed to him. From this vantage point, Clemmons critiqued the scholarly field of black theology; the larger discipline of Black Religious Studies; American Religious History; and the newly emergent, predominantly white, Society for Pentecostal Studies (SPS). Joining the SPS in 1972, Clemmons’ active level of participation in the Society caused him to ascend to the presidency of the organization in 1981; he was only the second African-American scholar to lead the predominantly white group in its then, eleven-year history.  

In addition to his close involvement with SPS, between the years of 1984-1990, Clemmons served as a consultant to Drs. C. Eric Lincoln and Lawrence H. Mamiya for the Eli Lilly Foundation’s research project on the seven historically Black Christian denominations in North America, of which COGIC would figure prominently.  

This study was subsequently published as The Black Church in the African-American Experience by Duke University Press in 1991. Clemmons was also a frequent lecturer for the Urban Theological Institute of the Lutheran Theological Seminary at Philadelphia; the Graduate Department of Religion and the Divinity School of Duke University; and Regent University School of Divinity. Two

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of the crowning moments of his academic career were his delivery of the
distinguished Gardner C. Taylor Lectures at Duke Divinity School in 1990, and his
delivery of the Azusa Lecture at Regent University Divinity School in 1996. At the
time of his death, Clemmons served as Adjunct Professor of African-American
Religious Studies at Regent University School of Divinity. Clemmons also served for
a time at Regent Divinity as a Visiting Professor of Christian Leadership. As early as
1971, Clemmons was the first Pentecostal scholar invited to deliver the
commencement address for the Interdenominational Theological Seminary of
Atlanta, Georgia.  

Alongside his theological criticisms, reflections and (de)constructions within
the church and the academy, Clemmons also took very seriously his larger role as a
theologian within the public square. As an activist-theologian, inner-city pastor and
eventually bishop of over 250 congregations, most of which were situated in New
York City, Clemmons was greatly concerned with the perennial question of “[h]ow
can the power that is continually experienced [with]in the church fellowship be
brought to bear on the problems God’s children are continually experiencing outside
of the church?” Out of this concern, very early in his ministerial career, Clemmons
became engaged in a number of vital social ministry initiatives. As one “deeply
interested in issues of justice and civil rights,” the social ministry projects in which
Clemmons involved himself centered around the issues of inequitable housing,
employment and education, all of which too often stemmed from chronic poverty

110 Ithiel Clemmons, “Falling Idols and Exploding Myths: A Commencement Address,” The Whole
Incident to Black Pentecostalism, 1.1 (1977) 31.
and structural injustice. Though Clemmons’ pattern was to begin these initiatives at his local church, he eventually moved out from the church and engaged in partnerships with other social service and community organizations.

In addition to the housing opportunities he helped to create for indigent men residing in Manhattan’s infamous Bowery, Clemmons was also “heavily involved with Robert Kennedy’s Bedford-Stuyvesant Restoration Project.”\(^\text{113}\) In 1966, along with local politicians, social service providers and local leaders of business and industry, Clemmons was among the religious leadership of Brooklyn nominated by New York Senator Robert F. Kennedy to offer guidance in the formation and mobilization of the Bedford Stuyvesant Restoration Corporation, the nation’s first Community Development Corporation (CDC). During this time, Clemmons also founded the “Foundation for Urban Ministries in New York, a funding agency with a half-million dollar revolving loan program which [would underwrite] mortgages for nearly 30 small churches in New York City.”\(^\text{114}\)

Clemmons advocated for educational and employment opportunities for socially dislocated minorities both in New York and throughout the nation by working with “Leon Sullivan to establish Opportunities Industrialization Centers.”\(^\text{115}\) During the peak of American racial segregation, Clemmons “played a significant role in helping to map strategy for the Civil Rights work of Martin Luther King, Jr. in New York in 1963.”\(^\text{116}\) At the time of his death, Clemmons was part of a select group of clergy chosen to serve on the advisory board for President William Jefferson


\(^{116}\) Ibid.
Clinton, the 42nd president of the United States of America. Clemmons continued to advocate for underserved communities until his death.

3.6 Conceptions of the Tradition

From the earliest days of his theological training, Clemmons became deeply impressed with his community’s engagement of spirituality, the dynamism of their pneumatology and their openness to religious experience. Clemmons came to see these pillars of his community’s theology as an ecumenical offering from his tradition to the broader church that could very well open up new avenues for doing theology. Realizing that these aspects of his community’s theology “tended to move in the direction of an experiential theology focused on awe, mystery and wonder,” Clemmons said that these emphases gave “rise to specific concern with dogma, worship and ritual.”117 As one who consciously sought to situate his faith within the context of the spiritual practices of the longer tradition of the church, Clemmons credited his Black Holiness-Pentecostal forebearers with conceiving of these crucial insights.

In bestowing credit to his predecessors for their theological insights, Clemmons said that though these men and women “did not have access to extensive academic opportunities” and “they were bereft of the intellectual tools with which to systemize their spiritual insights into theological discourse, literacy was not a prerequisite to revelation.”118 Clemmons further added: “God gave to them the wisdom to penetrate behind the walls of sophisticated Christian orthodoxy and [t]hey were able to get at and utilize genuine religious experience as a cure for the ills of

117 Ithiel Clemmons, “Shaping the Coming Era,” 187
In defense of their theological method, Clemmons maintained that “[a]lthough these elements of faith may [have] appear[ed] to be put together uncritically within the framework of an ethno-religious impulse, this serious engagement of pneumatology occasioned an essential breakthrough within the Christian tradition.” This breakthrough for Clemmons was his community’s modest ecumenical offering to the wider church.

Seeing within his native Pentecostal tradition a vibrant ecumenical witness and believing wholeheartedly that “Black Holiness Pentecostalism [possessed] the potential to give the much-needed fresh theological articulation to diverse spirituality and provide a pneumatology of spontaneity” Clemmons posited:

Moving beyond conceptual language and propositional thinking as starting points for theological reflection to experienced presence, Clemmons argued that his tradition’s distinctive approach to theological praxis “continues to challenge any approach to theology that is primarily academic rather than experiential.” Clemmons saw this as one of the chief virtues of his faith tradition.

Although Clemmons extolled the virtues of his tradition’s theology and spirituality and offered this spirituality to the broader church as an ecumenical

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119 Ibid.  
121 Ibid., 175.  
122 Ibid., 173.  
123 Ibid., 174.
offering, he was also critical of this tradition. As an internal critique of the movement, Clemmons remained gravely concerned with the ways in which the legacies of racism and white supremacy hindered and distorted the chronicling of the movement’s theology and history, compromising the integrity of the church’s unity and witness. In his 1996 article, “What Price Reconciliation,” published in *Pneuma: The Journal of the Society for Pentecostal Studies*, as part of a dialogue on racial reconciliation within the broader movement, Clemmons identified the taproot of what he perceived to be the cardinal sin of North American Pentecostalism. According to Clemmons, “[h]istorically, white Pentecostals [in America] have attempted to be vigorously missionary minded and evangelistic while being unwilling to view racism as a sin, viewing it as merely a social problem and hypocritically hiding a sense of racial superiority.”124 For Clemmons, this historical distortion had both devastating and far-reaching consequences upon the way the movement’s interpreters recorded and interpreted the tradition’s theology and history.

Clemmons’ 1981 presidential address delivered at the Society for Pentecostal Studies annual conference addressed the serious problems that racism posed for the faithful rendering of North American Pentecostal history. He revealed precisely the way in which he saw racism functioning in the chronicling of the movement’s history. According to Clemmons:

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The social a priori of white culture that informed and continues to inform particular white theologians and historians of the Pentecostal Movement is especially revealed in the intensified and renewed drive since the 1950’s to hail Charles Fox Parham as the father of the contemporary Pentecostal movement at the expense of William J. Seymour, the man whom God truly

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used. This is due not so much to the devious intention of particular theologians and historians as it is to the social context in which their thinking occurs. It is an expression of two centuries of protestant theology which as Peter Gay has so perceptively observed, “gives God His glory, assigns men their places, gives events their meaning – and Anglo-Saxon superiority its due.” It is unfortunate that in telling this marvelous story of Pentecostal origins in America that these brilliant chroniclers [of history] have become so enclosed within their own social contexts that they are lured to treat their distorted visions of reality as the whole truth. And they feel they must destroy other stories which bear witness that the history of the movement can be seen from another perspective. 125

Being gravely concerned with the dynamic process of selection and omission that was North American Pentecostal historiography, Clemmons took up the vocation of a Pentecostal historian; his scholarly and theological calling resurrected neglected voices and provided alternative visions of the Pentecostal saga in North America.

With regards to the practical implications that this flawed treatment of the history had on the present and future life and health of the movement, Clemmons remarked that his:

Caucasian brethren and sisters usually wanted unity without being really ready to pay the price of justice; that is without being willing to take seriously the issues of power, privilege and purse. As African-American Pentecostals, our interest is not in unity in simply a spiritual sense. Our interest is in love, power and justice which are indivisible and concrete expressions of unity of heart and unity of soul. 126

Seeing these issues as major obstacles to the unity of the Christian church in general and to the witness of the North American Pentecostal church in particular, for the remainder of his life and ministry within both the church and the academy, Clemmons advocated for racial justice in both the re-telling of the movement’s history, as well as within the life of the church.

125 Ithiel Clemmons, “True Koinonia,” 50.
In countering this problematic reading and rendering of the North American Pentecostal story, Clemmons offered an alternative vision of the movement, calling into question both the movement’s history and theology. Commenting on what he saw as the tradition’s potential for making its greatest impact, Clemmons shared his perspective:

[m]y reading of Pentecostal history and theology makes me provolutionary, focused on the future. Despite the negative aspects of the history of Pentecostalism, the Pentecostal message has the latent, challenging potential of overcoming modern “tribalism” and racism…and can serve as a catalyst for a new fellowship and a new global society, an instrument of hope in our fractured world.\(^\text{127}\)

Clemmons’ offered this pro-revolutionary vision of Pentecostalism, interpreting the vocation of the tradition as a calling to, “be a prophetic sign of the authentic liberation of God’s truth for humanity.”\(^\text{128}\) Clemmons would go on to say:

what is said in Acts 2 about Pentecost in the indicative must be understood in the imperative for the mission of the church. On the day of Pentecost the church ancient and modern speaks in tongues because, prophetically, the Holy Spirit has given to the church all the peoples of the earth. Christ, in the Holy Spirit calls the church into being and fits it for the immense missionary effort by which it is to attain its full stature and accomplish its mission of uniting all cultures, all peoples, all things in Christ (Col.1:16)…there is in here in the book of Acts a challenge for Christians, a challenge with regard to the unity of humankind; there is here a challenge for Christians as being responsible for church unity.\(^\text{129}\)

Clemmons also noted:

The image of the church in its origins is also that which can have contemporary impact. What an incredible prophetic vocation! If we as Christian leaders are gripped by and faithful to the leitbild of Pentecost, reversing Babel we have special reasons for struggling against racism, classism, genderism, and against stereotypes and propaganda and for promoting a mutual appreciation between people antagonistic to each other.


\(^{128}\) Ibid.

\(^{129}\) Ibid.
The *telos* of the church’s prophetic vocation should give a foretaste of the unity which in our eyes holds all people together in their diversity and which lets us feel the communication that the Holy Spirit is inexorably promoting which humankind can receive as the promised gift of God.\(^{130}\)

Armed with this pro-revolutionary and radically egalitarian vision, Clemmons saw within the movement unparalleled potential for healing the deep divisions fracturing the human family and destroying world community. But for Clemmons to get to the place where his pro-revolutionary vision of Pentecostal witness to the world in Spirit could become a reality, Clemmons came to realize that a certain limited construction of Pentecostal pneumatology had to be overcome.

### 3.7 Pneumatology

Of all of the scholars who have written about the narrow theological contours of North American Pentecostalism (as interpreted by white Pentecostal theologians), perhaps the most polemical writings concerning the privileging of tongues-speaking above other gifts of the Holy Spirit come from Ithiel Clemmons.\(^{131}\) From both his scholarly and pastoral vantage points, Clemmons was exceedingly critical of the pneumatological proposals of both Modern African-American mainline theologians and those of his predominantly Caucasian North American Pentecostal theological counterparts. For Clemmons, mainline African-American theologians, having inherited the flaws of their teachers, neglected to fully develop a theology of the

\(^{130}\) Ibid.

Spirit by failing to draw upon either scripture or the Black folk Christian tradition; a tradition which grew directly out of the spirituality of their early enslaved African forebearers. With regards to Euro-American Pentecostal theologians, Clemmons believed that they had routinized and canalized the Spirit’s giftings and attempted to domesticate the Spirit’s free movement into certain cherished manifestations of the Spirit, primarily that of evidentiary ecstatic speech.

In an unpublished essay entitled, “The Anglo-Saxon Corinthianization of the Azusa Miracle,” Clemmons named his theological difference with the dominant tradition of North American Pentecostal theology, stating that white Pentecostal’s preoccupation with tongue-speaking as the initial physical evidence of Spirit Baptism, “precipitate[ed] a confusion akin to the confusion of the early Corinthian church.”

Referring to this dogmatic proclivity as the “Anglo-Saxon Corinthianization of ecstatic speech,” Clemmons’ fundamental concern was with their privileging of the gift of tongues over and above the other accompanying gifts of the same Spirit. Unable to find biblical grounding for such a position, Clemmons remained highly uncomfortable with the tendency of these theologians who elevated the gift of tongues as the highest or supreme manifestation of the Holy Spirit. In his reading of St. Paul’s instructions to the church at Corinth, Clemmons did not understand the account as a defense of tongues doctrine at all, but rather as the Apostle making a case for multiple manifestations of the Holy Spirit.

In another unpublished essay, “The Church of God in Christ and the Initial Evidence Controversy, 1907,” presented during his denomination’s International Holy Ghost Conference in 1990, Clemmons commented on this tendency of

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privileging ecstatic speech above other gifts of the Holy Spirit, by saying: “the ranking of spiritual gifts is [simply] immature.” Clemmons also noted that, “[g]lossolalia, [though] a most peculiar gift, so mysterious in its workings, should be reserved for God. It is a most personal gift and serves the common good only when the Holy Spirit uses it as a sign to the unbeliever or when it is coupled with interpretation.”

In what can be called Clemmons’ “Post-Corinthian understanding of Pentecostal theology,” speech inspired by the Spirit can either be deeply personal or radically communal. When glossolalia is followed by interpretation, a word is given for the common good of the community. For Clemmons, when such ecstatic discourse is engaged in as a form of prayer or an expression of worship, it is reserved for God and God alone. Against and unlike Corinthianized understandings of tongues-speaking so characteristic of Anglo Pentecostal theologians, for Clemmons, the exercise of tongues-speech inspired by the Spirit is never performed as the subject of human approval and verification.

As it relates to Clemmons’ critique of what he understood to be the underdeveloped pneumatology of modern black theologians, Clemmons stated that: “Black theologians have rightly pushed for a pragmatic spirituality and have shown the connection between the spirituality in the sanctuary and the struggle in the streets, however the absence of pneumatology in the foremost statements of black theology is astounding given that there has always been within the Black church recognition of the need for the Holy Spirit.”

Seeing within African-American Pentecostalism tremendous resources for addressing this neglect, and hoping that his

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Black Pentecostal brothers and sisters would rise to the challenge, Clemmons asserted that: “any [serious] theology that is done by and for Black people that is useable in the church, has to pay more serious attention to pneumatology. This is part of the unfinished business of Black theology!” For the duration of Clemmons’ theological career, he continued to wrestle with the ecumenical implications of a more balanced Christian pneumatology and did so from the context of his native Black Holiness-Pentecostal tradition. Clemmons’ concern for the co-equality of the Holy Spirit within the godhead conditioned all that he said concerning God.

3.8 Christology

Within contextual and liberation theologies, Christology, the doctrine of the person and work of Jesus Christ has received comprehensive and exhaustive treatment. As Howard Thurman notes, this is necessarily the case as many dispossessed Christians around the world want to “know what the teachings and the life of Jesus have to say to those who stand…with their backs against the wall.” Indeed, the various Christological proposals in contemporary contextual theologies are to be commended for broadening and deepening the church’s understanding of Christ’s identification with the oppressed, and making relevant and intelligible the gift of salvation for millions living on the underside of history, with an emphasis on the materiality of salvation. However, according to Clemmons, as it relates to the Black church in North America, there is yet the need for a Christological proposal that takes seriously both the witness of scripture and the deep-seated spirituality of the African-American church. Concerned with the question of Christology for the whole of the American church in general and the

135 Ibid.
African-American church in particular, Christology became one of the areas Clemmons engaged in his own theological reflections.

Clemmons extolled a number of crucial insights gleaned from various liberationist and political theologies, as these theologians “rightly pushed for a pragmatic spirituality and ha[d] shown the connection between the spirituality in the sanctuary and the struggle in the streets.”\(^{137}\) Naming the problem of Jesus within American theology as one of “Christological confusion,”\(^{138}\) Clemmons nevertheless evinced:

\[v\]arious movements have fashioned many, often competing, Christologies, that claim to answer life’s and history’s most perplexing problems. There are Fundamentalist theologies, Orthodox theologies, Liberation theologies, Feminist theologies (to name a few), all claiming the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ as the foundation of their visions…these competing Christologies [however] have often produced a confused Christianity and a compromised Church.\(^{139}\)

For Clemmons, due to widespread Christological misconceptions in the American church, the question of Christology was one that could not be avoided. He wedded crucial insights garnered from the pneumatology of his formative tradition with what he perceived to be the more progressive elements inherent within some contemporary Christological proposals. He offered to the church a pneumatic-Christology more attuned with both the testimony of scripture and his formative African-American Christian spirituality.

In the concluding comments of his 1975 classic work *Black Belief: Folk Beliefs of Blacks in America and West Africa*, African-American theologian Henry

\(^{137}\) Ithiel Clemmons, “The Unfinished Business of Black Theology.”


\(^{139}\) Ibid.
Mitchell wrote: “I am particularly anxious to see more work done on the folk Christology among Blacks, a subject I have dealt with slightly under the topic of the “Holy Spirit.” Though Mitchell never returned to take up this project in his future writings, his claim pointed to the need for African-American theologians to develop a Christological agenda that would be usable by the church. For Mitchell, this agenda needed to pay more serious attention to the role of the Spirit within the life and ministry of Jesus and the crucial role of the Spirit in the anointing of Jesus for the work of liberation.

Whereas black theologians since Mitchell’s time have done commendable work in developing a more robust anthropology of Jesus, much is yet to be said about the role of the Holy Spirit in Jesus’ earthly ministry, as well as the implications of the continuing presence of the Spirit of Christ in the church. Believing that an overemphasis on the anthropology of Jesus had contributed to a pneumatologically-imbalanced Christology, Clemmons argued that:

the founder of the Christian faith was far more than a politician crusading for good government, far more than a protestor, struggling against social and economic structures; far more than an organic, intellectual philosopher, speculating on mystery, metaphysics and logic; far more than a pioneer and publisher of a “new morality” or theological method. Jesus was a prophet, sensing the signs of the times and seeing the hand of God in history.”

For Clemmons, one reason for the Christological confusion rampant in the American church, directly contributing to the over-use of anthropology in contemporary Christology, was the unwillingness of modern theologians to accept the testimony of scripture as to who in fact Jesus was. For Clemmons, this issue also severely weakened the church’s witness in the world. According to Clemmons:

141 Ithiel Clemmons, “And Still the Church Triumphs,” 4.
One of the reasons why the malignant forces of evil seem so triumphant and the Christian church so compromised, is that modern Christians have not taken hold of the Apostolic kerygma (preaching and teaching) recorded in the New Testament – the kerygma centered on the proclamation of the life, passion, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. The New Testament Church bequeathed to us a profound account of Jesus as Savior and Lord. Moreover, it provided for us an awe-inspiring example, and a passionate courageous testimony of the appropriation of Christian faith in one’s life in the struggle against a pagan world.142

Clemmons felt that his tradition had something to say in the face of the current Christological controversy, given Pentecostalism’s high view of scripture and emphasis upon the recovery of the Spirit’s role within the church.

Pentecostal theology is often accused of “pneumatocentrism,” the charge that the work of the Holy Spirit somehow eclipses, overshadows and upstages the work of Christ. In developing his pneumatic-Christology, drawing from his own Holiness-Pentecostal heritage, Clemmons argued:

[1]he rediscovery of the Holy Spirit and [the Spirit’s] gifts...does not entail any belittling of Christ and His redemptive role. Quite to the contrary, the early fathers and mothers of the Holiness-Pentecostal Movement…were often considered Jesus cults.143

Insisting that certain “elements of great spiritual value in Pentecostalism are frequently overlooked, including its insistence upon restoring the balance between Christology and the experience of the Spirit,”144 Clemmons sought to connect “the Holy Spirit and the historical praxis of Jesus with the situation of the oppressed.”145 Clemmons made this connection by reflecting upon the continuing presence of Christ through the ministry of the Parakletos.

In a 1989 meditation upon Pentecost, Clemmons connected the work of Spirit with the continuing work of Christ in the life of the believer as well as within the church. Arguing in favor of all Christians having a personal experience of Pentecost, Clemmons deepened his Christological reflections by stating:

at Pentecost…[t]he Christian receive[s] compelling evidence of the truth—not only of what Jesus had said and done, but who and what [Jesus] was—and also power to pass this evidence on to be witnesses to it. So it has been in the life of the Christian Church. The Holy Spirit is not God in the absence of Jesus. [The Spirit] is God making Jesus present, again and again.  

Clemmons went on to say:

Jesus for the Christian led by the Paraclete is always more than memory. He is a living presence, a companion on life’s way. [The Spirit] is to us what [the Spirit] has been to every generation before us: God’s unique and plenary self-communication. Jesus was careful to direct the attention of the disciples to the fullness of God. The Spirit of Jesus, the Spirit of Christ, the Holy Spirit (and not just our historical memories) point us to Jesus as God’s indwelling redemptive, witnessing presence in our lives, in the Church, in the world by the Spirit, through the Son of the Father.  

By reflecting upon the Spirit’s work of making Christ continually present in the life of the believer and within the church, Clemmons offered to the church a pneumatic-Christology which sought to correct the overly anthropological christologies common in much of contemporary Christianity. In doing so, Clemmons participated in what he saw as the gift of his formative tradition to the larger church: correcting the imbalance that existed between Christology and pneumatology.

3.9 Prayer

Perhaps the hallmark dimension of Clemmons’ ministry, for which he became widely-known, was his robust theology of the spiritual discipline of prayer.

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147 Ibid.
Because of his preoccupation with prayer, there is a way in which we can understand Clemmons’ entire life, from his early development until his death, as one long pilgrimage into the discipline of prayer. By Clemmons’ own admission, very early in his spiritual development he “was inspired to become an intercessor by reading Norman Grubb’s book, *Rees Howell: Intercessor.*” In a personal reflection on St. Luke 22:31-32, regarding the Lord’s prayer for the perseverance of Peter’s faith, Clemmons disclosed that: “this text was the text of my initial sermon over 40 years ago. It has stayed with me all these years. I have survived only because Jesus has prayed for me [and] sheltered me.” Armed with the simple, yet radical idea that Jesus was his prayer partner and that Jesus “prayed for his disciples, his friends [and], his enemies,” Clemmons came to believe that a very large component of his vocational identity was that of exhorting and encouraging his fellow Christians to lives of prayer, intercession, supplication, and thanksgiving.

For Clemmons, this emphasis on prayer went beyond purely devotional and pastoral concerns. Clemmons understood himself as a cultural and spiritual custodian of a greatly needed, though rapidly fading tradition of American Christian spirituality, as he himself was the beneficiary of a distinctive spirituality, bequeathed to him by his enslaved African forbearers and his pioneering Black Pentecostal progenitors. Concerning this tradition, Clemmons revealed:

For Mason and the Church of God in Christ, the Pentecostal experience thrust the faith community toward a new spirituality. The Saints in the early years

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150 Ibid.
of the Church of God in Christ called it a “spirituality of deliverance.” Today, it is called a spirituality of liberation. Mason took Mark 16:15-18 as providing both the basic paradigm of the church and its mission statement. The Church of God in Christ embraced a biblical spirituality that allows God’s delivering acts in history to penetrate all levels of human existence.151

Even though Clemmons saw his tradition’s spirituality of deliverance and liberation as permeating all areas of the Christian life, it was precisely the practice of prayer that served as the critical anchor for this particular tradition of Christian piety.

According to Clemmons:

The prayer tradition of Slave Religion that Mason sought to preserve above all else was and is the essence of life in the Church of God in Christ. This tradition means fulfilling inward conditions of attitude and receptivity and getting appropriate results in heightened insight, self-control, strength, poise and revolutionary patience.152

Of Mason and this tradition, Clemmons also wrote:

Mason’s success and strength as a leader was based upon his prophetic thought and action that kept alive essential elements of a tradition bequeathed to blacks from the past. Mason was revolutionary – departing from the mainstream of both black and white evangelicalism. He projected a vision and inspired a practice that would fundamentally transform the prevailing status quo in light of the best of the African tradition – a tradition [many] African-Americans were more anxious to forget than to remember for the sake of acceptance and assimilation.153

As a spiritual custodian of this highly distinctive tradition of Christian piety passed down to him by Mason, Clemmons not only sensed a divine call to nurture this form of spirituality, he also attempted to find a way to ensure its perpetuity.

In September of 1986, at the COGIC Cathedral in Greensboro, North Carolina, Clemmons implemented a program to revive and secure the perpetuity of his inherited prayer tradition, and in essence helped to preserve the ecstatic spirituality of his Black Pentecostal community. Clemmons established his annual

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151 Ithiel Clemmons, “Bishop CH Mason,” 68.
152 Ibid., 69
153 Ibid.
Prayer Clinic, which convened under his leadership from 1986 until his death in 1999. Clemmons understood this annual Prayer Clinic as both the institutional incarnation of his denomination’s prayer tradition, and as a site for pastoral and theological praxis. Concerning this uncommon time of fellowship and dialogue, Clemmons wrote, that the:

Prayer Clinic is a methodological breakthrough. In a way hitherto unknown, (or rather un-institutionalized) [the Prayer Clinic] provides a forum for exchange between pastors, lay people, and biblical scholars – ethicists, historians, and worship leaders—in a framework of dialogue and prayer centered reflection. It is a prayerful learning experience that includes broad participation.  

Clemmons used the Prayer Clinic as an occasion to reflect with scholars, pastors and laity from the wider Pentecostal tradition upon historical topics, doctrinal issues and other spiritual practices of the broader tradition. Among the issues discussed during Clemmons’ administration included the practice of tarrying, Spirit baptism, the anointing, the person and work of Christ, and spiritual warfare – to name a few.

What was so novel about Clemmons’ theology of prayer was not only the depth of his theological reflectivity, but also the deeply political and highly pneumatological character of his intercession. Defining intercession as “spiritual defiance of what is, in the name of what God has promised” and stating that “intercession is prophetic in that it visualizes an alternative future,” in Clemmons’ theological and political understanding of prayer, the intercessor, through the power of the Spirit, participated with God in the righting and reordering of history in

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accordance to the will of God. Seeing the spiritual discipline of prayer as a primary means of engaging principalities and powers, Clemmons invoked the language of spiritual warfare, not only in the effort to contextualize the demonic, but also to name the earthly psychic struggles, social forces and political powers that were bent on thwarting creation’s conformity to the will of God. In qualifying his usage of the language of demonology in naming and engaging these powers, Clemmons stated:

The New Testament has much to say about demons and demon-possession. Oh! We in this generation have been too sophisticated to believe in demons and demon-possession. We need to realize however, that the realities to which the ancient language points, are still with us today in ever intensified destructiveness…the demons of the mind are real…children and adults who hate themselves need an authentic exorcist. That’s a demon, when we think the only way to make money on the scale of corporate giants is to sell drugs; that’s a demon when they think the only way to have access to power is [through] a gun, that’s a demon. And these demons are cast out by the power of God.

For Clemmons, the breaking of these demonic strongholds could only be performed through the power and might of the Spirit.

Clemmons not only spoke against the ways that the demonic manifested itself in persons, he also prophesied against the ways in which the demonic manifested itself in more corporate, institutional and nationalistic ways. He wrote:

While the world has excelled in technological efficiency, it has degraded spiritually. The demons of racism, nationalism nihilism, meaninglessness, [and] violence, undergirded by market mechanisms, market values, [and] market mentality, that has co-opted even the church…are driving [humankind] to disease, despair, disappointment, dread and death.

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156 Ithiel Clemmons, “History Belongs to the Intercessors,” 3.
157 Ithiel Clemmons, “And Still the Church Triumphs,” 5
Seeing the world as being “inundated by the cries of the entire creation: the millions starving to death, young men shot down in the street by their peers, the tortured victims of sexual abuse and battering, the infested rivers killing fish, the polluted air destroying trees, the destruction of the ozone layers of the earth,” Clemmons also said:

our world’s hope is not its politicians, not its kings, presidents, [nor its] parliaments but in its intercessors...In the face of titanic political forces, the clashing of cultures, moral relativity, [and]...the perversion of love, God has given [the] saints (the spiritual defiers of the world’s systems), a great...an[d] immense prophetic task. God has placed into the hands of the intercessors the destiny of the world, and by means of their prayers they hold back the divine wrath.

For Clemmons, it was the interceding church, in critical confrontation with the demonic, and by the power of the Spirit, which participated with God in the reordering of history and the turning away of evil. Clemmons believed that the church “has been and [must] remain in a more intensified way an exorcist - that is, we must free people whose wills and motivations are sapped by fear, distrust, self-depreciation, docility under oppression; [and those] who vent rage and violence.”

It is precisely because of this reality that warfare prayer for Clemmons could be done only through the strength of the Spirit.

The Spirit was given a very prominent role in the work of intercessory prayer within Clemmons’ theology of prayer. In reflecting upon the great anguish and despair raging within the culture, Clemmons wrote: “[t]he Spirit of God gathers all [of] this pain [and] releases it through [the intercessor] with sighs too deep for

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161 Ithiel Clemmons, “And Still the Church Triumphs,” 5.
words.”

Clemmons also noted that in addition to the pain that is channeled by the Spirit, it was “[t]hrough [the intercessors’] inarticulate groans the Holy Spirit…is pleading…our groans are given articulation by [the Spirit].” Though the intercessor’s groans are given articulation by the Spirit, for Clemmons, the relationship between the groaning Spirit and the intercessor was *perichoretic*. For while the Spirit groans through the intercessor, said Clemmons, “[the intercessor’s] task in prayer is to give speech to the Spirit’s groaning within [the intercessor].” It is in this pneumatic flow between the Spirit and the intercessor that allows the intercessor to participate with God in confronting principalities and powers, and in reordering creation into the world that God truly wills.

**3.10 Holiness**

At the core of Clemmons’ religious identity, undergirding his theology of prayer, his conception of the Spirit, his theology of Christ and his understanding of the Pentecostal tradition that nurtured him, was a robust theology of the Holiness of God. It was this theology of God’s holiness that formed the basis of his contemplative-prophetic spirituality, influenced his embodiment of the faith and informed the way in which he engaged the world. Recognizing that the idea of holiness was irrelevant or outmoded for most, Clemmons, proclaimed: “the concept of holiness, though ancient and to modern ears, an outdated, out of touch concept, offers the only real vision of human fulfillment worth our attention.”

Concerned with the way in which holiness had often become identified with self-righteousness and legalism, Clemmons asserted:

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163 Ibid.
164 Ibid.
[f]or most people, holiness, if it means anything at all, it is associated with persons who are judgmental, self-righteous, moralistic and rigid – [basically] a person who makes goodness unattractive. And when one drops the word holiness into a conversation, people suddenly freeze up and become ill-at-ease.\textsuperscript{166}

Theologically uncomfortable with holiness being understood as self-righteousness and the human achievement of perfection, Clemmons spent the duration of his life and ministry working through an alternative vision of the holiness of God.

In an address given before Brooklyn’s Historic First COGIC, for the congregation’s 75\textsuperscript{th} Anniversary, Clemmons proffered his theological vision of holiness as wholeness of person and community. Grounding his idea of holiness within his pneumatic Christology, Clemmons explained:

if we are grounded in the person of Christ, we will experience his holiness in the most ordinary events of our lives. It is not so much a concern with being religious, as it is with perspective and values and openness to the Spirit of God present in the world. Holiness is not a status we achieve, but the energy and vision we are given as a result of our encounter with the holiness of God in the midst of the complexities of human experience.\textsuperscript{167}

He emphasized that holiness was radically different than mere human achievement when he claimed:

Holiness is not simply a quality we struggle to achieve; it is rather the fruit of our association with Jesus. It sets us apart, not in the sense of being otherworldly, but rather in the sense of being grasped by the kingdom-vision that formed the center of Jesus’ life and message. The call to holiness is a call to live in the world, but not of it—meaning that we open ourselves to the relationship that Jesus offered - to his vision that transcends what we normally experience in this secular culture.\textsuperscript{168}

For Clemmons, the work of sanctification was the work of God in Christ through the power of the Spirit.

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\textsuperscript{166} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{168} Ibid., 1.
While Clemmons was interested in re-envisioning his community’s understanding of holiness in a personal sense, inherent to his vision of holiness was a vocational and a missional destiny of the sanctified. With regards to his understanding of the role of the church in the eschatological vision of the holiness of God covering the earth, Clemmons noted: “holiness is not so much a moral perfection achieved as [it] is a moral vision pursued. The task of the church is not to make individuals or society holy but to awaken the thirst [for] holiness so as to pursue the vision in which the call to holiness is rooted.”¹⁶⁹ Thus for Clemmons, awakening the thirst for holiness within the culture was central to the church’s mission and ministry.

At Union Theological Seminary, Clemmons found a context to wed his black Pentecostal conceptions of holiness with a much wider social, historical and theological vision. Not only did Clemmons pave the way for others within COGIC to study there, he also created avenues for black Pentecostals from other denominations to matriculate at the institution. And just as Clemmons’ time at Union placed him solidly on an ecumenical trajectory, others that came after him moved beyond simple ecumenism into broader public theological conversations, and even interfaith alliances. One such person was the Reverend Dr. James Alexander Forbes, Jr., of the UHCA, a leading American public theologian and Pentecostal-liberationist, who is the subject of the next chapter. Forbes would take the message and experience of black Holiness-Pentecostalism into new territories and in doing so, helped to usher in a new era of Pentecostal prominence within the broader American religious milieu.

Chapter Four

The Prophet: James Forbes as the Public Interpreter

4.1 Forbes As Theologian: The Prophetic-Liberationist

In his opening remarks to a sermon given before the 91st Annual International Holy Convocation of the COGIC, the Reverend Dr. James Alexander Forbes Jr. said to his Black Pentecostal brothers and sisters: “though I am one of you, I have gone out from you as an ecumenical missionary. But know that everywhere I go, you go with me.” Forbes, who by then served as the esteemed Senior Minister of the Historic Riverside Church of New York City, sought to give an account for both his lack of attendance at previous gatherings and also to reinforce the highly ecumenical character of his public ministry. Though licensed and ordained within a sister denomination to COGIC, the UHCA, Forbes spent a significant portion of his adult ministerial career sharing his tradition’s experience of the Spirit with faith communities that were neither Black nor Pentecostal. In doing so, Forbes emerged as perhaps the most significant ecumenist in North American Pentecostal history.

The great majority of Forbes’ ecumenical liaisons were undiscriminating in that he did not enter into ecumenical conversation as the official representative of any governing Pentecostal denominational body. As opposed to the top-down, programmed or structured ecumenism characteristic of North American Pentecostal denominations, there was an uncommon dispensation of “spontaneous ecumenicity” in Forbes’ life and work. In this form of trans-Christian-denominational engagement, “the work of the Spirit removes the denominational barriers and brings “spontaneous

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ecumenicity” in aspects of worship and experience of the charisms. In the ministry of Forbes, it was the charisms of preaching and prophetic social criticism that enabled him to move freely and fluidly across the varying denominational demarcations and ecclesiastical entanglements.

Perhaps one of the most significant, yet highly neglected moments within both the history of Pentecostal ecumenism in North America as well as in Forbes’ own ecumenical career occurred in the spring of 1986. Forbes, the Pentecostal theologian, homiletician and social critic, was asked to deliver the prestigious Lyman Beecher Lectures, one of the most celebrated and highly coveted ecumenical lectureships in all of North America, at the invitation of the Dean and faculty of the Yale University Divinity School. Although Forbes was not the first African-American to deliver the lecture series, he was the first, and to-date, the only Pentecostal scholar to be invited. Forbes’ delivery of the Lyman Beecher Lectures is illustrative of the rather curious ways in which North American Pentecostalism converged with liberal American Protestantism in the closing years of the 20th century.

With the theme, “The Anointing Makes the Difference,” Forbes used the Lyman Beecher Lectures to “share in an ecumenical setting the fruit of many years of reflection on Holy Spirit renewal in the life of the church” as well as “to identify and present the most significant contribution [he] could offer for the enrichment of [Christian] preaching.” The exposure received from giving this set of lectures at Yale, along with his rhetorical giftedness and the publication of the lectures under the title, The Holy Spirit and Preaching (Abingdon Press, 1989), placed him

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simultaneously at the helms of both the American homiletical and public theological academies. It is from the interior of both academies that Forbes emerged as a major American religious intellectual and social critic. Forbes, in addition to remaining in conversation with Christian churches, also spoke as a Christian theologian to non-Christian faith communities and into other non-religious public spaces. In this regard, Forbes’ ministry must be regarded as not only deeply ecumenical but also radically public.

Attempting to clarify the role of the Christian minister as public theologian within the African-American church tradition, moral development theorist and Christian social ethicist Robert Michael Franklin explains:

Public theologians are committed to presenting their understandings of God along with their ethical principles and values to the public for scrutiny, discussion and possible acceptance. In contrast to sectarian theologians who understand that they are speaking for and to the community of believers, public theologians understand themselves as ambassadors for Christ. They stand between worlds representing the distinctive visions and virtues of Christianity to a secular culture. They stand in a particular faith tradition but seek to address people from all walks of life. And they do so with a deep respect for the belief systems that others may already hold.⁴

As a public theologian, Forbes spoke into a variety of public and religious spaces and in the process sought to reinterpret various theological convictions of his formative African-American Pentecostal tradition. As a major American public theologian, Forbes’ perspectives brought him before the U.S. Congress, world political leaders, international human rights organizations, various interfaith councils and commissions, numerous denominational judicatories and congregations, North

⁴ Robert Michael Franklin, Another Day’s Journey: Black Churches Confronting the American Crisis (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1997), 122.
American colleges, universities, divinity schools and theological seminaries.\(^5\) As a public theologian, with all of the passion and indignation of the Hebrew prophets, Forbes prophesied against the unrighteousness of unjust nations, oppressive institutional structures and the sins of the human spirit.

In a moment of self-disclosure within an article written at the outset of his ministerial career entitled, “A Ministry of Hope from a Double Minority,” Forbes articulated both his vocational self-understanding and his sense of the distinctive perspectives of ministry imprinted upon him by his formative ecclesial tradition. According to Forbes:

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\text{I have been given a ministry of hope – with implications for spiritual renewal and social reform. I am a black Pentecostal preacher who believes that the Holy Spirit empowers us to witness better for Jesus Christ, and also equips us to engage in warfare against the forces and structures of oppression. I am committed to black liberation (not excluding other kinds of liberation) through the power of the Holy Spirit...I feel called to stand in the gap and prophesy about the relationship of the Holy Spirit to personal deliverance and social change.}\(^6\)
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Clinging steadfastly to his African-American Pentecostal heritage, Forbes nevertheless squarely situates his ministry within the broader liberationist tradition of progressive Christian theological thought. While Christian liberationists generally subscribe to an ideology of a preferential option for the poor and oppressed, as articulated by the principle architects of both Black and Liberation theologies, within Forbes’ theological program, there is broader understanding of the dimensions of human liberation.

In a May 1989 interview for Sojourners Magazine, when asked about his

\(^5\) For a complete biographical sketch, please see: http://www.therriversidechurchny.org/about/?minister-emeritus

working “through the tension[s] between [his] praxis-oriented liberation theology and [his] own seemingly universalist [theological] vision,” Forbes replied:

As you know, one cannot read the Bible with a kind of linear understanding such that the statement that “God is the God of the oppressed” leads to the belief that oppressors are outside of the concern of God. The gospel also addresses those people who think that God is on their side by virtue of their prosperity and the power they enjoy. It functions to arrest their thinking and to disabuse them of presumptions about God being for them.

When I say that “God is the God of the oppressed,” I mean that God is the God of those who are obviously oppressed, and God also is the God of those who are oppressed but who do not yet know it. They will not be able to receive the gospel with gladness of heart until they have given attention and support to the obviously oppressed and discover the degree to which they too, without knowing it, are in need of the liberating word.

My vision is that there is no one who is outside of the loving reach of God and that the message of liberation is extended to all. It is only because people think that they are whole that they do not know that they need a physician.

That Forbes, a self-proclaimed Black Pentecostal liberationist suggested, “that there is no one who is outside of the loving reach of God and that the message of liberation is extended to all,” provides us with a frame for understanding the distinctive strand of Forbes’ liberationist agenda. Because of his deep-seated desire to see both the oppressed and the oppressor liberated, the root metaphors that best characterizes Forbes' radically inclusive theological perspective may be described as a "prophetic-liberationist orientation."

As a public theologian with a prophetic-liberationist ethic, Forbes’ radically inclusive vision, ecumenical and interfaith appeal uniquely positioned him to speak prophetically to persons, publics and institutions from nearly every segment of the American society. Such a position also allowed him to unmask, name and engage oppressive institutional arrangements within the broader global culture. Forbes’

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ministry provided him with various platforms to speak out against the institution of apartheid in South Africa and the HIV/AIDS pandemic world-wide; to advocate for affordable housing, employment and universal healthcare within the United States; as well as to serve upon a number of presidential commissions and caucuses dealing with various issues such as the Department of Justice’s Roundtable on Youth Violence and the President’s Initiative on Race.  

Calling him the “single most eminent Christian spokesman for prophetic Christian faith in the entire United States,” Joe Hough, former president of Union Theological Seminary, made this statement about the universalist proclivity of Forbes’ liberationist ministry:

Forbes’ preaching is authenticated by his love for all people, even when we as a community of faith act in ways that do not inspire affection. He pours forth a compassion that makes the most unworthy of us quite sure that we can still be objects of God’s grace, and he enunciates the principles of righteousness so clearly and so powerfully that the most comfortable of us face squarely the possibility that we may be complicit in evil and become familiar with infinite capacity which we have for deception. 

While Forbes’ justice preaching and his prophetic social critique brought him significant acclaim throughout the American church, the government and broader society, much less is known about the ways in which his own theological moorings within the African-American Pentecostal church informed his distinctive theological and social understanding. This chapter examines the degree to which Forbes’ African-American Pentecostal constitution informed, challenged and shaped the ecclesial, interfaith and public issues he engaged.

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8 http://www.theriversidechurchny.org/about/?minister-emeritus
4.2 Childhood and Formative Years

On September 6, 1935, in the rural hamlet of Burgaw, North Carolina, James Alexander Forbes Jr., was born to the Bishop and Mrs. James Alexander Forbes Sr., the first of eight children. Born into a family of preachers which extended back into the era of American slavery, Forbes determined very early in his development never to become a minister. Regarding the pervasiveness of the preaching vocation within his family lineage, Forbes writes:

I grew up in a family of preachers—father a preacher, grandmother a preacher, grandfather a preacher, a couple of uncles and aunts who were preachers. During my early years because of my enjoyment of the life of the church, everybody always assumed that I would be a preacher, like my father.\(^\text{10}\)

While Forbes resolved never to become a preacher, he later admitted that, “[a]ccording to family lore, as a pre-school lad I used to stand on a coffee table to imitate my father’s fiery preaching style.”\(^\text{11}\) It is in this respect that Forbes says, “I have been a student of preaching most of my life.”\(^\text{12}\) According to Forbes: “much of my life was spent listening to one of these [family] preachers or observing a host of ministers at various conferences, convocations, revivals, and assorted district meetings.”\(^\text{13}\) While it was many years before he responded to the personal call to ministry, Forbes received an early initial impression that he would someday speak on behalf of God. In recounting this experience Forbes states:

Sometime between the ages of seven and nine, I found myself on my grandfather’s farm out in the fields doing some kind of work, and heard in my own spirit the sense that one day I would be a representative of Christ in


\(^\text{12}\) Ibid., 14.

\(^\text{13}\) Ibid., 14.
some way. So that was a profound sense of having been selected for some kind of vocation, bearing witness to the gospel.\textsuperscript{14}

Forbes suppressed this impression for nearly two decades until he finally submitted to a vocation in Christian ministry.

His father, the Reverend James Alexander Forbes Sr., was a leading bishop within the UHCA, an African-American Pentecostal denomination which had its origins in eastern North Carolina in 1886.\textsuperscript{15} Alongside his pastoral and administrative role as bishop, Forbes Sr. served successively as senior minister to UHCA congregations in Burgaw, Goldsboro, Raleigh and later, the Forbes Temple UHCA of Queens, New York. It was in Raleigh’s Providence Holy Church, however, that Bishop Forbes carried out the greater part of his pastoral ministry. In addition to his pastoral labors, Bishop Forbes sold candy, thus earning additional money to support the ministry of Providence Holy Church and his growing family. The bishop’s wife, Mrs. Mable Clemons Forbes, was a missionary at their church and a domestic maid during the week for wealthy white families in the community.\textsuperscript{16}

Unlike the vast majority of Pentecostal and African-American clergy of his day, Bishop Forbes had the benefit of receiving formal theological training. Bishop Forbes received a Bachelor of Divinity degree from the Shaw University School of Religion in Raleigh. Shaw University, founded in 1865, was the first historically Black college of the American South and the School of Religion awarded its first

\textsuperscript{14} James A. Forbes Jr., “When God Spoke Through Tchaikovsky’s Symphony # 4 in F Minor,” 111.
\textsuperscript{15} See William Turner’s, \textit{The United Holy Church of America: A Study in Black Holiness-Pentecostalism} (Gorgias Press, 2006).
degree in 1900. Armed with a formal theological education and practical training from his denomination, Bishop Forbes was well suited for his work as congregational minister, community spokesman and denominational executive.

Both of Forbes’ parents were products of Holiness and Pentecostal traditions and they provided love, a strong moral example and order and discipline within the family home. In this context of strength and security, Forbes developed a strong and healthy sense of self. This grounding proved vital for his life’s journey throughout the church as well as his childhood passage through the deeply segregated American south. His childhood influences in Raleigh were many, but none had as great an impact upon him as his parents. In their own distinctive ways, his mother and father provided Forbes with images of the divine that he carried with him throughout the course of his life.

The Forbes children were nurtured in what might be considered a strict perfectionist context, as maxims like “cleanliness is next to godliness” and “let all things be done in decency and in order” were enforced and uttered freely within Holiness and Pentecostal communities. Fondly remembering both his mother’s tender care and knack for perfection, Forbes humorously recalled:

Many Sundays [do] I remember my mother’s cornering me before getting ready to go to church and trying for the last time to get my hair in place, to comb it and brush it; and she only had one comb, and it didn’t go through so easily. And she would comb one way and it would not stay in its place so that when she sent me to the barber shop she said, “Get a skinny. Cut it all off.”…For a long time I was trying to get rid of it, because it was unmanageable, because it wasn’t “good” hair, because it was not the kind of hair that looked like my white brother’s hair.

For Mrs. Forbes, orderliness was not just adhered to for the sake of others, but orderliness was the way of the sanctified. All of the saints and their children were required to dress “as becometh holiness,” and there was also an understanding that the God who numbered the very hairs on their heads expected that hair to be in place.19

Not only did Forbes recall his mother’s attention to his outward appearance, he also remembered how his mother’s care toward her children provided him with positive ways of envisioning the providential care of God. In a moment of self-disclosure regarding how his mother’s activity within the home helped him to envision God within his own life and ministry, Forbes noted:

I remember our table at home when we sat down to eat dinner, we had a ritual. Mom would say, “are all the children in?” And if there was a child not present, we had to prepare a plate for that child and put it in the oven before we could say grace and our Bible verses and then eat. Now that’s the image of God for me. Because I think of God as Momma Eternal, who before I can eat asks, “Are all the children in?”20

Forbes’ emphasis on his mother’s love, care and provision for her children shaped his conception of God, a notion which finds strong support in the work of Christian objects-relations theorist, Ana-Maria Rizzuto.21 In summarizing Rizzuto’s theory of God representation, psychologist of religion Deborah van Deusen Hunsinger writes that Rizzuto: “locates the source of an individual’s private image of God in the relationship to primary objects, that is, to one’s significant others from early childhood, especially one’s parents. Rizzuto argues that a child creatively pieces “God” together out of fantasies about and experiences with his/her emotionally

19 Ibid.
20 Deborah van Deusen Hunsinger, Theology and Pastoral Care: A New Interdisciplinary Approach (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1995), 106.
significant parent.” Hunsinger goes on to say that for Rizzuto this “representation of God is formed from the *prima materia* of a child’s hopes, fears and longings as they are imaginatively interwoven with some of the actual characteristics of those in the family of origin. Such a God representation is used throughout life to provide psychological stability and equilibrium.” For Forbes, the representation of the providential care of God that was modeled by his mother proved to be foundational to the formation of both his “universalist” theological orientation as well as in his re-articulation of his tradition’s theology.

The influence of Forbes’ father was also central to his theological and vocational understanding. In Forbes’ eyes, his father was the epitome of both courage and strength. In reflecting upon the godly example modeled for him by his father, Forbes recalled:

> My father I remember as a man who used his hands for service. My daddy’s old church was falling down and he had a crow bar. He started ripping the planks off the church to say whether we’re ready or not, this church has got to come down and I’m going to build a new church here.

The image of watching his father demolish the sanctuary of the old Providence Holy Church with his bare hands was indelibly etched in Forbes’ memory and it was to this same strength and conviction that Forbes aspired. Having endeavored to someday be like his father, Forbes later says of his father’s influence:

> He allowed himself to be the channel through which I was inspired to consider ministry as my life’s work. He nurtured me in a Christian home until by God’s grace I could be called to the ministry. He challenged me, encouraged me, and made me free…I’m just trying to be what the old folks

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22 Ibid.
23 Ibid.
25 Bill Moyers, “Speaking to Power, 5”
called a chip off the old block.\textsuperscript{26}

Not only did Forbes proudly extol his father’s name, he endeavored to live ever more deeply into his father’s vocational footprints.

In addition to his parents’ influence, the larger religious community that nurtured Forbes was also central to his moral and spiritual development. Perhaps one of the central principles to be impressed upon Forbes by his wider community was that of the principle of reinvestment. According to Forbes:

“The community that I came up in had the understanding that if God blessed you, you at least ought to have the common decency to invest in some things that God is concerned about. That meant you would pay your tithes. When you got special blessings, you would even make a special offering. It became natural.”\textsuperscript{27}

Being inspired by the godly influences of his parents and the selflessness of the community that nurtured him, Forbes spent his days attempting to invest in things about which he felt that God was most concerned.

\textbf{4.3 Formative Social and Ecclesial Contexts}

Since his father was a leading bishop within the UHCA, much of Forbes’ life was spent within the confines of the sanctuary. Because of the frequency of his family’s church attendance and their high level of involvement within both their local congregation and the denomination, church was the primary context of Forbes’ spiritual and moral development. In reflecting upon the significant impact that the church had upon his formation, Forbes said:

Church [back then] was the center of your social life. Church was the place where you developed your talent. This was the life. And every major holiday, there was a church festival, a convention, somewhere or another, designed to keep you out of mischief. But also, to keep you in a context where the values


of the church, and your associates, were all of a common mind about what righteousness looks like, and what holiness looks like.\textsuperscript{28}

Forbes’ articulation that his instruction in the doctrine of holiness was central to his childhood and adolescent socialization processes is a significant detail. Cheryl Sanders, theological ethicist and interpreter of the African American Holiness-Pentecostal experience, argues in her work, \textit{Saints in Exile: The Holiness-Pentecostal Experience in African-American Religion and Culture}, that while most “scholars and casual observers of these churches have noted the emphasis on personal morality and ascetic lifestyles…[with] the corresponding prohibitions against alcohol, tobacco, addictive drugs, extramarital sex, gambling, secular dancing and the like…attention to personal morality has obscured the focus on other dimensions of holiness ethics.”\textsuperscript{29} Resisting such reductionist readings of the holiness codes among African-Americans, Sanders is careful to assert that within the tradition in which Forbes was nurtured: “the call to holiness [was] not simply an admonition to stay sober and celibate; it [was] a vocation to bring personal lifestyle, corporate worship, and social engagement into harmony with the attributes and demands of a Holy God.”\textsuperscript{30} Thus Sander’s observation suggests that Forbes’ grounding in holiness doctrine provided him not only with a critical lens for interpreting the world but also with a way of envisioning the vocation to which he personally had been called. This foundational instruction in a life of holiness aided Forbes for the duration of his ministerial journey.

Despite the nurturing and affirming environments of his familial and ecclesial

\textsuperscript{28} Moyers, “Speaking to Power,” 4-5.  
\textsuperscript{30} Ibid.
contexts, the broader social matrix of Jim and Jane Crow in which Forbes was raised was very inhospitable and self-negating. In fact, the incongruities that Forbes observed between his familial and ecclesial worlds and the southern segregationist culture of North Carolina caused him to raise some very serious questions about the nature of the church, the American South and the Christian faith. Perhaps the single social reality of Southern life that raised questions for Forbes as a child was that of the highly segregated nature of Southern churches. In reflecting upon his childhood experiences of traveling with his father to various rural congregations in their denomination, Forbes stated:

When I was a child in North Carolina, I used to travel with my father as he made the circuit of several small churches he served. I can remember passing large, beautiful churches where the white people worshiped. I used to wonder what those churches looked like on the inside, what kind of music they sang. I wondered what the pastors preached about: did they talk about how to get along with black people, or did they tell their children not to play with us? And I wondered whether they were curious about what went on in our churches, and whether they were all that different.\(^{31}\)

As Forbes grew older, he began to realize that the deep segregation he had witnessed was not a problem particular to Christian churches or just within the American South; Forbes came to understand the shameful reality of racism as a distinguishing mark of the entirety of American culture. In commenting upon his realization of the omni-pervasiveness of racial discrimination within his youth, Forbes confessed,

From start to end, the predicate of race seemed to insinuate itself into almost everything and also the sense that we [African-Americans] were a kind of spoiled batch of cookies. God made the other cookies, they were all right. But those of us that stayed in the oven so long that our pigmentation was dark, we were a second class form of citizen. Now we didn’t believe it. But the power of the circumstance made it necessary to cope with that reality.\(^{32}\)


\(^{32}\) Moyers, “Speaking to Power,” 5.
Forbes’ self-image had been significantly shaped and fortified by his parents and the communities that nurtured him. However, the fact that “the power of the circumstance made it necessary to cope” with the reality of racism is crucial in understanding the person he would become, as well as the hermeneutic he embraced in his adult theological vocation.

Having developed the necessary survival strategies for negotiating the hardness of life in the segregated South, Forbes eventually leaves North Carolina and moves northward to Washington D.C. to pursue his undergraduate studies. With some distance from the highly racist context in which he was formed, Forbes began to grope for a new language for confronting and dismantling the racism with which he had become so intimately acquainted. On a return visit to North Carolina, shortly following the victory of North Carolina students’ in integrating luncheon counters in Woolworth department stores, Forbes visited a store for a meal, sat at a counter in the front of the store and waited to be served. To his surprise, a white woman who had been sitting at the counter before he arrived gathered her belongings and stormed out of the store. The woman’s abrupt departure and Forbes’ recollection of the pain of his childhood experiences of racial exclusion, caused him to pen the following poetic lament:

Why did she move when I sat down? Surely she could not tell so soon that my Saturday bath had worn away, or that savage passion had pushed me for a rape. Perhaps it was the cash she carried in her purse. She could not risk a theft so early in the month. And who knows that on tomorrow t’would fall her lot to drink her coffee from a cup my darkened hands had clenched? So horrible was that moment, I too should have run away, for prejudice has the odor of a dying beast. Whether racist or rapist, both fall in the savage class. And the greatest theft of all is to rob one’s right to be.33

33 Ibid. 13.
Feeling as though he himself had been “robbed of his right to be,” Forbes began to think more deeply about how people are stigmatized by individuals who, in their efforts of securing their own positive identity, define others as exotic or inferior. Having been so often dehumanized because of his inherited racial composition, Forbes took up the task of making life more human for persons who had been objectified and discriminated against on account of race, class, sex and age. He also came to the defense of those who had been systemically discriminated against on account of their sexual orientation. As a public theologian and Christian social critic, Forbes mounted his defenses theologically, believing that the deliverance of all who were oppressed was the concern of God. What is most interesting is how his liberationist ethic and his Pentecostal theology of spiritual empowerment of the oppressed converged in his defense against all forms of human subjugation.

4.4 Influences

Like most so-called “colored” children living in the southern United States prior to the demise of Jim Crow legislation, Forbes and his siblings were educated in the segregated public school system of North Carolina. Like other segregated school systems throughout the American South, black children in North Carolina were consigned to substandard educational facilities, textbooks and other inadequate educational materials. Not much is written of Forbes’ earliest educational experiences, but later in his life he commented on his parents’ attitudes toward some forms of academic knowledge. According to Forbes, “I had been brought up to feel deeply and to be suspicious about the rational process, especially in matters of
religion.”

He was encouraged to excel in his academics, however, and according to Forbes, his “life was safely protected behind the cushioned wall of denominational rules, regulations and articles of faith.” In connection to the limits of his intellectual curiosity during his youth, Forbes said, “I raised questions only to get clarification of the truth “once delivered to the saints” and not to ask if “perhaps there were alternative ways of seeing the truth.” He had been pressured by both his biological and ecclesial families to pursue a profession in ministry, but it was not until he enrolled in Washington High School that Forbes “went on and left that behind in [his] effort to become…[his] own man.” The pressure to conform to the will of his loved ones was great; however, as Forbes explained: “I began to assert my own determination to follow my own path and clearly not be programmed by expectations. So I decided I wanted to be a doctor.”

Though Forbes initially declared that this decision was reached entirely on his own, he later admitted that he was inspired by his high school science teacher, Mrs. Suzy Vic Perry. According to Forbes, “it also helped [my decision to be a doctor]…that I was in love with Mrs. Suzy Vic Perry… she was the wife of my family doctor, Nelson Perry…so I figured [if] she liked Doc Perry, she’d like me too as a doctor.” While he never married his high school science teacher, Forbes excelled in the sciences and went on to pursue his undergraduate studies in the biological sciences.

After graduating from Washington High in Raleigh, Forbes completed his

35 Ibid.
36 Ibid.
37 Ibid.
39 Ibid., 111.
undergraduate studies at a historically African-American institution of higher learning, nearly 300 miles away from his home in Raleigh. Forbes attended Howard University in Washington, D.C. and the experience provided him with radically new perspectives. Founded in 1867 as the Howard Normal and Theological School for the Education of Teachers and Preachers, by the time of Forbes’ enrollment, Howard University was known throughout the world as the capstone of African diasporan intellectualism and culture. Known during the years preceding the Civil Rights Movement as “the Negro Oxford,” in addition to being the academic base of a number of premier Black intellectuals, Howard also incubated a number of gifted students who made outstanding contributions to the world in the areas of religion, the arts and politics.

Upon completion of his Bachelor of Science degree in Chemistry at Howard University in 1957, and having finally answered his call to the Christian ministry, Forbes returned to Raleigh and entered into a one-year period of discernment regarding the next phase of his ministerial preparation. Desiring to remain in North Carolina to assist his father in the ministry, Forbes applied to the Divinity School of Duke University, which at the time was one of the premier ministerial training institutes in the nation. However, his hopes of attending Duke University were dashed when he received a letter saying: “We regret to inform you that we do not accept colored students at the present time, and we do not anticipate doing so in the

42 Some of the most well-known graduates of Howard include: Zora Neale Hurston; Stokely Carmichael; Amiri Baraka; Jeremiah Wright; Thurgood Marshall, Toni Morrison; Roberta Flack; Jessye Norman; and Donnie Hathaway. Some of the teaching faculty at Howard that gave the institution its character include: Mordecai Johnson; Howard Thurman; Ralph J. Bunche; Alain Locke; E. Franklin Frazier; Sterling Allen Brown; Rayford Logan; and Charles Hamilton Houston.
foreseeable future.” With the dream of attending Duke Divinity shattered, Forbes enrolled into the Bachelor of Divinity program at Union Theological Seminary, despite the discouragement of an influential bishop who “questioned the wisdom of [Forbes] exposing [himself] to the liberalism and biblical criticism for which Union was so well known.” It was at Union Seminary that Forbes, in addition to deepening his understanding his own tradition, learned to speak in other social, cultural and theological tongues. While at Union, Forbes was well instructed in prophetic social criticism and the art of critical theological reflection.

Despite being discouraged from attending Union Seminary, Forbes received a warm reception from several members of the seminary’s theological faculty when he matriculated in 1958. One of the warmest welcomes came from theologian, and then president of the seminary, Dr. Henry Pitney Van Dusen. Having written two articles and published a full-length theological text informed by his observations of the rapidly burgeoning Pentecostal movement in Latin America (“Caribbean Holiday,” “Pentecostalism – The Third Force in Christendom” and Spirit, Son, Father: Christian Faith in Light of the Holy Spirit), Van Dusen was critical to Forbes’ theological and intellectual development as a Pentecostal theologian. According to Forbes:

Van Dusen had been impressed with the vibrancy and rapid growth of Pentecostal churches in Central and South America. He thought these Pentecostal sects reflected in their worship the contagious power of New Testament times. Indeed, he wondered if mainline churches might not discover in the dynamic of these churches something vital, though missing, in their more traditional forms of worship and general piety.  

44 James A. Forbes Jr., The Holy Spirit and Preaching, 12.  
45 Ibid.
According to Forbes, Van Dusen’s theological writings on both the Spirit and the global Pentecostal movement “came at a most opportune time.”46 He goes on to say: “I arrived at the seminary confident there would be respect for my tradition. I was not disappointed. In fact, many faculty members...showed interest and expressed hope that I would not lose the richness of my unique religious experience. They believed that Pentecostalism was on to something essential to vital Christianity.”47 The relationship that Forbes nurtured with Van Dusen significantly contributed to his success at Union as well as to his future labors in ecumenical, interfaith and public Christian witness. It was Van Dusen who first encouraged Forbes to reflect critically upon the distinctive nature of his Pentecostal experience and to lift up the virtues of his formative tradition for ecumenical, interfaith and broader public theological consideration.

Another signal experience for Forbes during his time at Union Seminary was studying with the world-renowned Christian existentialist theologian, Paul Tillich, one of the most influential Protestant theologians of the 20th century. Since the birth of the modern black theology project in 1969 with the appearance of James Cone’s, *Black Power and Black Theology*, scores of African-American theologians, many of whom were tutored by Cone himself, have continued to wrestle with the theological system of Tillich. Though more than a few African-American theologians have been influenced by Tillich’s *Method of Correlation*, at Union, Forbes was greatly influenced by Tillich’s reflections on ontological symbols and his theology of spiritual presence. Having attended Union during the time in which Tillich was preaching and lecturing through the third volume of his *Systematic Theology, Life in

46 Ibid
47 Ibid.
The Spirit, Forbes admitted that though “I didn’t understand every word he said… I got the impression that he brought rational categories that were not incompatible with the experiential dimensions of the Spirit I had learned about in my early upbringing.”

With further regards to the Tillichian imprint upon his theological understanding and upon his future ministry, Forbes later said:

The power, pastoral sensitivity, and insight into Christian struggle reflected in Paul Tillich’s sermon “Spiritual Presence” convinced me that he knew something about the Spirit I had experienced in prayer meetings back at Providence Holy Church in Raleigh, North Carolina. Portions of Tillich’s third volume of *Systematic Theology* were presented as part of Monday morning lecture in James Chapel at the seminary, I didn’t fully understand his accent or concepts, but sensed the majesty and mystery of the Spirit and its place in his monumental theological system. Following those lectures, I began calling myself a Tillichian Pentecostal.

As a self-proclaimed Tillichian Pentecostal, Forbes later used the theological categories of his teacher as new lenses for broadening and reinterpreting his own and his community’s distinctive experiences of the Spirit. This broadened, reinterpreted understanding of the virtues of Pentecostalism greatly influenced his ministry as public theologian both within the broader ecumenical church and within the wider public domain.

Also while at Union Seminary, Forbes was challenged by another scholar who helped to broaden his theological understanding in rather significant ways: the theologian Reinhold Niebuhr. He assisted Forbes in relating his Christian faith to pressing issues of the broader social and political worlds. In recounting his earliest experience of meeting Niebuhr, Forbes commented: “I recall [the] occasion when Reinhold Niebuhr had lunch with a group of incoming students. Upon learning of my background, he warned me not to let my seminar training rob me of the

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fervency of my Pentecostal heritage.” Speaking more specifically about the experience of studying with Niebuhr, Forbes later said:

Reinhold Niebuhr was, for me, one of the giants who seemed to have such a grasp of the Christian experience that when he spoke, it was as like he leapfrogged from one century to the other. He could discern the major trends, add sensitivity and responsiveness to his students, and always make them feel like they had something important to say.

With regards to the theologian’s most direct influence upon him, Forbes asserted:

Niebuhr impacted my understanding of how to have high ideals and yet not to be immobilized by the complications of the concreteness within which these ideals would need to find contemporary expression. I think there is a measure of Niebuhrian realism in me.

Having emerged from his time at Union Seminary as a Tillichian Pentecostal with Neibuhrian realism, Forbes was then prepared to face the unique challenges to the Gospel that were posed to the church by the modern world.

In addition to Tillich and Niebuhr, Forbes noted several other professors as being influential in his theological formation. According to Forbes, “I saw in James Muilenburg’s Old Testament classes and John Knox’s New Testament lectures and in Bill Webber’s East Harlem Protestant Parish ministry, manifestations of the Spirit in living color. Their forms and styles of expression were different than mine, but I sensed the same Spirit inspiring us all.”

Upon completion of his studies at Union, Forbes was selected as one of the first Pentecostals to undertake doctoral studies in the Martin Luther King, Jr., Black Church Studies Program at Colgate Rochester Crozer Divinity School, under the mentorship of North American homiletician and intercultural theologian, Henry P.

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50 Ibid., 12.
52 Ibid., 26.
Mitchell. Forbes was part of a program established in 1969 with the express purpose of providing “opportunities for the intellectual, professional, and inspirational development of [the coming generation of] transformational leadership within the African American [religious] community.”

At Colgate, Forbes sat under the tutelage of Mitchell and reflected more deeply upon both the African-American preaching tradition and the distinctive theology of his formative Black Pentecostal tradition. As a member of what Forbes called “both the formal and informal sections of Mitchell’s academy of homiletics,” Forbes said of Mitchell: “[h]is mentoring...deepened my understanding of the unique contribution Black preaching could make for empowerment of the broader ministry of the Word.”

Calling him the “dean of imagining and the hearers’ identification,” Forbes was greatly affirmed by how Mitchell, “effectively question[ed] the adequacy of theories and practices of proclamation that bow[ed] at the altar of the enlightenment, passing over the...piety of heartfelt religion.” Forbes completed his doctoral studies at Colgate-Rochester Divinity School in 1975 with a doctoral thesis entitled “A Pentecostal Approach to Black Liberation.” In this project, Forbes offered the Pentecostal theologies of Spirit baptism and Holy Spirit empowerment to the whole of the African-American church as an ecumenical gift for the work of the ministry and the liberation of the Black oppressed.

In reflecting upon his formation within the American theological academy, Forbes said of his own pilgrimage:

56 Ibid.
57 Ibid., 10.
As I gained broader [theological] exposure, I observed that some of the ingredients for spiritual awareness were missing in the larger church. I saw theoretical familiarity without experiential concreteness. The noticeable absence of freedom in liturgical expression often left me cold and unfulfilled. There seemed to be little awareness of the biblical gifts of the Spirit – at least the ones that were talked about in my church. Although I couldn’t be certain, it seemed there was little reliance upon the power of the Spirit for the work of ministry. There definitely was not the general acknowledgement of such a dependency – if it was indeed a part of the faith understanding.58

It was out of this experience that Forbes became convinced that “the exchange of views and broadening of experiences would be profitable for both sides of the theological and ecclesiastical divide.”59 Forbes argues that his “ministry has involved searching for ways to help the larger church community experience the empowerment found in the Pentecostal emphasis on the experience of the Holy Spirit.”60 Out of this experience and his heightened sense of vocational awareness, Forbes wrote his Bachelor of Divinity and Doctoral theses Pentecostalism and the Renewal of the Church (1962) and A Pentecostal Approach to Empowerment for Black Liberation (1975). In addition to his theses, Forbes published two books, The Holy Spirit and Preaching (1989) and most recently Whose Gospel?: A Concise Guide to Progressive Protestantism (2010). Alongside these texts, Forbes has written well over fifty articles and essays in which he lifts up the importance of the work of the Spirit in the church and within the broader social world. Given the uniqueness of his formation, Forbes was trajected into a life of ecumenical engagement and a special ministry of spiritual renewal within the church and the broader culture.

And though Forbes was challenged and shaped by his teachers at Union Seminary and Colgate-Rochester Divinity School, and by the larger ecumenical

59 Ibid.
60 Ibid., 14.
church, Forbes maintained that the greatest contributors to his theological
development were individuals from his biological family and those from his native
African-American Pentecostal tradition. In a 1989 interview with *Sojourners*
*Magazine*, when asked about the most influential religious thinkers in his own
spiritual and theological development, Forbes responded:

> [u]sually, as a theologian, one asks which volumes of systematic theology
you read, in order to know who you are and where you are going. For me, the
influence of the people who were attempting to bear witness to the faith when
I was a child made a significant difference.

I usually consider my family and the family of faith as the real theological
plant bed to which I bear evidence now in my own consciousness and spirit.
The theology of my grandparents and the black community – even though
some of these mentors had no credentials – definitely etched something that
is a continuing influence in my own self-understanding.\(^6^1\)

Forbes’ theological understanding was significantly honed and conditioned through
nearly twenty years of sustained theological reflection as a student within the
American theological academy. However, by his own admission, the deepest wells
from which he drew remained the wells of his Black church and Pentecostal
spiritualities. Though Forbes’ ministry was one of inclusivity and radical hospitality,
it must be understood the base of his theological understanding was the African-
American Pentecostal spirituality which he sought to broaden and reinterpret at every
point along his theological sojourn.

### 4.5 Vocations

Accepting the call to ministry during his third year of undergraduate studies
at Howard University, Forbes began serving as a lay-minister within the UHCA at
the Tabernacle on D Street in Washington and in other UHCA congregations within

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the greater Washington D.C. metropolitan area. As often as possible, Forbes returned home to Raleigh to assist his father with the ministry at Providence Church. While at Howard University, Forbes was exposed to some of the most fertile minds and prophetic voices emanating from the Black Christian community in America. According to Forbes: “[a]s I prepared [to train for the] ministry, I became most interested in hearing outstanding pulpiteers. I rarely missed an opportunity to be inspired by the preaching of the likes of Bishop H.H. Hairton, Mordecai Johnson, Vernon Johns, Howard Thurman, Gardner C. Taylor, Adam Clayton Powell, Jr., Samuel Proctor, and Martin Luther King, Jr.”

Forbes was eventually licensed and ordained by his father to Christian ministry within the UHCA of America.

Prefiguring the highly ecumenical, interracial and interdenominational trajectories of his future ministry, upon completion of seminary, Forbes received his first full-time ministry appointment outside of his formative tradition; he was called to serve as pastoral intern at an all-white Southern Baptist congregation. According to Forbes, Olin T. Brinkley Memorial Baptist Church of Chapel Hill in North Carolina was the first “of four congregations [that] provided contexts in which [he] began to observe how diverse congregations experience and call forth the gift of preaching in their ministers.”

Brinkley also provided Forbes with the space and opportunity to both unmask and confront the racism that had so significantly shaped his early social development.

Though the Brinkley Memorial Church previously had two other occasions in which “Negroes” expressed interest in joining the church, in the words of Reverend Robert Seymour, the congregation’s pastor, the potential presence of Forbes, “posed

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63 Ibid., 15.
a new situation: we would be receiving ministry from a Negro, not simply offering it to him.” As it related to the congregation’s openness to an African-American serving on its ministerial staff, Seymour candidly stated: “I was not sure that our people were ready for such a move.” Sey mour went on to say: "[t]here was some trepidation on both the parts of the congregation and the intern, [though] the congregation consented to the relationship which proved to be a mutual blessing.”

In reflection on the deep healing that receiving Forbes’s ministry provided for Brinkley, Seymour said that Forbes’ presence literally “transformed the congregation.” For Forbes, the experience of providing ministry and being received as a minister by a white congregation in the South, with its complicated history of racial hatred and white supremacy, also had a deeply humanizing effect upon him. The impact that the experience had upon Forbes was so profound that Forbes stated that in all the years of his life he had “never felt so completely a person.” Seymour and Forbes, upon the completion of the internship, made combating racism a theological priority in their respective ministries. With regards to this experience at Brinkley, in comparison to serving a church within his own community, Forbes explained:

This is very much like the work I would be doing if I were working in a church predominantly of my own race, but because most of the members of this church are white I have had an opportunity to approach my work from a slightly different perspective…[as a result of this experience] one thing has become increasingly clear, and it is that real understanding requires genuine

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65 Ibid.
66 Ibid.
confrontation...I feel that my working at this church in a leadership role has been a vital Christian witness.\textsuperscript{70}

In an article written by Forbes entitled “Racism as Demon Possession,” Forbes came to characterize and articulate the Christian struggle against racism in the language of demonology. Recognizing that the “demons of racism are sometimes difficult to cast out,” Forbes said that “[n]othing less than the power of the Holy Spirit will move us beyond bondage to self-interest so that we may obey the call to battle under the guidance and empowerment of our liberating Lord.”\textsuperscript{71} Forbes continued to understand his exorcising of the demon of American racism as part of the Spirit’s broader agenda for the healing of the nations.

Upon completion of his tenure at Brinkley Memorial, Forbes spent the next thirty years of his life serving four congregations within his father’s denomination. These included: the St. Paul’s Holy Church, Roxboro, North Carolina, from 1960-1969; the Holy Trinity Church, Wilmington, North Carolina, from 1962-1965; St. John’s Holy Church, Richmond, Virginia, from 1965-1973; and the Forbes Temple UHCA of Queens, New York as the assistant to his father, from 1976-1989. In a moment of disclosure regarding his ministerial labors within the UHCA, Forbes noted:

\textit{It was always strange to my church members to hear a Tillichian Pentecostal proclaiming the gospel with a curious combination of heart and head. Indeed, I often felt the tension between the old-time religion and the new-age perspective that I was attempting to embody. Nevertheless, in each of the churches I received support from seasoned saints and growing numbers of young people as well. I encouraged worship and fellowship with churches of other denominations and sought to lead my members to translate the warmth of the Spirit we experienced into vibrant witness in the community. I came to characterize our style of ministry as “progressive Pentecostalism” - a strong}

\textsuperscript{70} Ibid., 111.
emphasis on Spirit, but deep commitment to transformative social action. This has been a continuing emphasis for me, both in congregational leadership and in seminary teaching.\textsuperscript{72}

In his efforts to encourage UHCA parishioners to better translate their Pentecostal religious experience into increased service within the community, Forbes organized the Abundant Life and Liberation Committee. According to Forbes, “their task [was] to work out the detailed implications of…[a progressive Pentecostal] vision.” Forbes’ understanding of ministry continued to be inspired by this vision which he offered as a mode of participating in the Spirit’s broader agenda for the world.

Forbes began his career as a theological educator while simultaneously deepening his commitment to interfaith cooperation as Director of Education for Interfaith Metropolitan Theological Seminary, Inc (Intermet Seminary). Forbes ended his tenure with Intermet Seminary in 1976 to join the theological faculty of his alma mater, Union Theological Seminary. During his long career at Union, Forbes served on the teaching faculty as the Brown and Sockman Associate Professor of Preaching (1976-1985); as the inaugural Joe R. Engle Professor of Preaching (1985-1989); and the Harry Emerson Fosdick Adjunct Professor of Preaching since 1989, when he accepted the pastorate of Riverside Church. In commenting on his years of teaching at Union, Forbes noted:

\begin{quote}
[m]y years [teaching] at Union have strengthened my ecumenical journey with the Spirit. The seminary’s diversity is like a theological United Nations. There was a strong emphasis on respect for various traditions and cultures, which helped me recognize the many different ways the Spirit ministers in the church. I highly value the insights gained from this exposure. In my teaching and preaching, I seek to reflect the benefits of this experience. At the same time, I see the need for sharing the perspective and emphases of my own tradition.\textsuperscript{73}
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{72} James A. Forbes Jr., \textit{The Holy Spirit and Preaching}, 15.

\textsuperscript{73} Ibid.
For Forbes, the insights and perspectives bequeathed to him by his formative Pentecostal tradition remained central to his work and witness within the broader Christian church and religious academy.

In addition to his tenure on the theological faculty at Union, Forbes also taught for several years at Auburn Theological Seminary; served as Luce Lecturer at the Harvard University Divinity School (1998); and also served on the preaching faculty of the Yale University Divinity School as Visiting Professor of Homiletics (2004). In addition to delivering Yale University’s historic Lyman Beecher Lectures in 1989, Forbes delivered a number of other prestigious addresses, including the keynote address given before the World Pentecostal Conference in 1982; the Sixth Annual Leslie R. Smith Lectures in Preaching in 1993; The Davidson Lectures at Warren Wilson College in 1995; as well the inaugural Luce Lectures at Harvard University in 1998, which focused on the theme of urban ministry.\(^74\)

Perhaps the single most defining experience of Forbes’ public theological career occurred on June 1, 1989. On this day Forbes was appointed the fifth Senior Minister and the first African-American to serve as pastor of the Historic Riverside Church of New York City. Forbes now had the opportunity of being pastor to the nation by virtue of his appointment to what continues to be hailed by many as the leading Protestant congregation in all of North America. The appointment of Forbes to the pastorate of Riverside provided the theologically sophisticated liberationist with a major platform for speaking to both the nation and the world – a stage that his formative UHCA tradition simply could not provide.

Forbes’ appointment occurred on the heels of at least three other significant

\(^74\) For a complete list of Forbes’ lectures, please see: http://www.theriversidechurchny.org/about/?minister-emeritus
landmark achievements by African-Americans during the very same year: Bill White being named president of American baseball’s National League; Ron Brown being selected as first African-American to chair the Democratic National Committee; and Barbra Harris’ consecration as suffragan bishop of Massachusetts, the first female bishop to be consecrated to the episcopate of the Anglican Communion worldwide.\textsuperscript{75} African-American cultural critic and religious intellectual Michael Eric Dyson called this significant moment in world history, “a special period of recognition of the abilities of African-Americans.”\textsuperscript{76} Forbes was chosen from a list of nearly 500 names to pastor the majority White, liberal-Protestant, middle-class congregation in upper Manhattan. This appointment proved to be what African-American cultural philosopher Cornel West called “a delicious experiment in contemporary American Christianity.”\textsuperscript{77} Known as the citadel of American evangelical liberalism, with Forbes now appointed as pastor, Riverside’s liberalism was tried and tested as never before.

Erected in 1930 through the benevolence of millionaire philanthropist John D. Rockefeller and the contributions of the members of the Park Avenue Baptist Church, Riverside Church has been long known in American Christianity as a congregation on the cutting edge of progressive social ministry. Though well known locally for its progressive social outreach, with regards to its unique position in American cultural and religious life, the \textit{New York Times} called Riverside “a stronghold of activism and political debate” and cited it as being highly “influential

\textsuperscript{75} Michael Eric Dyson, “Improvisation: James Forbes at Riverside,” in \textit{Reflecting Black: African American Cultural Criticism} (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993), 274.  
\textsuperscript{76} Ibid.  
on the nation’s religious and political landscapes.”78 Riverside Church took stances in opposition to the Vietnam War; apartheid in South Africa; vocalizing dissent against international terrorism; and advocating for affordable housing, employment and national health care reform, among other social issues.79

Within American cultural life, the congregation has historically served as a leading advocate for the rights of homosexuals, bisexuals and transgendered persons. Riverside became the cradle of perhaps the most divisive American theological debate of the modern era in 1922, largely through a sermon preached by the congregation’s first pastor, the Reverend Harry Emerson Fosdick. Fosdick’s sermon, “Shall the Fundamentalists Win?” became the touchstone in the unceasing cultural and theological debate known as the Fundamentalist-Modernist controversy. This debate drove a sharp ideological wedge between the memberships of mainline American Protestant Christianity at nearly every level.80 As time evolved, Riverside continued to take theological stances on a host of other controversial social and political issues including same-sex unions, Christian pacifism and racism. Under Forbes’ pastoral administration, continuing the traditions of his predecessors, Riverside continued to stand against poverty; to advocate for the humanization of all people; to oppose racism in all of its forms; to advocate for environmental justice; and to vocalize dissent against the problematic ideologies of materialism and militarism.81 Given the congregation’s national prominence, resources and the

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79 For additional information on Riverside Church, please see Peter Paris’ The History of Riverside Church in the City of New York. New York: New York University Press, 2004.
81 Forbes discusses his personal involvement in the aforementioned issues in his work, Whose Gospel.
historical trajectory of its social ministry, the pastorate of Riverside provided Forbes with a national platform for his evolving, progressive Pentecostal theology to find fuller expression. After eighteen years as the congregation’s pastor, Forbes stepped down from his role as Senior Minister in 2007. Upon his resignation, Forbes went on to establish the Healing of the Nations Foundation, also in New York City. Under the auspices of this new organization, continuing to draw upon themes from his charismatic origins, such as healing, revival and spiritual renewal, Forbes sought to participate in the instigation of the healing and spiritual revitalization of America. Upon completion of his tenure as pastor of Riverside in 2007, Forbes also returned to the faculty of Union Seminary as the Harry Emerson Fosdick Distinguished Professor where he remains until this day.

In a 2000 interview with Christian journalist Bill Turpie, Forbes was queried about his effectiveness in the pulpit. When asked about the “remarkable sort of confluence of moments” that brought him to Riverside, Forbes cited his nurturing in a Pentecostal community; his ministry within this tradition for nearly 30 years; his education within liberal protestant seminaries; and his teaching within liberal protestant seminaries as a theological educator. Forbes said of his journey:

My belief is that God prepares us for whatever our witness is supposed to be by the contacts and relationships and the situations of service through which we have passed. So I am, as it were, a product of all those places and all those influences, and I bring that together hoping that the Holy Spirit can focus it and use it for the advancement of the work of the Lord.

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82 For additional information on the significance of Forbes’ ministry within the life of Riverside Church, please see Peter Paris’ The History of Riverside Church in the City of New York. New York: New York University Press, 2004.
83 Please see the mission statement for the Healing of the Nations foundation: http://www.healingofthenations.com/index.shtml
85 Ibid.
Understanding his own vocational and theological trajectory as being guided by the providential care of God, Forbes reflected upon this journey using explicitly pneumatological language. Not only would this language of the Spirit be central in his continuing work as public theologian, but the theology of the Spirit that he inherited from his Black Pentecostal forbearers provided him a critical base for his evolving theological and social understanding. Forbes’ entire public ministry can be interpreted as critiquing, broadening and re-envisioning his formative Pentecostal theology. In invoking the language of the Spirit and in being grounded and undergirded by a distinctive theology of the Spirit, Forbes cherished the religious faith he received within the community in which he was inubated.

4.6 Conceptions of the Tradition

Though several of Forbes’ commentators have noted his background within the African-American Pentecostal tradition, noting that his father was a Pentecostal bishop, that Forbes’ first ordination was within the UHCA, and that his preaching style was informed by his charismatic origins, few have dared to probe the significance of his theological formation within this highly distinctive tradition. Neither have they examined the ways in which his adult theological understanding remained informed by the tradition in which he was reared. Many of Forbes’ critics dismiss the charismatic nature of his formative religious experience as “fundamentalist, conservative or evangelical.” These commentators often overlook the particularities and peculiarities of Pentecostalism upon Forbes’ moral and spiritual development, simply labeling his formative religious experience as common to all of African American Protestant Christianity. Any serious attempt to understand Forbes as a religious intellectual, within and outside of the church, must first come to
terms with his formative development within the Black Pentecostal church. For it was in this tradition that Forbes’ theological consciousness was formed and it was through lenses and frameworks bequeathed to him by this tradition that Forbes carried out his public vocation of compassion and liberation.

While Forbes critics have neglected the impact of his Holiness and Pentecostal moorings upon his religious consciousness, in Forbes’ own writings and reflections, he comments extensively on his holiness and Pentecostal upbringing. For Forbes, the virtues and limits of his Pentecostal heritage had everything to do with the type of religious thinker that he became. And while Forbes continued to extol the virtues of this tradition, he also had much to say about the tradition’s limits upon his development. Forbes envisioned his notion of “progressive Pentecostalism” as an alternative vision for modeling his Pentecostal theology and spirituality both within and outside of the tradition.

In his 1989 interview with Sojourners Magazine, Forbes commented on the continuing influence of his formative Pentecostal tradition upon his personal life and ministry. Forbes confessed:

My Pentecostal background has given me a kind of focus on personal response to the challenge of faith. To be Pentecostal means that you have to give evidence that you are willing to let the Holy Spirit come into your life, seize the nerve centers of [your] consent, and provide guidance for your life, both your life of worship and your life in the work-a-day world. The Pentecostal emphasis on faith that makes a difference in daily life is very strong with me.

Also the issue of empowerment is very central to my understanding of ministry. The Holy Spirit empowers us to bear witness to that which we have heard in the gospel. I continue to feel that as a very special part of the way I think and respond to life’s challenges.\(^{86}\)

For Forbes, the Pentecostal emphasis upon life in the Spirit was central to the way in which he proceeded into both Christian and public service. In large measure, Forbes’ evolving understanding of the Spirit provided him with an alternative epistemological framework for discerning the ways in which God is present and active within the life of the believer, the church and world.

In commenting upon what was perhaps the single most restrictive element of his theological inheritance, Forbes stated:

Well, when I went home to work in my father’s church [after leaving seminary], I discovered that the Pentecostal tradition as I had been nurtured in had a problem with me. And the problem was that I, for all my understanding of the Spirit, did not speak in tongues. I had never spoken in tongues and I was pastoring. They said, “Well, he’s pastor because his dad is the bishop and gave him a church. But how can he help us get the blessing when he doesn’t have the blessing himself?” That experience [of being stigmatized] has more to do with who I have become than anything else. That was getting me ready for my ministry because religious folks do that all the time. They go around judging other people by their standards and are not prepared to believe that people have to define what their relationship is with God. That was God’s way of preparing me for an ecumenical mission, an interfaith mission.

The ostracism and marginalization that Forbes encountered “being in a community that dared to question [his] authenticity and integrity, because [he] did not bear the same signs of religious experience that they had,” had a very significant impact upon Forbes’ future career. Forbes dedicated the balance of his theological career to broadening the church’s understanding of the Spirit and providing ministry and encouragement to persons marginalized by communities that sought to define their relationships with God.

The theological narrowness of Forbes’ community, along with his evolving

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universalist and liberationist sensibilities, simultaneously goaded him into further articulating and defining his own “Progressive Pentecostal” vision. In a 1977 article, “Shall We Call This Dream Progressive Pentecostalism?” published in *Spirit: A Journal of Issues Incident to Black Pentecostalism*, Forbes set forth the five pillars of his vision for a more progressive modality of Pentecostal theological praxis.

According to Forbes:

1. This dream [of progressive Pentecostalism] calls us to progress beyond institutional or denominational narrowness and isolation. The task to which we are called is bigger than any one group can handle singlehandedly.

2. This dream calls us to progress beyond the belief that the Holy Ghost only manifests Himself in one or two ways, or only in supernatural ways. Every aspect of human and divine activity which brings us closer to the realization of the Kingdom of God is the concern of the Holy Ghost.

3. This dream calls us to progress beyond the belief that the Holy Ghost is only at work in our churches or only in the organized church.

4. This dream calls us to progress beyond the view that the Holy Ghost is only concerned about the souls of individuals, or “spiritual things” in a narrow sense of the word. Anything which affects our attainment of abundant life and liberation is a spiritual matter and on the Holy Ghost’s agenda.

5. This dream calls us to affirm our spiritual experiences of the past, but then to progress beyond the belief that the Holy Spirit is limited to traditional patterns of the past.  

Having carefully articulated his vision for a broadened and more holistic Pentecostal spirituality, Forbes sought to expand the pneumatological understanding of those within and outside his tradition. In fact, Forbes understood his desire to expand the wider public’s understanding of the Spirit as a major component of his professional theological vocation. Upon delineating the tenets of his progressive Pentecostal theological vision, in addition to his work within the church, Forbes said the

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following about his broadened vocational understanding:

I began to sense a special call to respond to invitations received from non-Pentecostal groups, by sharing this vision of progressive Pentecostalism. There is now an openness and in many places an intense desire to know more about the work of the Holy Spirit. Such a time as this requires varied expressions bearing witness to the same reality…I have found my place and have experienced much satisfaction in interpreting some of the symbols and practices associated with the [Pentecostal] movement. To help people experience freedom to be themselves, to be more open to new dimensions of the Spirit in their lives, and even find greater appreciation for the way the Spirit was already at work in them.  

In being intentional in moving beyond his tradition and in his efforts of sharing his progressive Pentecostal vision, Forbes emerged as a leading American ecumenist and interfaith missionary. Believing that the Spirit’s agenda was much broader than any one religious tradition could encapsulate, Forbes carried his progressive Pentecostal vision of Holy Spirit encouragement throughout the nation and the world.

4.7 Pneumatology

In seeking to re-articulate his broadened pneumatological understanding, Forbes steered clear of the narrowly focused, tongues-centered understanding of the Spirit that he encountered in certain segments of his Pentecostal background. Building upon his progressive Pentecostal vision, Forbes’ entire theological program was established upon his cosmic understanding of the Holy Spirit. Believing that “[e]very aspect of human and divine activity which brings [the creation] closer to the realization of the Kingdom of God is the concern of the Holy Ghost” and that “[a]nything which affects [humanity’s] attainment of abundant life and liberation is a spiritual matter and on the Holy Ghost’s agenda,” Forbes sought to broaden the pneumatological understanding of his native Pentecostal tradition, and that of the

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91 James A. Forbes Jr., “Shall We Call This Dream Progressive Pentecostalism?,” 14.
larger ecumenical church as well. In doing so, he demonstrated the efficaciousness of pneumatological discourse for both interfaith and public dialogue.

One of the most distinctive features of Forbes’ theology of the Spirit is his gradualist or process understanding of the anointing. First, his theology of the Spirit can be understood as an alternative theological response to the initial evidence doctrine so characteristic of much of North American Pentecostal theology. Forbes declared that it was “the freedom of the Spirit to manifest [God’s] presence as [God] wills and to distribute gifts as [God] chooses.”92 Because of the varying modalities of the Spirit’s manifestation within the life of the believer, Forbes began his reflections on the Spirit by substituting the privileged Lukan Pentecost narrative with that of the anointing of Jesus at his baptism in the Jordan River as recorded by the synoptic writers.93

Defining the anointing of the Spirit as “that process by which one comes to a fundamental awareness of God’s appointment, empowerment, and guidance for the vocation to which we are called as the body of Christ,” Forbes maintained that “it is [this] process that leads us to yield fully to the revealed will of God. Out of a sense of divine power working within us, we are made ready to go forth to be about the task of ministry.”94 Forbes chose the language of anointing to refer to the process by which the believer was spiritually empowered. However, he remained aware that there were many names by which this process of divine empowerment has been called. According to Forbes:

[There are several terms that refer to such a religious experience: “baptism

93 These accounts can be found in Matthew 3:13-17; Mark 1:9-11; and Luke 3:21-22.
94 Ibid., 37.
of/with/in/by the Holy Spirit,” “filled with the Holy Spirit,” “endued with power,” and Holy Spirit poured out upon us.” All these terms speak of the process by which believers are divinely empowered for the work of the kingdom. The anointing may be viewed as just another term in the series of phrases, or it may be broadly conceived so as to include aspects more specifically indicated by other terms.\textsuperscript{95}

This experience of the Spirit, which Forbes labeled as the anointing, is “marked by the awakening qualities and an addition of divinely inspired gifts such as tongues, prophecy, and gifts of healing, etc. This experience is God’s gift of power and therefore is to be received when, where and in what manner God chooses to send it.”\textsuperscript{96}

It then followed that for Forbes, “empowerment is that process whereby persons and their communities are set free and endowed with the capacity to makes choices about their own existence and to move toward the goals they have chosen in spite of the restraining forces, within and without.”\textsuperscript{97} In Forbes understanding, the Spirit’s work of empowerment is both personal and radically communal. We see in Forbes’ emphasis on empowerment, liberation and the sovereignty of the Spirit a very different accent than we find in other traditions of Pentecostalism within North America, thus Forbes was able to construct a theology of the Holy Spirit as a Pentecostal without regarding tongues as the center of the Pentecostal experience. This ability would serve Forbes well in the broader theological conversations in which he would be engaged.

4.8 Theology of Religions

In his opening remarks given before the Interfaith Alliance’s Walter Cronkite Faith and Freedom Awards in 2004, Forbes disclosed the origins of his deep-seated

\textsuperscript{95} James A. Forbes Jr., \textit{The Holy Spirit and Preaching}, 44.
\textsuperscript{96} Forbes, “A Pentecostal Approach to Empowerment for Black Liberation,” 11.
\textsuperscript{97} Ibid., 13.
interest in interfaith exchange. He confessed:

Somehow interfaith has been a part of my heritage from my parents. My father at Shaw University would come home and explain how much he learned from Rabbi Friedman, who was his teacher there, and how he had such a close relationship that Rabbi Friedman would lend him some special books that were dear to his heart and illuminating to my father’s understanding. So that, although I was a Pentecostal brother from the deep South, something of my father’s openness to other streams of faith made an impression on me.

And my mother, when dying from cancer, would invite me in to pray, she would say, “Pray son.” Then she would laugh and say, “But you should know you are not the only one praying for me.” She said, “When the Catholic priest comes through, I am grabbing onto his beads, and when the Rabbi comes through, I grab his prayer shawl because I think maybe the Lord just might hear any one of them equally as well as you.” There is something about interfaith experience that has been a long time in my heart.  

Becoming interested in non-Christian faith traditions in his early adolescence, prefiguring his work in interfaith relations and preparing him for it, Forbes opened himself to listening for God in a variety of religious contexts. Forbes eventually came to the place where he could say:

It is clear to me that the richness of God’s revelation is not limited to one system of belief. Therefore I am interested in being challenged and inspired by others. But such openness to other faith traditions is no substitute for a deep devotion to the Christian tradition in which I find the truth of life and the way of salvation through Jesus Christ. Contrary to some of my co-religionists, the more open I am to the Spirit of Love, made known through Jesus Christ, the more I am to such love and truth genuinely shared from those who pray from different places or give another name to the transcendent reality I call God.

This openness to discovering the truth of God in other religious traditions served Forbes well as he ventured ever more deeply into a vocation of radical interfaith

cooperation. This openness also provided Forbes with a grammar for articulating the ways in which he perceived the Spirit of God at work in various religious traditions.

Forbes remained engaged in and encouraging of interfaith dialogue throughout the duration of his public ministerial career, and he did so from a decidedly Christian perspective. Forbes understood interfaith cooperation as “God’s radical call to inclusion,”¹⁰⁰ and in the process of unfettered interfaith exchange, the Holy Spirit brought persons from differing faith perspectives into the unity for which Christ prayed for his disciples. According to Forbes:

Usually when I go to interfaith services, I say, I expect something unusual to happen here, and I do this from a Christian perspective because Jesus’ last will and testament was: Lord, make them one. So that now that we are together across these lines of faith, I’d like to think that the Spirit’s going to show up. Because Jesus wanted to make us one, make us all one group of Christians, make us all one family of humankind. So my understanding of God as revealed through Jesus Christ is that God delights in and blesses situations where we come together with integrity…when people are willing to get real and deal with the structures that will facilitate community or destroy if-make it real like that – my experience is that the Holy Spirit’s going to bring some joy, drop some joy. But that joy is not going to come until after the pain of discovering how hard it is to be real in a world that’s [not] made of tinsel.¹⁰¹

Forbes, clearly inspired by his grounding within the Christian tradition, saw the Spirit of God as the principle of unity not just between Christians, but also between Christians and people of faith from other traditions. It was the Spirit who provided the dialogue participants with solidarity and joy as they came together for the sake of facilitating human community.

Understanding himself as a “radical relationist with an uncompromising

commitment to all people of all faith traditions,“102 and operating from his resolutely Christian perspective, Forbes maintained that “strengthening [the] Christian witness while also encouraging [his] co-religionists of other traditions [would] increase understanding, respect and tolerance…[and in the process] strengthen the character of [the] nation.”103 Furthermore, Forbes spoke in a very affirming manner about the “spiritual reserve” in every religious tradition out of which individuals could draw strength during seasons of distress and grief. In his work in interfaith relations, Forbes remained clear that the strength that was offered through Christ was available to all. Forbes noted:

I encourage “people to draw from the faith in which they are nourished, whether Hindu or Buddhist or Christian. “If your faith has given you strength in your hours of peril, then draw from it.” I also say, “Find strength in your own faith tradition or else I’m going to challenge you to see what Jesus Christ has done for you.” But that’s only after I ask them to honor their own faith and see if it ministers to their needs.104

In the final analysis, Forbes, though deeply committed to interfaith participation, continued to offer Jesus Christ as both “the truth of life and the way of salvation.”105

Perhaps one of the most intriguing aspects of Forbes’ theology of religions is his vision of a coming interfaith spiritual awakening. Reading Acts 2:17, “and I will pour out of my Spirit upon all flesh” as “a pluralistic text for a pluralistic age,” and drawing upon both his Pentecostal pneumatological and eschatological sensibilities, Forbes forcefully contended:

God is spiritually revitalizing America, but not just Christianity. I believe the Spirit is calling the nation – Jews, Christians, Catholics, Protestants,

102 Ibid.
104 Ibid.
Muslims, Hindus, Buddhists - to stir up the spiritual values at the center of faith so that people will not be shallow in their response to these difficult days.  

Believing that he had been commissioned by God to participate in this end-time outpouring of the Spirit, Forbes said: “I’ve been feeling that my life has no other major purpose than [that of] the spiritual revitalization of the nation. And I’ve been talking [about] this a long time. Way back in 1984, God said [to me], “This is what’s got to happen. We [have] got to have [a] spiritual revitalization wherever you go. That’s what you are working on.” Given the platform that both his preaching gifts and the pastorate of Riverside had afforded him, Forbes was able to travel throughout the nation proclaiming the good news of the coming interfaith revival.

Armed with the belief that America had “backslidden from liberation consciousness,” Forbes argued that only a revival of values would be able to save the nation from destruction. Forbes believed that the country’s religious institutions were central in the renewal of these values. Engaging the language of his formative tradition, Forbes said: “It’s altar call time for the United States and…the country faces a crossroad: it will venture further down a path laden with greed, pride, imperialistic domination or embrace a sense of truth, of sacrifice, the ideas of justice, equality and environmental responsibility.” For Forbes, “every religious person – Christian, Jew, Lutheran, Sikh, Buddhist, Hindu, whatever – everybody would need…to have a vision of what the world looks like from a perspective of faith, and

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106 Ibid.
need…to work toward the achievement of that end.”\textsuperscript{109} Given his cosmic pneumatological vision, Forbes attributed this renewal of justice consciousness to the work of the Holy Spirit.

4.9 \textbf{Theological Anthropology}

Undergirding Forbes’ public and liberationist theologies was a critical and robust theological anthropology. Growing out of his own experience of racism and segregation within the American South, and his broadened theology of the Spirit, Forbes, for the duration of his public ministerial career, sought to affirm the worth, humanity and dignity of all persons. Seeing all of humanity individually as gifts of God, Forbes believed that:

\begin{quote}
God celebrates the uniqueness of each one of us and calls us to discover the path of our own fulfillment in ways characterized by the integrity of our being…God bends us from where we are and lifts us up in the service of others. God forgives us when we fail to be faithful to who we are, and then God rejoices in our freedom to be who we are and encourages the community to celebrate with all people the integrity of their being. And if the beings are significantly different, then God’s glory is in the diversity of creation itself.\textsuperscript{110}
\end{quote}

Forbes understood all persons as gifts of God, given the imperfect and fallen nature of the world. Forbes also realized that “Blacks, women, gays, grays and the poor cry out for a time when their lot will be marked by the glorious liberty of the kingdom.”\textsuperscript{111} With this in mind, he spent much of his ministerial energies attempting to make life more human for those who were socially oppressed. Realizing how deeply entrenched both religious and social attitudes could be around the issues of homosexuality, Forbes spent much of his writing and public speaking on the topic of


theological anthropology and the full humanization of gay, lesbian, bisexual, and queer persons.112

Forbes approached the issue of humanization of the “same-gender loving community”113 from his deep liberationist orientation. This was also informed by his theology of creation, his evolving pneumatology and as a matter of practical ecclesial concern. According to Forbes, “[o]ut of my Black liberationist struggle, I have come to wonder how to frame this issue so that it becomes a part of a broader liberation struggle and I think it has.”114 Confessing that “[i]t is admittedly difficult to use the bible in defense of homosexuality”,115 Forbes later admitted that though, “[t]he movement [for gay rights] is taking its place alongside other liberationist causes…there are elements and dynamics of the movement that are still evolving, and many of us have not worked through our basic solidarity with it to a more sophisticated theological understanding. It is much more ideological solidarity.”116

Even though Forbes’ position on the issue would be more ideologically inspired, as a Christian minister and theologian, Forbes maintained that this issue could not be ignored. Seeing the issue of homosexuality as a possible threat to the unity of the ecumenical church, Forbes asserted:

We [the church] need to talk about these things. It is not only appropriate to do so, but urgent, desperately urgent that we talk together about these things. For issues of sexuality are turning out to be a spiritual fault line threatening the stability and the unity of the church. These issues are fragmenting families, polarizing communities, and also affecting policies that claim to

113 Please see Yvette Flunder’s Where the Edge Gathers: Building a Community of Radical Inclusion (Cleveland, OH: Pilgrim Press, 2005).
protect the liberties of all of the citizens of our democracy. These problems are with us, and, though we may have made some advances, now the general climate in society is filled with fear, anxiety, and confusion.117

To keep the church from further fragmentation over the issue of human sexuality, Forbes suggested that the church enter into an extensive period of conclave, dialogue and discernment.

It is within this dynamic rhythm of discernment and dialogue prescribed by Forbes that the contours of his broad vision of the Spirit were most clearly revealed. Inspired by the “paraclete sayings” in the Gospel of St. John concerning the power of the Holy Spirit following the completion of Jesus’ earthly ministry, Forbes provided an alternative angle for understanding the Spirit’s role in helping the church discern these matters. In his interpretation, Forbes wrote that the, “Spirit will come into your heart, and the Spirit will repeat everything that [Jesus Christ has]… said and then elucidate it in light of the developments in [our] time, so that in a contemporary setting [we] will know what it means to be a Christian and how [we] might apply Christian values to the difficult problems that we face under [these] new circumstances.”118 Forbes went on to say:

The task of the church is to understand that Jesus didn’t answer it all, and many of the things that had been said in the good old days, Jesus updated even in his time. You are not a violator of the gospel. Your Lord was the translator, transformer and reviser so that we could be revised to the heart of God’s original intention. Every culture just does the best it can. But no culture can piggyback completely on the wisdom of the past.119

For Forbes, it was excedingly crucial for every generation to receive a fresh revelation of the Word of God and to have hearts and minds illuminated by God’s

118 Ibid., 6.
119 Ibid., 7.
Believing that the church was in need of more light from the Spirit with regards to questions regarding human sexuality, Forbes promoted the notion of pneumatological epistemology as a means for the church to move forward. By the church assuming a posture of pneumatological epistemology, which Forbes defined as a “Spirit-directed way of knowing that is always self-critical and suspicious of personal benefits,” the church would remain open to God’s continuing revelation within contemporary culture. In stressing the importance of being open to the Spirit’s leading and the discernment of new truth, Forbes stated:

This is your time and my time, and Jesus expects us to open our hearts to the Spirit and raise some difficult questions before the Spirit. We need more light from the Spirit on sexuality. Some things are different now. I can’t do it by myself. I need the conservatives and the liberals, the old-timers and the newcomers. I need all of us to present these issues to the Spirit. Maybe some of you think you know the answers already, but the consensus is not there until your answers are clear enough that you can share it with others and bring us along in dialogue.

In advocating for more openness to the continuing revelation of the Spirit in the church, Forbes drew from the eschatological and pneumatological sensibilities forged within his Pentecostal and African American church traditions, although he was not limited by them.

### 4.10 Theology of Preaching

Forbes developed a theology of preaching informed by his background within Black Holiness Pentecostalism in seeking “to address the contemporary challenges of pluralism, paradigm shifts growing out of technological change and the new science,

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122 Ibid.
[as well as] polarization along lines of social, economic and political inequity." Understanding the challenge of 21st century preaching as precisely the challenge of "speaking in tongues," Forbes argued that prophetic proclamation would consist of at least three moments. This first moment of prophetic proclamation, which Forbes called "the homiletic challenge," involved preachers "trusting the Spirit to speak to and through" them. The second moment, the "hermeneutic challenge," dealt with the preacher’s role in "the interpretation of tongues" of both the faith and the modern world. The third and final moment in Forbes’ theology was what he called "prophetic enactment." For Forbes, this moment is precipitated by the preacher "signing on to the justice of the gospel." Forbes operated out of this framework of "preaching as speaking in tongues" for the duration of his public theological career and found his way into a vast number of ecumenical, interfaith and public theological conversations.

Understanding his preaching ministry as “bearing witness to the resurrecting power of God, which extends itself into the regions of death, so that the new life in Christ breaks forth in all dimensions of the created order,” Forbes’ theology of preaching was grounded in a robust theology of life, a high Christology and his progressive Pentecostal pneumatology. Although Forbes’ construction was well grounded within Christian theology, he refused to shun the responsibility of engaging in a critical reading of the world, which for Forbes was imperative for prophetic preaching. According to him: “[t]o call people out of the ways of the world places the responsibility upon the preacher to know what the world is like, what its trends

124 Ibid.
125 James A. Forbes Jr., The Holy Spirit and Preaching, 56.
are, how it commands allegiance from its subjects, how tenaciously it holds them hostage, how deeply etched are its mandates.”

In reading the world, far more than mere proof-texting, the preacher “is called upon to deal with a multiplicity of disciplines and knowledge areas. Politics, agriculture, business, law, geography, economics and psychology are [all] intertwined in ... broadening the horizons of interest and general understandings.” Forbes also noted that, “[i]t is not enough to be a student of the book; there are many books which need to be read if [the preacher] is to achieve competence” in engaging the harsh realities of the varying contexts of life.

Moreover, Forbes gave a very prominent place to social and cultural analysis in his theology of preaching. Given his robust pneumatology and Pentecostal origins, Forbes emphasized the need of the Spirit for delivering the life-giving word within an increasingly secular age. According to Forbes:

> Given the reality of a culture that has lost contact with the living Spirit of the one who announced to us the vision of the kingdom in the first place, we need preaching that is more than aesthetically delightful. Mere ranting and raving and excitation from some spirited pastor will not suffice. We need some sense of the Spirit accompanied by power sufficient to interrupt a decline in the sense of the reality of God.

He went on to say:

> reliance upon the Spirit...springs from our recognition that uncommon vision and vitality are essential to the [kind of preaching] tasks we [must] undertake. For all our psychological insight we have not solved the problem of how to promote freedom so that people will rise above inordinate self-regard and promote the well-being of their neighbors. And even if such a miracle discovery were made, would we be able to offer a blue print for the cosmic harmony among all things? For all our positive virtues we need a coordinator

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127 Ibid., 51.
128 Ibid., 52.
of more comprehensive scope and power. This is why the Spirit is so central.\textsuperscript{130}

For Forbes, without the aid of the Spirit, prophetic proclamation was not possible. Forbes spent his time engaging in this mode of prophetic discourse, as well as both broadening and sharing the unique endowment of the Spirit he first experienced in his Pentecostal youth.

As the leading theologian from the UHCA, Forbes inspired a generation of younger people within his tradition. Though there was a growing tradition of formal theological education within his denomination, Forbes’ story was exemplary in his pursuit of theological education beyond the Master’s level; his work as a professional theologian in the academy; his ecumenical and interfaith activism; and his pastorate of one of the premier liberal, Protestant congregations in North America. All of these achievements were marked by his continuing commitment to the black Pentecostal faith of his youth. One of the young people inspired by Forbes during his tenure as senior pastor of St. John’s Holy Church in Richmond, is the subject of the chapter that follows. It is evident that in his life, work, and ecumenical ministry, Forbes’ clarion call for a “progressive Pentecostalism” was heard and taken up by those who were so powerfully influenced by his ministry, including “the preacher,” Dr. William Clair Turner, Jr.

\textsuperscript{130} James A. Forbes Jr., “Preaching in the Contemporary World,” 51.
Chapter Five

The Preacher: William Turner as the Systematic Interpreter

5.1 Turner As Theologian: The Constructive-Homiletic

In the introductory remarks to an unpublished manuscript concerning the neglect of the Holy Spirit in modern black theology entitled *Lord, Let The Holy Ghost Come On Down: Pneumatology and Black Liberation Theology*, African-American pastor and theologian William Clair Turner Jr., sought to account for the occasion that prompted the writing of his manuscript. According to Turner,

The catalyzing moment for this study came in the summer of 1993 when I was invited to deliver lectures on the Holy Spirit at the prestigious Hampton Ministers’ Conference. Known within black church circles as “the conference no minister wants to miss,” [the conference] brings together in one place perhaps the largest gathering of African-American church persons. Clergy, scholars, and laypersons gather for a time of study, worship and refreshment. Preaching is uncommonly good, and lectures have a way of turning into preaching before they are completed. More than all else, one is expected to communicate the content of the academy in the language of the people. This was the ideal moment to take the substance of what I had been doing in pneumatology and black church studies and form it into a synthesis. On the one hand, it would satisfy a longing within me to make the connection; on the other hand, it would do what I perceived to be missing in the scholarly production known as black [theology].¹

Presenting a trilogy of lectures under the theme “The Holy Spirit: Giver of Life, Love, and Liberty,” Turner, along with COGIC theological-ethicist Robert Michael Franklin, were the only two Pentecostals scholars to serve as principal lecturers during the massive ecumenical gathering.

And though Turner seized this occasion to promote his on-going research on the person, work and experience of the Holy Spirit within African-American

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Christian thought, Turner later admitted that the occasion for him proved to be one filled with both great excitement and much trepidation. According to Turner:

I distinctly recall commenting that I did not think it wise to “withhold what I brought.” In my opinion, there were countless men and women who could do a superb job as preachers- informing, inspiring, and taking the people to heights of worship and ecstasy. I did not believe though there were nearly so many persons who could explore tedious issues of pneumatology, probe the language that had to be considered, and yet make an offering the people could embrace. So I took the challenge head-on, realizing I might run the risk of alienating some and appearing pedantic to others. 2

It was during this conference that Turner, a theologian and homiletics professor from Duke University, emerged upon the Black ecumenical scene as an critical interpreter of the African-American religious experience and did so both as a son of the UHCA and an astute interpreter of his tradition’s theology and spirituality. To understand the distinctive mode of Turner’s theological thought, offered both at Hampton and throughout his academic and pastoral career, one must take seriously the systematic mode in which he envisions the task of Christian theology.

In his keynote plenary address given before the Joint College of African-American Pentecostal Bishops in 2005 entitled, Crossing Boundaries: Being Christian in the 21st Century, Turner disclosed the distinctive logic both controlling and undergirding his theological program. In commenting upon the way he conceives of and executes the theological task in general, and his specific work in pneumatology, Turner said to the congress of Pentecostal bishops: “[t]he [critical] issue [in my work as a Christian theologian] is how to speak consistently about God, the human creature, and the world.” 3

2 Ibid.
his theological thinking, Turner went on to ask, “What must be said [about God] at one point [in the doing of theology] so that there is not contradiction at other [doctrinal] points?” In raising this matter as the central question undergirding his theological vision, Turner disclosed the orderly, rational and coherent nature of his theological project. Situating his theological approach within the distinctive branch of Christian theology known as systematic theology, Turner provided a unique perspective on African-American Christian thought in general and African-American Pentecostalism in particular. Seeing systematic theology as perhaps the best way forward, Turner said of this branch of theology: “systematic theology is essential for ensuring that whatever is said [about God] in one matter is consistent with what else must be said." Turner goes on to say, "[i]n addition, [systematic theology] assists one in speaking in a way that is coherent with other [forms of] knowledge, supplying a critique of them where necessary.” For Turner, nowhere would his concern for a systematic theology be more readily apparent than in his treatment of the doctrine of the Holy Spirit.

Seeing the doctrine of the Spirit as crucial for all human speech about the triune God, and further revealing the systematic orientation of his theology, Turner raised the matter with reference to the Spirit by asking:

How do we speak of the Spirit in a manner that is consistent with what we confess about God who creates and acts to save the world? How do we adjudicate claims regarding the Spirit if there is no consistency with what is revealed in the Son Jesus Christ our Lord. Pneumatology is the quest for this consistency. As such, it is a critical discipline that measures our discourse and practices. We have no account of God in creation, incarnation, resurrection, or salvation that is without the Spirit. Because our experience of God is by the Spirit, we can helpfully reverse the taxis, with pneumatology as the focus.

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4 Ibid.
By the Spirit Christ dwells in our hearts, and we are filled with fullness of God.⁶

In reversing the more commonly ascribed trinitarian construction of Father-Son-Spirit and reversing the taxis to that of Spirit-Son-Father, Turner not only discloses the distinctively trinitarian nature of his theological thinking, but he also discloses his point of entry into the broader theological conversation as a Black Pentecostal systematic theologian. Believing that humanity's experience of God is precisely by the Spirit, Turner continued his mode of systematic theological reflection born of the church's experience of God by the Holy Spirit.

And while Turner’s theological program remained robustly trinitarian and rigorously systematic, because of the interpersonal and intimate nature of his work as a pastor, and his significant preaching vocation, his theological scope attended to both his ministry and his scholarship. Turner understood himself as a systematic theologian and saw systematic theology as a most fruitful and constructive approach to doing Christian theology. And yet, in a moment of brutal honesty and pastoral sensitivity, Turner admitted that while “the creedal, dogmatic, and systematic productions are required [in the doing of Christian theology]…they cannot replace the first order spirituality located in the contemporary praxis of ongoing reflection, where the pulpit and preacher are focal.”⁷ Seeing both the pulpit and the preacher as primary sites for serious theological engagement within the community of faith, Turner regards the work of Christian preaching, in his own words as “intensely theological.” Understanding himself as a “homiletical theologian” who envisions the work of preaching as “intensely theological,” Turner offers serious theological

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justification for the sermon itself as primary theological speech and for conceiving of Christian preaching itself as a critical mode of theological praxis. Because within Turner’s community of origin, preaching was required to “wrestle with the present reality of God among the people” and was required to do so precisely “in the language of the people.” As a homiletical theologian engaged in ministry within such a community, Turner regarded the sermon itself as its own theological text and the practice of preaching as his critical theological methodology. While remaining systematic in his theological orientation, Turner forcefully defended the preaching event as his preferred mode of theological engagement and application.

With regards to Turner’s defense of the sermon as his primary and preferred mode of theological engagement, Turner explained:

The value of preaching for doing [theology] is in how it forces extended excursions into concrete reality, when it is done well. This is particularly the case in those communities where the preacher is not afforded the luxury of preaching a word that does not connect with the people, and where the response is immediate and clear. Where dullness is not permitted, the pressure on the preacher is to make it ‘plain’. Unlike other forms of discourse, the sense in such communities is that no preaching has occurred unless hearts have been touched and the hearers have been moved.

Turner also went on to say of the inherently theological value of preaching:

Preaching affords the unsurpassed privilege of probing the thickness of mystery and offers an invitation into the imaginary world of the text. Imaginary is not to be mistaken here for false or untrue. Rather, it is the world of images by which mystery is unfolded and rendered accessible. From the world of images, knowledge that is possessed is appropriated for the journey, the voyage into the realm of truth that may have no other mode

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8 Ibid., 6.
9 Ibid., 5-6.
10 Ibid., 7.
of transport into the world of the people. Accordingly, preaching compels a handling of the material of life, and so affords a word that matters. 11

For Turner, the sermon provides an unsurpassed occasion for “doing theology in the crucible of life.” With regards to Turner’s distinct approach to the performed sermon as theological text, church historian David Daniels writes: “Turner offers a challenge to Black theology, Pentecostal theology, and homiletics. As a systematic and pulpit theologian, Turner points toward significant future discussions for each enterprise.” 12

Working as a Pentecostal systematic theologian with a high theological understanding of the preaching event, for Turner it is precisely in the preaching moment that both his theological method and distinctive mode of theological praxis each find their fullest theological expression.

But not only is Turner’s theological orientation and methodology systematic and homiletical, his theological vision is tempered by a realistic understanding of the theologically constructed nature of all human reasoning and speech about God. Being gravely concerned with the ways in which many Christian communities denied the reality of such constructions, Turner forcefully maintained, a theological construction is made whenever the scriptures are interpreted. To do anything more than read the bible is to do theology. But alas, theology is implied in the privileging of the text as scripture and the act of making a selection. And, it must be noted that scripture is never read in a vacuum: one learns its importance and how to give interpretation within a community of faith that has received a tradition of interpretation. Reading and interpreting always are done for some interest and purpose that is related to the experience and need of real people, with concrete and historical existence. Invariably, some thought is given to matters of appropriateness, correctness of interpretation, and relevance. The theological project is underway whether one acknowledges it or not. Hence, the question is not whether one does

11 Ibid., 7.
theology or not; the question is whether one does it with intention and integrity. The first act of intention is to acknowledge what is being done.\textsuperscript{13}

For Turner, in denying the first act of intention and failing to acknowledge the theological construction under development, the integrity of the entire theological project is compromised. For Turner, the problem was not in theological construction in it of itself: “the problem is not that we make theological constructions; the difficulty is acknowledging them for what they are, and admitting that we are engaged in the same process as others.”\textsuperscript{14} In this chapter, Turner is examined as a constructive-homiletic theologian who is systematic in his theological orientation; homiletical in both his method and application; and realistic in his vision of the constructed nature of all theological discourse. These are the root metaphors that best define the complexity of Turner’s theological vision.

5.2 Childhood and Formative Years

On April 26, 1948 in the city of Richmond, Virginia, William Clair Turner Jr., was born the fourth of nine children to Mrs. Ruth C. and Mr. William Clair Turner Sr. His father, William Turner Sr., was a mailroom clerk for the Seaboard Coast Line Railroad Company, headquartered in Richmond, and his mother Ruth was a first grade teacher in the Hanover County Public School System. Though Turner and his family lived in an all-black community on the outskirts of the city, because of his parent’s occupations, in relation to many families within their community, the Turners were financially well established.

Regarding the economic and social significance of Mr. Turner’s employment with the Seaboard Coast Line Railroad Company, according to American historian

\textsuperscript{14} Ibid., 7.
Theodore Kornweibel, author of *Railroads in the African American Experience*, for Black Americans living during the Jim Crow Era, “working for [t]he railroads…in the South [was] the best alternative to escaping two worse fates, either agriculture which often meant sharecropping….or domestic service.” Because of this reality, Kornweibel argues that up to this point, “[t]he railroads were the most important industry that blacks ever worked in. ...[m]ore blacks [worked for railroads] than were steel workers…coalminers [and] loggers... African-Americans participated in railroading…more than any other industry.”

Though Turner’s father did not work in railroad construction, as a porter, butler or lounge car attendant, by virtue of his employment with the company, Turner, Sr. enjoyed the attendant compensation and social capital afforded him by working for the railroad.

As a public school teacher, Mrs. Turner was able to provide her children with an early start in their educational preparation and her position was greatly revered within the black community. Teaching was also one of the more lucrative professions that African-Americans entered, however teaching was not an easy vocation for African Americans in the segregated South:

Most southern schools remained legally segregated, and black schools invariably received less funding and fewer supplies. African-American teachers especially suffered from inadequate materials and funding. Though their communities were eager for schooling, teachers found that money was rarely abundant. Well into the 20th century, black school systems relied on hand-me-down textbooks and used equipment, discarded by their white counterparts. African-American teachers were usually paid significantly less than their white peers and their civil rights were often compromised.

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16 Ibid.

Mrs. Turner’s choice of teaching as a profession was of financial benefit to the Turner family, but it also modeled the pursuit of education as an important goal and honorable vocation, undoubtedly influencing Turner’s decision to pursue his vocation as an engaged academic. Mrs. Turner’s commitment to teaching young black children in the midst of segregation may have also served as a model for Turner’s lifelong quest to merge social justice with his religious activism. And while the Turners did quite well financially, the family’s anchoring in the holiness tradition served as a moral safeguard against materialism and ostentation.

While Turner’s father was not a minister like the other individuals examined within this study, and did not raise his son to enter the ministry as such, as a child Turner desired nothing more than to be like his father. In a sermon delivered years after his father’s death, Turner waxed nostalgic regarding his childhood admiration of his father. According to Turner, “as a young lad, one of my greatest desires was to dress like my father. I couldn’t wait to get out of my bowtie for a long necktie. I used to sneak in his room to try on his shirts. No day was greater than when I could fill out his coat.”18 Being so deeply inspired by his father, in his own way, Turner spent the rest of his life attempting to fill out his father’s shoes. Turner Sr. provided a healthy black male image for his son during the Jim Crow era, a time in which black men were psychologically emasculated and subject to systematic dehumanization. As a deeply spiritual and socially upstanding family man, Turner Sr. provided Turner Jr. with a model of black masculinity that countered prevailing negative sentiments and stereotypes.

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18 William Clair Turner, “Living As Confident Christians” (sermon, Mount Level Missionary Baptist Church, Durham, North Carolina). N.D.
And though William Turner Sr., was known and respected by his family for his gentleness and compassion, he also insisted that his son both recognize and respect his fatherly authority, all in the service of preparing his son for manhood:

At a certain age my father let me know that there couldn’t be but one man in the house. I don’t know whether the conversation was prompted by my size, my scent or my body language. He let me know that the house was his, and even when I was welcome, I was under his roof. I had been gone away to school, and had taken on my ways—some of which were in conflict with how I had been raised. But the rules of the house were the same. We had that understanding, and when I got a house he respected me as a man.19

5.3 Formative Social and Ecclesial Contexts

In his 1992 article entitled “Keep on Pushing,” published in Black Sacred Music: A Journal of Theomusicology, Turner critically analyzes a song from his youth in order to recall the rich spirituality undergirding the so-called Black secular music of his day. In doing so, Turner provides insight into the social world of his childhood home in Richmond, Virginia, a socio-economically diverse, black affirming cosmos in which he came to both cultural and religious consciousness. In reflecting on the song “Keep on Pushing,” recorded by the African American rhythm and blues trio, The Impressions, Turner used the metaphor of “pushing” to describe his passage through the deeply-segregated, yet culturally-affirming context in which he was raised. Turner writes:

The black children of the post-World War II generation - baby boomers – were pushers, perhaps the premier pushers of the century. For...we supplied the people power for the Black Revolution. Sparked by the courage of the preceding generation, we enabled the torch of freedom to send forth its brilliant blaze…our early socialization came within the womb of the black community in the last phases of the Jim Crow era. That womb – that black

affirming world – was our buffer zone against the inimical climate of a larger, more vicious, world.20

In his own words, Turner was fortified by the all-black community of his childhood, although his larger context in the American South was one of deep racism and social stratification. The two primary institutions within this community, the black family and the African American church, helped to create this “buffer” zone for Turner throughout the remainder of his journey and prepared him for his vocation as a pastor and a theologian within the church, the academy, and the broader society.

Within the segregated world of Richmond’s black community, Turner’s gifts and achievements were consistently affirmed, and this community provided both dignity and solidarity to all of its members, acting as an extended and surrogate family. Turner recalls:

It was a black world that was populated by a broad cross section of black people. Preachers, teachers, undertakers, bankers, insurance people, and assorted entrepreneurs lived within the same perimeters as those in the skilled professions, those who did domestic work, and those who just “got over.” Interaction occurred on the streets, in the drugstores, and in the churches to promote a sense of solidarity and mutual reinforcement. Children went from one house to another and ate at the table of a friend’s mother. Indeed a whipping could come from someone else’s parent. Whoever stood out for promise or achievement became the darling of the entire community, causing everyone from that section to swell with pride whenever the favored person’s name was uttered.21

Turner went on to say of Black life in his formative community, “Contrary to the portrait often given, life in this era was not considered bleak or drab. Terms such as “poverty,” “underprivileged,” or “ghetto” were not our choice for self-description. These names were later given by social scientists who became so-called experts on

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21 Ibid., 207.
the “black problem.” It was in such a healthy and vibrant community that Turner learned both to love himself and his broader African-American family. This deepened sense of community that Turner experienced in the Richmond of his youth proved to be fertile ground for his budding intellectual and theological curiosities.

For the Turner family, at the very center of this rich black social world was the church, particularly the UHCA, the formative Pentecostal denomination of his youth where he embraced the teachings of holiness, spiritual empowerment, and develop what he later called a “keen sense of prophetic social consciousness.”

Recalling the spirituality of the black saints who nurtured him, Turner writes:

Growing up in the “Old Church,” I remember the “righteous poor” who loved and served God with all their hearts. They suffered at the hands of a cruel and unjust social order that relegated them to little more than chattel…having limited opportunities for achievement, educational advancement, and employment that afforded fair compensation. Nevertheless they lived holy lives, loved one another, cared for the weak, reared children as holy seed for the church, and prepared them for opportunities not afforded to them. They offered prayers whose virtue continues to this day. They were “Happy in Jesus,” knowing they had laid the foundation for a generation to follow. They were holding to the faith and living out the faith.

Turner, seeing himself as the fulfillment of the dreams and hopes of the saints who nurtured him, and as one who sought to embody their spirituality in his own life and ministry, spent his life reflecting on the things that mattered theologically to his tradition and to other Christian traditions beyond that of his own denomination.

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22 Ibid.
While raised in a Pentecostal denomination, during the decades of his formative development, the Black Power Movement was in full swing and deeply influenced how Turner embodied his own Pentecostal spirituality. Turner writes:

I was…radical--or should I say a self-styled revolutionary…I had been raised in the church, but like many others, I had become disenchanted with that Negro institution. The civil rights era was waning. We listened to Martin King, but we were becoming fascinated with Malcolm X, whom we could still hear on 33 LP records. After King got shot (like Malcolm three years earlier), Malcolm seemed to make more sense. Into this mix came a generation of young black preachers with a fresh take on things political and spiritual…they showed through the embodiment of their ministry that being a follower of Jesus did not require one to be what Malcolm called a "handkerchief head," a "tom," or a "shuffling, grinning, chicken-eater." This ilk of young black preachers reacted strongly to the representation of black religion given in the work of Joseph Washington as "folk religion," and a feeble aberration of white European Protestantism.25

Turner, as a socially conscious black Pentecostal, uses his spirituality in the service of black liberation, as well as liberation of other oppressed people. Describing himself as a “revolutionary,” Turner’s theology challenged his social vision and his social vision also served to challenge his theology. In doing so, Turner wed his Pentecostal ethos and a prophetic social consciousness for the duration of his life and ministry, which continues until this day. It was in these social, cultural, and familial contexts that provided the foundation upon which Turner builds his academic and pastoral career.

With Turner's mother Ruth being an educator within the then segregated Hanover County School System, the Turner children, in their home, received a head-start in their academic preparation. Knowing the challenges ahead of them in their formation, Ruth Turner worked tirelessly to ensure that each of her children were

academically prepared and they all successfully matriculated from the local public schools. In laying bare his own academic journey beyond Richmond, Turner indicated that while he was still a teenager, his father took him to the campus of Duke University to see the Duke University Chapel. And although racial exclusion was the official policy at Duke, Turner Sr. asked Turner Jr.: “how do you like that, son?” Turner said he realized later that “his father was planting the seed, and others in his generation knew that change was near,” despite Duke at that time legally maintaining a policy that excluded the enrollment of African Americans.26 In 1968, Turner was admitted to Duke University, arriving at the university, ironically, at the time that the first cohort of African American students admitted to the university were graduating.

At Duke, Turner deepened his love for science and chose electrical engineering as his undergraduate major. In addition to his studies in Durham, Turner participated in the university's athletic program, as a “walk on” for the football team in 1966, becoming the first African American to desegregate the previously all-white team.27 In addition to his studies and athletics, perhaps the most formative aspect of Turner’s time at Duke was his struggle to exist and thrive in the racially hostile environment. Upon his arrival to the campus, Turner became quickly aware that his time in Durham would be difficult, so having been raised in the church, Turner quickly connected with the local saints to assist him in what proved to be a very difficult sojourn on the racially charged campus of Duke University in the mid-

In commenting on the life-giving relationships forged with many of the black churches he attended, Turner recalls:

When we got there (to church), we found out that the people who were there had children just like us, and they understood us implicitly...not only did they understand us implicitly, but in order to survive at Duke in those days, you had to put a crust over you...you had to act mean or half-crazy. ... These [church] people could see right through us.  

Though clearly unwelcomed on campus, it was within Durham’s African American churches that Turner and other students found communities of belonging and support to nurture them throughout these very difficult undergraduate years. For Turner, this connection to black churches which understood and supported him during the struggle for racial equality became significant for the broader trajectory of his life, scholarship and ministry. It was these saints who encouraged Turner to press past the difficulties and frustrations of the moment.

With regards to the hardness of life on Duke’s campus during these very difficult years, Turner writes:

“Keep on Pushing” was the needed encouragement when suddenly we were among the few of our race in the newly integrated schools. Where once we had been the intellectual stars, we now were banished to the social periphery of the predominantly white schools. Where outstanding achievement once had been expected from us on a regular basis, we were now confronted by consternation and surprise when we wrote excellent papers or understood complex mathematical problems. Daily explanations were requested for manners, preferences, and values that were so much a part of us that we never noticed them. We were the objects of observation and suspicion. Thus, for those who integrated dormitories, football squads, glee choirs, and fraternities, it did us a world of good to hear...“keep on pushing.” Without pushing we would have been bruised and hurt. Pushing came to be an

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orientation to life, an attitude within the new cosmos, a gesture toward a
different sort of history. Pushing was the posture that produced our future.29

With this new orientation to life, necessitated by the circumstances, Turner began to
form a new kind of social consciousness that wedded his Christian orientation with
the struggle for humanization and dignity. With the church squarely behind him, and
his formative community in Richmond still encouraging him, Turner deepened his
understanding of the Christian faith, connecting the black Pentecostal piety of his
childhood with the cause of racial justice.

Turner soon began to connect his own struggle in Durham with the broader
struggles of black people throughout the United States. As an undergraduate, he
became increasingly aware of the inadequacy of his education and knew that he
needed to supplement the official curriculum with a different kind of knowledge. It
was at this point that Turner began to give himself to black nationalist theory, the
writings of black activists, African American political thought and black literature.
Although he was clear about the necessity of finishing his formal education, there
was a mounting tension between his own intellectual curiosities and the need to earn
a degree and the cries of his people for justice in a racist nation. Turner argued:

We were supposed to be making our parents proud of us as the first
generation of black college students to integrate the major institutions of the
nation – and surely as the first to storm the bastions of southern aristocratic
institutions. But along the way we paused to listen to Dick Gregory, Fannie
Lou Hamer, Julian Bond, Malcolm X, and Martin Luther King. We read the
plays of Don Lee, Imamu Amiri Baraka, and James Baldwin. We were
attentive to the thought of Ron Karenga, Eldridge Cleaver, and Stokely
Carmichael. Consequently, it was hard to keep our minds on theories of
economics, sit through calculus classes, complete experiments in chemistry
labs, and calculate the charge on a particle in an electrical field. Whatever

was not immediately relevant to the “revolution” was considered an unworthy object of our undivided attention. For that matter, we were supposed to be cheering for our school teams, but our school had no black scholarship athletes. And when some black students were courageous enough to offer themselves as walk-ons, they got few opportunities to play and no opportunities to make mistakes. We were supposed to be grateful for our presence on white campuses, but [we knew] that changes were required before our presence could have true meaning.  

A new world of meaning was open to Turner through his exposure to black intellectual thought, as he and other African American students supplemented the official curriculum of the all-white institution. Filling in these gaps within his own learning deepened Turner’s commitment to his people and began to raise for him serious questions about his own vocation. Turner committed to working for change on his campus, but also within the broader Durham community, and he was be awakened to the possibility that his local efforts for justice could make a difference in the nation.

Turner’s racial critique deepens and his global consciousness begins to develop as he begins to connect the struggles of his people with other oppressed and marginalized groups. Seeing America and other Western capitalist nations as purveyors of empty promises, Turner says of his emerging global consciousness:

we were supposed to be patriotic Americans, but we could not deny the outrage brought on by our awareness of the injustices the nation had heaped upon Africans, Native Americans and people of color throughout the Third World. We were supposed to “pledge allegiance to the flag” and to a republic that claimed to be “one nation under God with liberty and justice for all,” but little discernment was required to see that the nation was united only among those who identified with its destiny and who were among the group that prospered. It was equally questionable whether the nation lived under God, and if it did live under God, it seemed that God was a racist and a tyrant. Liberty and justice were reserved for white male Anglo-Saxons and

30 Ibid., 211.
those who identified with their program. So it was hard to do what we were supposed to do.31

In the aforementioned quote, Turner describes the complex of contradictions felt by students of color in the late 1960’s attending historically white institutions. As his social consciousness continues to develop, it was no longer adequate for Turner to focus exclusively on his scientific interests and his pursuit of a vocation in engineering. Given the racial climate of his native Richmond, Durham and the entire nation, Turner felt that much more was at stake in his pursuit of higher education. It was at this point that Turner decided that it was from within the church, the institution that gave him life and helped to sustain him through the most difficult points of his life's passage, that he would seek to make his contribution. And so in 1971, upon completion of his undergraduate degree, Turner enrolled into the Divinity School of Duke University. It was within the field of religion that the young black Pentecostal revolutionary made his mark.

At Duke Divinity School, Turner had the opportunity to expand intellectually upon the foundation of faith laid by his formative ecclesial community, his supplemental education in black intellectual thought, and even his studies of science. Though Turner's knowledge base was broadened in numerous ways during his time as a seminarian, he later revealed that this broadening came at a great price. In calculating the real expense of his theological education at Duke, Turner remarked, "[seminary] tuition did not cost much in the seventies compared to current figures. But as expected, a price had to be paid in study and discipline. The far greater price

31 Ibid.
[to be paid however] was that of “invisibility.” As a “double minority,” rendered invisible because of both his race and his denominational affiliation, Turner candidly disclosed, "[a]s an African American who was born and reborn among Holiness-Pentecostal people, there was scarcely a hint that my kind so much as dotted the theological landscape. Yet I knew both the spiritual and intellectual power of the tradition that formed me. I sought out what I needed for myself...[f]or [this] I have no regrets.” Armed with knowledge of the power of his own tradition, but remaining open to insights from the larger church, several of his theological instructors at Duke left indelible marks upon Turner during this early stage of his formal theological development.

In discussing the perils of entering a historically white seminary to prepare for ministry within the African American context, Turner remarked:

Common wisdom was that training in the predominantly white seminary was only one step short of a curse on a seminarian seeking an appointment or call in a black church, and the notion of a call or an appointment to a white church was nothing short of hilarious. The cleavage in the Church between black and white was far more rigid than is presently the case.

Fortunately for Turner, the Divinity School hired a young AME pastor, Reverend Phillip Cousin, to offer a preaching course for Turner and other black students. Turner writes that the addition of Cousin as an instructor was critical to his studies, saying “it is good [Cousin] was here, because I was scared to take preaching.”

Concerning this fear, Turner explained: “it was common knowledge that if [I] didn’t

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33 Ibid.
turn out right I would be like some others in my generation: no white church would have them and no black church would call them.”36 Describing him as “insightful, polished, full of knowledge and inspiration,” Turner also noted that Cousin’s preaching was “charged with contemporary relevance.”37 Suggesting that Cousin was “astute to the tenor of the times,” Turner further argues that Cousin’s “involvement as an activist was a mirror on the Word he proclaimed.”38

While Turner was impressed with his person and his preaching, it was Cousin who assisted Turner in plumbing the depths of his own black church tradition. According to Turner, Cousin was:

a distillation of African Methodism. This theological tradition was populated with names I had never heard. Names like Richard Allen, Daniel Payne, Henry Turner, Reverdy Ransom. Cousin represented the tradition of preaching that was bursting forth under the nomenclature of black theology. Indeed, from the outset black theology was the essence of reading the scriptures through the interpretive lens of the African American pulpit.39

It was the content of what Cousin taught, known formally as “black theology,” that completely arrested Turner’s evolving theological imagination:

This theology had roots that went deep into the soil and soul of the black independent church movement of the 1900s. It was tethered to the activism that birthed the church’s investment in abolition, emancipation, and the twentieth-century struggle for social justice. This preaching oozed with the passions (yea, the harmonies) of liberty, and was wedded to the strong and unapologetic call for conversion. Later, I learned that this synthesis was at the very root of the faith into which I was born and from which I drew natal nurture.40

36 Ibid.
38 Ibid.
39 Ibid.
40 Ibid.
Turner attached himself to Cousin for the duration of his seminary journey, later becoming his intern and subsequently his assistant pastor. The pastoral and academic support Cousin provided to Turner was salvific, giving him an alternative theological epistemology to what the predominately white seminary offered.

In addition to Cousin, systematic and liberation theologian Frederick Herzog was yet another professor whose teaching and scholarship significantly enriched Turner's journey at the Divinity School and beyond. An early advocate for integration within the Divinity School,41 Herzog was known as one of the first white North American theologians to publish in the area of liberation theology. Turner was deeply impressed by Herzog's attentiveness to the cries of the poor and the oppressed and his employment of the human sciences in the service of theology. In reflecting on the influence of Herzog's scholarship to his own theological formation, Turner remarked:

Herzog insisted that theology is not only a constructive project, [i]t is a critical discipline as well. His intense interest in hermeneutical schools of thought that supply the dialectic led him to make use of liberationist themes and methods, and to insist on viewing history from the underside – not only the tale as the narration by the victors. The way persons are trampled in human history is not to be construed as the march of God. Accordingly, the theological project necessitates emancipatory knowledges for true understanding of the world, and more, for changing the world. Hence, the human sciences are essential in the service of theology.42

Hertzog exposed Turner to the broader theological dimensions of the struggle for liberation, thus deepening Turner’s own understanding of the connection between the struggles of his own people and other oppressed people throughout the world.

Moreover, Hertzog’s comprehensive engagement with black theology carried Turner

even further into the praxis of black theology. Turner writes that Hertzog “dialogued with African American theologians as equals” inviting James Cones to lecture and even teaching that “black theology [was] essential for the theological curriculum – everywhere, and for every student.” Due to Hertzog’s strong influence, Turner boldly proclaimed that for him black theology was “the door of entrance to Christian ministry with integrity and for doing theology that matters within the American context.”

In addition to Cousin and Herzog, the future trajectory of Turner's scholarship and ministry was impacted by his relationship with Methodist theologian Thomas Langford. Langford, who served as the Dean of the Divinity school while Turner was a student, challenged Turner to deepen his understanding of his inherited holiness spirituality and to engage in critical reflection upon both his Pentecostal pneumatology, as well as the wider church's understanding of the Holy Spirit.

Having taken Langford's course on the Holy Spirit (the only course on the subject within the school's curriculum), Turner later said of Langford's influence:

I was inspired by him to pursue the critical study of pneumatology to accompany and critique the first hand knowledge of my own Holiness-Pentecostal upbringing. By critique I have reference to the ways in which systematic reflection expands and deepens knowledge, and establishes dialogue with interlocutors both ancient and contemporary. But I also have reference to the ways in which first order theology gives the sense for neglect of the Spirit and subterranean movements that often do not reach the radar of a domain bounded by the epistemologies of science and history.

These investigations between faith and the epistemologies of science and history raised new questions about the relationship between spirituality and science for

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43 Ibid., 9.
44 Ibid.
45 Ibid., 14
Turner. He writes that this “juxtaposition of disciplines prompted a deep thirst to explore pneumatology as a critical discourse” given a world that had placed so much faith in technology and tried to excise mystery.\textsuperscript{46} For Turner, the formal study of pneumatology rested on its ability to “interrogat[e] the things of faith,”\textsuperscript{47} much like the scientific method. Upon completion of his M.Div. degree at Duke in 1974, Turner began the doctoral program in the Department of Religion at Duke University, combing his interests in pneumatology, black theology, and African American Christianity. Turner, working at the intersection of theology, sociology of religion and history of religions, and reflecting on his formative Pentecostal tradition, successfully defended a dissertation entitled “The United Holy Church of America: A Study in Black Holiness-Pentecostalism,” earning the doctoral degree in 1984.

5.4 Influences

Unlike the other subjects of this study whose fathers were pastors and thus theological and ministerial role models for their sons, neither of Turner’s parents were ministers. His father and mother were faithful members of the UHCA and they raised Turner and his siblings in the fear and admonition of God. Though both of Turner's parents were positive examples of the sanctified life, the varying contexts of his life provided him with more than a few pastors, scholars, and theological trajectories that served as the incubating matrices of Turner's formative ministerial, intellectual and theological development. Among the persons and intellectual trajectories which significantly contributed to Turner's development were: James Alexander Forbes Jr.; Miles Jerome Jones; the late Bishop A.W. Lawson of the

\textsuperscript{46} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{47} Ibid.
UHCA; Dr. C. Eric Lincoln; Dr. Charles Long; and the academic fields of sociology of religion, history of religions and Black religious studies. In addition to his previously discussed tutors at Duke (Cousin, Herzog and Langford), Forbes, Jones, Lawson, Lincoln and Long significantly impacted the way in which Turner understood his own vocation and conceived of the theological task.

Before Turner reached seminary, he felt that he had already received a “primer [in Christian theology]” during his teenage years in Richmond as he heard “African American preachers do theology on a regular basis,” including two young local pastors, “James Forbes and Miles Jones.”48 As his earliest examples of seminary-trained African American ministers, Turner argued that he owed much of his passion for doing ministry to Forbes and Jones, also suggesting that he “at least half-knew Tillich before ever cracking one of his books” due to their preaching.49 In recalling his earliest memories of Forbes, who came to pastor his home church (St. John’s UHCA, Richmond, Va.) while Turner was just a teenager, he wrote:

> Excitement filled the air and the church whenever [Forbes] preached or spoke for any reason. It was nothing short of amazing what this young, brilliant theologically trained Pentecostal preacher could do with a text, and how he could make the pulpit come to life like his predecessors. He made you want to listen to him, but even more, listen to the text. He could take the old traditions of the church, find the doctrinal and scriptural roots, and breathe new life into them. He had a gift for making the word oh-so-relevant—contemporary, fresh, and insightful. In his hands, preaching was far more than prohibitions, and hellfire, which was fairly standard for holiness-Pentecostal preaching of that day. Later I learned how the content was culled out by meticulous exegesis and refracted through the theology of Paul Tillich and Karl Barth – to name two of the mid-twentieth century theologians.50

As a young man trying to discern his place in history, Turner’s early contact with Forbes provided him with an alternative means for modeling his own Pentecostal

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48 Ibid., 7.
49 Ibid.
spirituality. Turner proclaims that “the preaching of Forbes was like a prescription. It was most appealing and critical in opening space for a teenage lad to remain in the church with a Christian option to Malcolm [X].”\(^{51}\) By Turner's own admission, Forbes' ministry essentially saves him from disengaging from the church, as was the case with many other disillusioned black youth of his generation. After leaving Richmond, Forbes continued to pastor and also become a homiletics professor at Union Theological Seminary in the City of New York; Turner followed in his bi-vocational footsteps, ministering, like Forbes, from a broadened ecumenical perspective though deeply entrenched within his formative Pentecostal spirituality.

Supplementing the inspiration that Turner received from his young and charismatic pastor, Rev. James Alexander Forbes, Turner was influenced by the late Pastor Miles Jerome Jones while he was still a teenager.\(^{52}\) Calling Jones one of the most "preachingest men" he has ever known, Turner suggests that it was "nothing less than an act of providence to bring Miles Jones to that community and into [his] life."\(^{53}\) Concerning Jones' influence upon him, Turner writes: "few events have impacted my life like the ones that surround my initial and subsequent encounters" with him.\(^{54}\) Jones arrived to Richmond in 1963 to assume the pastorate of Providence Park Baptist Church, a church in Turner's community that he and his siblings frequented as youth.

\(^{51}\) Ibid., ix.
\(^{54}\) Ibid., 1.
According to Turner, it was through his preaching ministry at Providence Park that Jones "exposed [him] to a subtlety of theological thought and probed [his] young mind in a manner that was somewhat different to the ways of science and history."\(^{55}\) Referring to Jones as a "pulpit theologian," Turner said of the pastor-scholar, that Jones, "worked through the desiderata of the theological enterprise from the pulpit."\(^{56}\) In light of Jones' critical theological work undertaken during the actual preaching event, Turner posits: "[t]he preaching of Jones may be compared to the praxis that is held as the model for Liberation Theology...[o]r one may consider it the archaeological subsoil--the substratum of black theology."\(^{57}\) Jones uses the preaching moment, which is informed by his understanding of black theology, to broaden and to deepen the Christian notion of soteriology so that salvation and human liberation are inextricably bound. In doing so, Jones situates the Christian idea of conversion within the context of the quest for black empowerment.

Alongside his pastorate of Providence Park Church, Jones served as a professor of homiletics in the School of Theology at Virginia Union University. Jones' bi-vocational trajectory as pastor and university professor in time became an intriguing model for Turner. Upon acceptance of his callings and completion of his studies, Turner's life was spent in the shadows of both the sanctuary and the ivory towers.

Perhaps the single most important ministerial influence on Turner was that of his pastor during his years in Durham, the Bishop A.W. Lawson, a leading bishop in the UHCA. Lawson took young Turner under his wings, shepherding him through the responsibilities of the pastoral vocation; Turner spent five years under Lawson’s

\(^{55}\) Ibid., 1-2.
\(^{56}\) Ibid., 7.
\(^{57}\) Ibid.
guidance following the completion his seminary training at Duke. In describing
Lawson’s influence on his life, Turner writes:

A.W. Lawson influenced me as the quintessential churchman, whom I
watched preach for the nurture, building, development, and molding of a
congregation and a connectional church (the United Holy Church of
America)...a man full of wisdom, he exegeted within the tensions of the
worlds converging inside him. But more, he had a keen sense for where the
church was being carried by the Spirit. A bishop in the United Holy Church
of America with uncommon prescience, his intention was to join the power of
the pulpit to a theology of the Spirit that moved beyond the constrictions of
fundamentalism and experiential dogmatism.

As an understudy of the bishop, Turner admired how Lawson was able to “make
document come to life in a manner that was neither shallow nor denominationally
limited.” Lawson’s ability to reflect theologically “beyond the constrictions of
fundamentalism and experiential dogmatism” influenced Turner’s own ecumenical
sensibilities, allowing him to fully embrace his Pentecostal identity, but also to work
for the good of other people of faith in what Lawson describes as “living, breathing
Christian communities” beyond his own. In addition to Lawson, another scholar to
assist Turner in moving in a post-denominational vein is the black Methodist
sociologist of religion, C. Eric Lincoln.

In his 2003 C. Eric Lincoln Lecture, given at Clark Atlanta University,
entitled *C. Eric Lincoln and the Standards of the Black Religious Academy*, Turner, a
former doctoral advisee of Lincoln, offered a fitting tribute to his teacher, mentor,
doktorvater and friend. Describing his tutor as a "man of considerable devotion and
piety, [who] gave himself thoroughly and completely to his work," it was Lincoln

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59 Ibid., xi.
60 Ibid.
who ushered Turner into the academic field of sociology of religion and who provided him with new lenses for contextualizing, analyzing and interpreting the Black religious experience.\textsuperscript{61} Situating his teacher within the grand sociological tradition of W.E.B. DuBois, Benjamin Elijah Mays and E. Franklin Frazier, Turner said of the importance of Lincoln's scholarship:

[Lincoln] was not content for the religion of his people to be known only by means of caricature, supposition, denigration, novels, movies and folktales. Like every other production of human culture, the religious life of African Americans was data to be examined. Patterns were present that needed to be exposed for appreciation and critique...scholarship was to be the mirror of reality; it was to provide the occasion to remove the fiction. He was concerned with meaning, correlation, and interpretation. He was concerned to show how what people believe is utterly decisive for how they create and give shape to their world.\textsuperscript{62}

As a careful and critical sociologist of religion, Lincoln taught Turner that "there was no rush to the work of a theologian" and Lincoln understood his sociological analyses as "laying a foundation upon which theologians (and...historians) could build."\textsuperscript{63} This sentiment was of vital importance to Turner, who had spent his seminary years in the formal study of theology. And although Turner remained deeply concerned with theological questions, it was through his relationship with Lincoln that he was awakened to a much broader range of data and interpretive possibilities. Turner learned from Lincoln to pay "attention to structures, institutions, numbers and other demographics"\textsuperscript{64} and to do so in the service of his theological projects. In addition to Lincoln, another person whose work was essential to Turner's

\textsuperscript{61} William Clair Turner, “C. Eric Lincoln and the Standards of the Black Religious Academy” (presentation, C. Eric Lincoln Lectures, Atlanta, Georgia, Clark Atlanta University, October 22, 2003), 1.
\textsuperscript{62} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{63} Ibid., 2.
\textsuperscript{64} Ibid.
ongoing reconceptualization of theology was the historian of religions, Charles Long, a leading member of Turner's doctoral committee.

Charles Long, a student of pioneering historian of religions Joachim Wach and himself a product of the Chicago School of the History of Religions, introduced Turner to the academic field of the history of religions and to the discourse of phenomenology of religion. As a scholar of religion, Long was dissatisfied that the academic study of African American religion had been limited to social scientific interpretations on the one hand, and theological apologetics on the other. Long's quest was to "present a systematic study of black religion" by "ordering...the religious experiences and expressions of black communities in America" in "an attempt to see what kind of images and meanings lie behind [their] religious experiences." Long enjoined his doctoral students, of which Turner was one, to participate in this more expansive hermeneutical project. As a student who had come to his doctoral studies with deep theological (and ecclesial) interests, Long challenged Turner's prior academic preparation by suggesting that "even if one is to have a theology, it must arrive from religion, something which is prior to theology." Turner learned from Long, to give "attention to the meaning and study of religion itself" and to "assert the value of studying religion as a human phenomenon [and] expression of the human spirit." Equipped with the tools of phenomenological analysis, Turner now interpreted his beloved tradition on its own terms, resisting the imposition of external categories that distort or demand

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66 Ibid., 55-6.
reduction. With the insights acquired from both his pastoral mentors and his religion professors at Duke University, Turner plumbed the depths of the African American religious experience in general and African American Christianity in particular. In doing so, Turner emerged as a major interpreter of African American Pentecostal theology.

5.5 Vocations

In the 2010 Leonard F. Stoutemire Lecture in Multicultural Ministry delivered at Western Theological Seminary in Holland, Michigan, William Turner reflected upon the vision that compelled him into public ministry. While admitting that he entered ministry with “a passion to not only understand the way of God in the world, but also to change the world,” as one who from the outset was drawn to both the church and the academy, Turner was told that he had to choose one.68 Others insistently told him that “one cannot be both a pastor and a scholar. You must be one or the other.”69 As we shall see from this cursory look into his public ministerial career, Turner sought at all costs to remain faithful to the scholarly-pastoral vision that called him forward.

Leaving behind his earlier academic aspirations in the sciences, Turner decided to pursue ministry as his primary vocation. Turner spent nearly the entire three years of his seminary experience serving as Staff Minister and Assistant Pastor of the Historic St. Joseph’s AME Church in Durham under the leadership of the Reverend Phillip Cousins, AME bishop designate, and his homiletics instructor at Duke Divinity. It is in 1973 that Turner returned to his formative UHCA tradition to be ordained by his pastor and theological mentor, the Bishop A.W. Lawson. It

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69 Ibid.
should also be noted that in the interim between his staff appointments at St. Joseph’s and Fisher Memorial Church, that Turner held a one-year campus ministry post as Director of The United Campus Christian Ministry at North Carolina A&T State University in Greensboro, North Carolina. It was also during this time that he received an appointment as a lecturer at Duke University in African-American Studies.

Upon being ordained by Lawson in 1973 and serving for a time as a local elder under Lawson’s pastorate at the Historic Fisher Memorial UHCA of Durham, in 1974 Turner was appointed the Assistant Pastor of Fisher Memorial Church under Lawson’s leadership. As Lawson’s assistant, Turner was significantly stretched and challenged in terms of both his pastoral and preaching ministries. Regarding the rigor and discipline of the training that Turner received as Lawson’s understudy, Turner writes: “it was from serving as his assistant that I was introduced to the wonderful discipline of *lectio continua*. We would select a book from which to preach and listen to what the writer had to say for a sustained period. Normally we preached from the Old Testament in the Fall (an extended Advent), the Gospels from the first of the year (Epiphany and Lent), and from an epistle following Easter (Easter, Pentecost and Ordinary Time).”

This type of discipline and systematic engagement in reading the scriptures had significant implications upon Turner’s development as a systematic theologian.

Concerning the benefits that Lawson’s homiletical discipline yielded within his own ministry, Turner said: “it was from this seminal, life-giving, mutual interpenetration between the word and the life of God’s people that good preaching

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emerges. This is the *humus* of pulpit theology that must remain as the anchor of the church, and the vital interlocutor for all other discourses that claim to do any reasoning about God."71 While serving at Fisher, Turner began to conceive of himself as a homiletical theologian. Turner served as Lawson’s assistant until 1979, after which he was installed as the Senior Pastor of the Faith Gospel Tabernacle UHCA. Turner resigned from his pastorate at Faith Gospel Tabernacle in 1981 to complete the writing of his doctoral dissertation. Upon completion of his doctoral studies, Turner served two additional congregations: Mack’s Chapel UHCA in Altamahaw, North Carolina from 1986-1990, and the Mt. Level Missionary Baptist Church of Durham from 1991 until the present time.

In addition to the various pastoral appointments within his denomination, his stint within the AME Church and his pastoral appointment at Mt. Level Church, Turner also served in a variety of denominational leadership capacities within the UHCA, both statewide and internationally. In addition to serving for a number of years on the Board of Presbytery of the Western North Carolina Convocation of the UHCA, preparing and examining lay ministers for ordained ministry, Turner received two additional platforms within his denomination that allowed him to utilize his theological training. In recognition of his gifts to clarify, deepen and articulate the community’s faith, in 1976, Turner was appointed to serve as the editor and author of the United Holy Church of America’s *Young People’s Holy Association Quarterly*, perhaps the most widely circulated theological publication within the denomination. For nearly thirteen years, until 1988, Turner was directly involved in the development of devotional and theological literature that not only instructed the

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71 Ibid., 11.
church’s youth in the way of holiness, but that also provided alternative ways of thinking about Pentecostal theology and spirituality.

Because of Turner’s mass appeal within his denomination as a preacher and as motivator and encourager of youth, in 1980 (while still serving as the editor and author of the *Holy Association Quarterly*), Turner was appointed as the General President of the Young People’s Holy Association of the UHCA. In this role, Turner, in addition to leading an annual conference, traveled both internationally and domestically, motivating, encouraging and goading young people to good works. Turner concluded his tenure as General President of the Young People’s Holy Association in 1988, along with his editorial responsibilities *Holy Association Quarterly*. Upon completion of his services rendered to his denomination, Turner continued to represent the UHCA in a series of ecumenical conversations. Most notable among these ecumenical liaisons was perhaps the dialogue that ensued among North American Pentecostal leaders which gave rise to the racially inclusive Pentecostal Charismatic Churches of North America (PCCNA) in 1994. Turner’s perspectives were so critical to the conversation that he was even slated as a speaker in the historic Memphis Miracle conference in 1994.

As the quintessential Pentecostal pastor-scholar, in addition to his years of pastoral service within the church and the offices he held within the UHCA, Turner remained deeply engaged in his work as a theological educator within the academy. Turner began his teaching career at Duke University in 1973, serving as Acting Director of what was then called Afro-American Studies, a post he occupied for only one year. In 1974, in addition to continuing course instruction in Afro-American Studies, Turner was appointed to serve as the Assistant Provost and Dean of Black
Affairs for Duke University, a position he held from 1974-1977. Following his
tenure as Assistant Dean and Provost of Black Affairs, from 1982-1984, Turner
served as an Instructor in Theology and Black Church Studies within the Divinity
School of Duke University. Alongside his administrative position, Turner continued
teaching as an instructor within the Divinity school until 1994 when he was
promoted to the role of Assistant Professor of Theology and Black Church Studies,
followed by a seven year term as Director of Black Church Affairs in the Divinity
was appointed Associate Professor of the Practice of Homiletics - a post he retains at
Duke University until this day.

While the entirety of Turner’s academic and theological teaching career has
been spent at Duke University, he has made a number of scholarly contributions to
the broader fields of both Christian theology and African-American religious studies.
Among these contributions include his work as a member of the Board of Directors
of the now defunct Spirit Journal: A Journal of Issues Incident to Black Pentecostal
Scholarship, on which he served from 1975-1978; the publication of four scholarly
theological texts: Discipleship for African American Christians: A Journey Through
the Church Covenant (2002), From Scribble to Script: Preparing to Preach (2003),
The United Holy Church of America: A Study in Black Holiness-Pentecostalism
(2006), and Preaching that Makes The Word Plain: Doing Theology in The Crucible
of Life (2008). Turner also delivered a number of guest lectures at several colleges
and universities throughout North America including his much celebrated 1993
Hampton University Lectures on, “The Holy Spirit: The Giver of Life, Love and
Liberty;” the 1994 James Walker Hood Lectures on “Pneumatology and the
American Theological Context” at Hood Theological Seminary; the 1997 Granville Hicks Lecture Series at Claflin College on “The Black Church and the Problem of American Docetism;” the 2000 Martin Luther King, Jr. Lectures at the Colgate-Rochester Divinity School on “Martin King and the New Millennium;” the 2003 C. Eric Lincoln Lectures, Clark Atlanta University on “C. Eric Lincoln and the Standards of the Black Religious Academy;” and Virginia Union University’s 2003 John Marcus Ellison Lectures, where he lectured from the topic “Miles Jones: A Preaching Man,” to name a few. Turner also published dozens of scholarly articles and remains widely sought after as a conference preacher and lecturer.

As one who has spent the entirety of his public ministry with feet in both the church and the academy, Turner strives to maintain a balance between his two distinctive, but interrelated vocational identities as academic and as pastor. In writing about this balance over the duration of his ministry, Turner suggested:

The intervening years have been punctuated by an active schedule of preaching and teaching in the areas of theology, black church studies, homiletics, and ministry. The exercise has been one that is characterized by tension. Indeed, it fits the description Jacob gave for Issachar when he blessed his sons—namely, the blessing of being balanced by two burdens. There is the burden of preaching to the people of God, hearing their cries, and carrying them before God. Then there is the burden of teaching others how to do the work of ministry. For me there has been balancing grace to fight against the tilt toward unreflective ministry on the one hand, and teaching and research not grounded in the life of the church on the other.\(^72\)

This “balancing grace” which Turner describes makes it impossible for him to choose either the church over the academy or the academy over the church. He writes that when he was only “connected loosely to the academy [he] was not

\(^{72}\) Ibid., 7.
fulfilled” and when was only “connected loosely to a parish [he] was miserable.”

Turner is finally able to make peace with weaving together his commitments to pastoral ministry and life in the academy, as a self-described homiletical theologian, finding sustaining grace in both spheres.

5.6 Conceptions of the Tradition

In his 2011 Leonard F. Stoutemire Lecture in Multicultural Ministry, delivered at Western Theological Seminary, Turner describes himself as an African American "born and reborn among Holiness-Pentecostal people." As such, Turner realized early on "both the spiritual and intellectual power" of the tradition in which he was nurtured. This spirituality, whose beauty he saw as a “modality of the Spirit,” sustained Turner for the duration of his life's journey and he took ample time to reflect upon the strengths and limitations of the faith of his inherited tradition. As a Pentecostal practitioner and scholar, Turner held in tension both "the learning and the burning” of his Black Pentecostal faith; he was willing to critique those aspects of his tradition he felt were limiting and inadequate, but he also readily uplifted the belief structures and practices he deemed liberating and empowering.

One of the distinctive aspects which frame Turner’s appreciation for his Black Pentecostal heritage is “how the social location of African Americans...who populated the Pentecostal movement, removed them from the [doctrinal] splits of the church between East and West.” And because of their marginal social location, the

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74 Ibid., 5.
75 Ibid.
faith perspectives of these same believers were unaffected by “the Enlightenment that sought knowledge without first making reference to God.”

According to Turner, this distinctiveness is most clearly demonstrated in a shared Black Pentecostal religious consciousness, and Turner describes the significance of this shared cosmology when he writes:

> among African American Holiness/Pentecostal/Apostolics is a common openness to the Spirit that contrasts with the dominant motifs of Western culture. Where the influence of the Enlightenment remains strong, the overriding emphasis is on what can be known and measured through the senses…against, or alongside this rational world[view], African American Holiness/ Pentecostal/Apostolics find themselves at home in the realm of the Spirit. This world, like that of the Old and New Testament and those cultures not heavily influenced by the Enlightenment, is one in which the deity exercises radical freedom. The Spirit, who is divine, intervenes at will to act directly upon and within the affairs of men and women. Priority is given to this noumenal or spiritual realm.

Insisting that the “world remains open for the entrance and movement of the deity,” this worldview inhabited by Pentecostals is “not limited by the boundaries imposed by science and historical consciousness,” but is “radically theistic.” Transcendence is a dynamic feature of the world occupied by black Pentecostals, where the deity disrupts the world and animates the activities of the believer. According to Turner, because of this openness to numinous encounter, "Pentecostalism was keen to develop practices to initiate and celebrate mystical experience." For Turner, this transcendence transforms both “the consciousness and the conduct” of those moved

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79 Ibid.
80 William Clair Turner, “Movements in the Spirit,” 44.
by the Spirit. And for Turner, Pentecostalism reintroduces “mystery” as a theological category, which had failed to be preserved in the wake of the Protestant Reformation.

For Turner, Pentecostalism reintroduces "mystery" as a theological category, which had failed to be preserved in the wake of the Protestant Reformation. For Turner, Pentecostal spirituality, "is consistent with an African view of the world, where there is openness to the realm of power and vitality as given with life." In an 1978 article, “Is Pentecostalism Truly Christian?,” Turner situates his tradition within the interpretive context of African religions: “Pentecostalism as it is thrust upon the world in its modern form, is a very Black thing.” Turner further argues that Black Pentecostal spirituality "is the offspring of the union between the very spiritual African religious tradition and evangelical Christianity that swept the slave[holding] south." In a similar vein as Hurston, Hollenweger, Lovett and Tinney, Turner understands Black Pentecostal spirituality as the Christianized resurgence of repressed African spirituality. According to Turner, "taking blackness and Africa seriously tends toward a change in the epistemological backdrop that does not concede to Western thought as the plenary domain of

88 Ibid.
knowledge.” As Turner understands it, "blackness is inherent in the concrete reality as that which constitutes integrity and essence." It is at the nexus of holiness, spiritual empowerment, and prophetic social consciousness, three paramount virtues of his tradition, that the "blackness" of Black Pentecostal spirituality is brought into clearer focus.

In his 2005 address for the Society of Pentecostal Studies, “Follow Peace With All Men: The Blackness of the United Holy Church of America,” Turner discusses the trialectic of holiness, spiritual empowerment, and prophetic social consciousness, using his own denomination as an example. These virtues are “three interdependent dynamics of Afro-Christian consciousness,” which allow for an interpretation of the “blackness” of Black Pentecostalism, especially when analyzed alongside other black churches and white Pentecostal churches. Turner argues that these dynamics, when viewed together, “distinguishes Black Holiness-Pentecostalism from white Pentecostals” and demonstrates “continuity with the Black Church.” On the other hand, Turner suggests these same virtues demonstrate the “distinctiveness” of Black Pentecostalism “from the Black Church generally” and he argues that the very nature of Black Pentecostalism is that of “reformation” to keep the Black Church “black and holy.” By suggesting that Black Pentecostalism is a reform movement for churches which identify themselves with the larger Protestant Reformation, Turner uplifts the genius of Black Pentecostalism, with its

91 William Clair Turner, The United Holy Church of America, 135.
93 Ibid., 3.
94 William Clair Turner, The United Holy Church of America, 115.
emphasis on holiness, spiritual empowerment, and prophetic social consciousness, as a model for the whole church.

There is much that Turner finds laudable within Black Pentecostalism: the community's openness to mystery; the space within the tradition that is reserved for transcendence; the community's institutionalization of blackness; and their emphases on holiness, spiritual empowerment and prophetic social consciousness. His concerns with the limitations of his tradition, however, are essentially theological. In a series of articles published in the *Journal of Pentecostal Theology* between 2005 and 2007, Turner outlines his concerns with the limitations and deficiencies of his tradition's theology. He argues that a "constructive and critical" Pentecostal theology is "more than valorized history or tedious torture of texts,"95 and he expresses dissatisfaction with theological proposals "truncated as Bible study that [focus] primarily on language and [adopt] a fundamentalist (dispensationalist) interpretation of the scriptures."96 Furthermore, Turner writes:

Pentecostal theology all too often has been an excerpt of evangelicalism and fundamentalism that failed to develop its voice. It focused on the experience of the Spirit. But the consequence was that it did not go far enough to address constructively the problems in pneumatology left by the Reformation – namely, how to preserve the place for mystery and theologically sound pneumatic speech. Pentecostalism was keen to develop practices to initiate and celebrate mystical experience. Sometimes this meant reading coveted experiences into texts that do not warrant the same. But the theology was not careful to guard the boundary where blurring occurred between the Holy Spirit and the human spirit. Nor has Pentecostalism supplied adequate theology to account for the sovereignty of the Spirit as a divine person who can speak to resist the believer and the Church. It took a definite posture against elements of culture involving destructive personal morality. Yet it

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stopped short of showing the procession of the Spirit in liberative praxis and prophetic witness against structures of oppression.  

Because of the “high valence placed on experience,” Turner argues that black Pentecostals have given “little attention to the reflective aspects of the faith,” and instead, “far more concern was registered for having the right experience (orthodoxy of experience) and right testimony” than developing a constructive theology. He argues that a “critical and reflective account is needed” within Black Pentecostalism so that it speaks to a broader public and not just those who are “already convinced and faithful.” Furthermore, Turner suggests that Black Pentecostalism’s emphasis on individual piety and personal morality hinders their full engagement of the broader structures of oppression, thereby limiting the potential of their prophetic social witness.

Turner articulates several additional limitations and theological problems within his tradition that he insists must be addressed in order for African American Pentecostalism to mature and flourish. While acknowledging that more black Pentecostals have entered into formal theological training, he also notes that “the increasing number of Pentecostals pursuing theological studies did not guarantee more critical [theological] reflection.” Turner laments the lack of “serious critical and reflective theology done from within the camp” of the relatively few “African American Pentecostal scholars.”

Theology, as an academic discipline, remains severely underrepresented for Pentecostal scholars, and Turner, believing that

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99 Ibid.
100 Ibid.
101 Ibid.
“Pentecostal theologians owe the church mature reflection,”¹⁰² notes two specific impediments to this lack of theological scholarship among black Pentecostals: a posture of experiential arrogance towards scholastic forms of theology and a similar stance of anti-theological bias.

Turner asserts that because of the privileged standing of religious experience within Pentecostalism, a posture of arrogance toward reflective theology can easily develop: “an arrogant posture in this regards is sometimes expressed by the phrase ‘a man with an experience does not need an argument.’”¹⁰³ In this case, the believer fails to recognize that the testimony to a religious experience is also “an act of theological construction” which itself requires reflection and analysis.¹⁰⁴ Likewise, Turner maintains that a bias against third order theological reflection can also be a significant impediment within Black Pentecostalism. Or, as he describes it: “sometimes this anti-theological bias remains under the caption [of] 'giving nothing but the Word', where the meaning of texts, the tradition of interpretation (or misinterpretation), and the construction are all subsumed in one uncritical move.”¹⁰⁵ In this case, adherents reject theological claims that do not fit neatly alongside their own interpretation of the scriptures, which they call “the Word.”

In the absence of constructive theological proposals, Turner argues that Black Pentecostalism is left with a vacuum that may be filled with the teachings of newer expressions of Christianity that also know themselves as Pentecostal, such as those who espouse prosperity teaching. While emphatically stating that theologically,

¹⁰⁴ Ibid., 41.
¹⁰⁵ Ibid., 40.
“Pentecostalism and prosperity gospel are not the same,” Turner insists that “theological maturity” is needed for the critique of these newer versions [of Christianity] that name themselves as Pentecostal.106 Without theological maturity and in the absence of a critical theology, the teachings of new theological vendors, like those of the prosperity teachers threaten to elevate “opulent prosperity and ridiculous claims concerning health as litmus tests and marks of the Spirit-filled life, while preying on the longings of the poor.”107

Ultimately, Turner insists that in order for Black Pentecostalism to continue to mature, a:

- reflective account is needed for discourse with broader publics than those who are already convinced and faithful. In addition, there are crucial intersections between knowledges. Succeeding generations require some account of the hope they are expected to embrace. The time comes for responsibility to be taken for the way in which faith and all its implications operate in all spheres of life.108

Turner offers a prescription to offset the limitations of his tradition: more thorough theological reflection; an engagement with broader publics outside of Pentecostalism; and an openness to other forms of knowledge, including the disciplines of the human sciences.109

5.7 Doctrine of the Trinity

In his 1984 study, The Color of God: The Concept of God in Afro-American Thought, black liberation theologian Major Jones critiques African American Pentecostal theology by insisting on a distinction between mainline black theology’s

106 Ibid.
107 Ibid.
108 Ibid., 41.
view of the godhead and Pentecostal misconceptions of the doctrine of God. Jones charges Pentecostalism's flawed understanding of the godhead to a distorted pneumatology, arguing that unlike Pentecostalism: "the understanding of the Holy Spirit in the more narrow tradition of Afro-American religion has its roots in more explicitly trinitarian and traditional Christian thought." Dismissing Pentecostalism from the trinitarian family, Jones suggests that black Pentecostals subscribe to a modalistic view of the godhead, unlike other black mainline Protestants who affirm the early ecumenical councils’ belief in a triune God. As a systematic Pentecostal theologian, Turner takes up the doctrine of the trinity as a central theme in his own theological program, addressing both impoverished understandings of the trinity within the broader Black Christian tradition, as well as non-trinitarian conceptions of the godhead within certain sectors of African American Pentecostalism.

In an 1995 essay entitled *Movements in the Spirit: A Review of African American Holiness/Pentecostals/Apostolics*, Turner distances his own tradition of Pentecostalism from the non-trinitarian variety that Jones critiques, while also affirming family resemblances among the wider Black Holiness and Pentecostal traditions. According to Turner, "although numerous similarities in faith and practice remain within the family of African American Holiness/Pentecostal/Apostolics, a significant distinction exists between those known as Apostolics and the others." Turner affirms Black Pentecostalism’s "common heritage within African American Christianity and evangelical religion in America," particularly noting that among all

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the various groups of Pentecostals, there is a similar "orientation to the Spirit" and similar "patterns of worship."\textsuperscript{112} Turner, however, highlights a significant point of theological difference when he writes:

although Apostolics are closely related to Holiness believers and Pentecostals, they differ from the other two groups on a significant point of theology...the doctrine of the Trinity and the formula for baptism. Apostolics, adhering to the "oneness" of God, reject the Trinitarian formula, holding that there is but one God, whose name is revealed in the New Testament as Jesus. Furthermore, they show from the Book of Acts that the consistent formula for baptizing believers in the early church was in the name of Jesus.\textsuperscript{113}

By highlighting this distinctive point of Apostolic theology, Turner critiques theologians like Jones and others who “make no differentiation among the subfamilies” within Pentecostalism, “with the consequence that the integrity of each subfamily is overlooked.”\textsuperscript{114} Attributing the Apostolics’ problem with trinitarian doctrine as rooted in "a quest to repeat the patterns of Acts and to recover the ways of the primitive church,"\textsuperscript{115} according to Turner, "much of the teaching to which Oneness Pentecostals reacted was the weak trinitarianism that simply repeated orthodoxy without comprehending the issues at hand."\textsuperscript{116} Turner goes on to say, "the consequence was that many lapsed into modern Sabellianism with hardly a clue as to what the problem was."\textsuperscript{117}

Alongside the Apostolics' quest to retain the baptismal formula of the primitive church and their attendant theology of the name of Jesus, which led the tradition to reject the trinity, Turner exposes an undergirding pragmatism reinforcing

\textsuperscript{112} Ibid., 47
\textsuperscript{113} Ibid., 46-47.
\textsuperscript{114} Ibid., 47
\textsuperscript{116} Ibid., 3.
\textsuperscript{117} Ibid.
the Apostolic rejection of the Triune God. According to Turner, "from another
standpoint, preference for the name Jesus grew out of the pragmatism of faith in
America. This was especially the case for believers who were not theologically
trained, and who could not access the larger tradition that made use of trinitarian
language to confess the [trinitarian] mystery."¹¹⁸ Turner further argues that "a drastic
consequence of this epistemological configuration was that the language of the faith
given to confess the mystery quickly fell to the default setting of the culture."¹¹⁹ In
additional commentary on the Black Apostolics’ theological obeisance to the culture,
Turner elaborates:

Nowhere was this moment more devastating than the confession of God in 'three persons.' Given the pragmatic nature of American culture, it was 'common sense' that persons meant three individuals—with three minds and three wills. Three persons meant three gods. What is more, as Apostolics, or Oneness Pentecostals are quick to point out, Jesus is a name—not Father, Son, and [Holy] Spirit. No account can be given from this pragmatic epistemological frame for hypostasis or perichoretic union whereby persons exist in one another. More, there was no way to confess how divine persons exist from eternity, with equal deity, honor, power, and glory. With the pragmatic starting point the only reference for knowledge is the realm of time and history as mediated through the senses. Since practical reason is all that can be verified by empirical means, it is the reference for what is known and said about God. Apostolics were doing all within their powers to confess the truth.¹²⁰

And while the Apostolics arrived in a different place theologically than other Black
Christians with respect to their theology of the godhead, Turner understood the
pragmatic reasoning of the Apostolics as indicative of a deeper theological anemia
within the broader African American Church relating to trinitarian matters. For
Turner, the entirety of the Black Church would do well to deepen its theological
reflection upon the trinitarian mystery. In his estimation, failure to do so is the

¹¹⁸ Ibid., 2.
¹¹⁹ Ibid., 2.
¹²⁰ Ibid., 2-3.
equivalent of "being seduced into reducing the eternal and all-wise God to the level of our limited [human] reasoning and comprehension."\textsuperscript{121} According to Turner, "in such attempts at simplification we fail to confess the God who has been revealed [in scripture]."\textsuperscript{122}

Believing that more sustained reflection on the godhead is needed, Turner maintains that: "the black church has suffered in its mission and outlook for not being vigilant as it might in trinitarian matters."\textsuperscript{123} Insisting that this suffering is largely due to the problem of language and human reasoning about God, Turner posits: "an unsurpassed challenge in every generation is that of confessing the [trinitarian] mystery without reducing the eternal God to the limits of temporal existence, or denying the manifestation in the flesh (the incarnation). Breaking the tension in either direction leaves one with something less than the gospel and leaves no account of salvation."\textsuperscript{124} Seeing both the gospel and salvation at stake when disregarding the trinitarian mystery, Turner offers to the Black church the very testimony of scripture itself as the controlling logic for confession of the trinitarian mystery. According to Turner, "the doctrine of the trinity is given precisely to confess the living God: this is a language suited to the mystery that is disclosed in the story of God's gracious dealing with the world. Not the product of philosophy and metaphysics, but the outgrowth of the gospel story."\textsuperscript{125} Because both the gospel and salvation are at stake, Turner insists that "great responsibility rests on any who

\begin{footnotes}
\item[122] Ibid.
\end{footnotes}
substitute another discourse, even when the intention is simplification or to make a confession that is more reasonable or pragmatic.\textsuperscript{126}

5.8 Pneumatology

It is unsurprising that pneumatology figures prominently within Turner's theological agenda, given his work as a theologian who is simultaneously systematic, trinitarian, black liberationist and Pentecostal. Whereas many theologians focus almost exclusively upon the works and the experience of the Spirit, pneumatology within Turner's theological system is rooted within the matrix of the trinitarian life of God. For Turner, the Holy Spirit is God, the Lord and giver of life and as divine person, "the Spirit is author of and in possession of all of the Spirit's works."\textsuperscript{127} It is out of his conception of the Spirit as third trinitarian person that Turner extensively reflects upon the personhood of the Spirit.

Turner argues that at the heart of the difficulty in coming to terms with the personhood of the Spirit is the tendency to use the names “Father” and “Son” as "shortcuts or props" that help to articulate the roles of the first and second trinitarian persons within the economy of salvation.\textsuperscript{128} For Turner, these “props” can hinder more than they can help, such as when we confuse “God the Father with a male parent or a near Eastern patriarch.”\textsuperscript{129} Indeed, Turner argues that “if we are not careful, we think the mystery of the Father and the Son has been disclosed because we are familiar with the corresponding social roles.”\textsuperscript{130} Lacking a corresponding

\textsuperscript{126} William Clair Turner, “Crossing Boundaries,” 25.
\textsuperscript{128} William Clair Turner, “Lord, Let The Holy Ghost Come on Down,” 177.
\textsuperscript{129} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{130} William Clair Turner, “I Believe in the Holy Spirit,” 214.
social role, the person of the Holy Spirit has been misunderstood and neglected in much of contemporary Christian theology. In Turner’s estimation, the personhood of the Holy Spirit actually supplies a hermeneutic for approaching the trinitarian mystery:

It is ironic that the personhood of the Spirit would pose such a problem, when in fact the nature of the Spirit conditions what we can and cannot mean by divine person. The Spirit shows that personhood cannot be reduced to race, gender, health, wealth or any other differentiating categories by which we divide and dominate the world. Accordingly, there is exceedingly promising liberative potential in personhood as seen in the Spirit for liberation in its manifold dimensions.\(^\text{131}\)

Instead of a “God [who] could be divided into segments,” Turner insists that in the person of the Spirit, we “come full face” and apprehend “the depth of the mystery” of God beyond human categories.\(^\text{132}\) Turner further argues that while “in some ways the Spirit is more difficult to apprehend than the Father and the Son,”\(^\text{133}\) this very difficulty in apprehending the personhood of the Spirit demonstrates how all “are fully dependent on revelation for all knowledge of God.”\(^\text{134}\) In this respect, for Turner, the person of the “Spirit [is not] third in rank” within a trinitarian conception of God, but the very “breath, the life, going forth within God...[and]...giving life to the creation.”\(^\text{135}\) As divine person, the Spirit, who is God, moves freely towards the creation in acts of life, love and liberty. For Turner, it is in the sovereign Spirit’s unfettered movement toward the world (as in \textit{kenosis}) that various acts of grace and power are manifested.

\(^{132}\) William Clair Turner, “I Believe in the Holy Spirit,” 214
\(^{133}\) Ibid.
\(^{134}\) Ibid.
\(^{135}\) Ibid.
Related to his emphasis on the trinity and his theology of divine personhood, Turner is uneasy with theological proposals that seek to make normative the ways in which the Spirit must be experienced by believers within the life of the church. For Turner, within all human attempts to pinpoint how the Spirit must be experienced, "the Spirit is potentially undermined,"136 whether one relegates the Spirit's activity to certain offices of the church (i.e. bishopric/priesthood); or to highly coveted religious experiences (i.e. healing/prophhecy); or by limiting the Spirit's activity to the official means of grace (i.e. communion/baptism). Turner argues that in such attempts, "the divine person who is the Lord and giver of life and the author of liberty is imprisoned and made essentially unfree. It is like the contradiction of putting a bird in a cage: the properties and actions that distinguish the bird most clearly are allowed no expression in consequence of such structures."137 Referring to the Holy Spirit as "the scandalous person, utterly resistant of domination and control," Turner posits that the Spirit essentially "blows where the Spirit wills."138 Though Turner understands such attempts at routinizing the Spirit as an ecumenical concern, in no tradition has this matter more engaged his attention than in Pentecostalism’s construction of *glossolalia* as the essential *evidence* of Spirit Baptism. Turner describes Spirit baptism as the "threshold criterion" of Pentecostal spirituality and within the Pentecostal *ordo salutis*, Spirit baptism is the experience which "supplies the fullness of salvation."139 Turner affirms Pentecostalism’s theology of Spirit baptism, arguing that “all Christian baptism must be of the Spirit” and that Christian baptism, “as accounted for in the scriptures--is not [only] reducible to contact with water or a

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137 Ibid.
138 Ibid., 140.
139 William Clair Turner, "Movements in the Spirit," 44.
moment in time." \[140\] However, Turner takes issue with how Pentecostal theologians at times collapse Spirit baptism into the doctrine of initial evidence, “the tenet that tongues-speaking is necessary evidence of Spirit baptism.” \[141\] As one trained in both the disciplines of science and theology, Turner says of the doctrine: "the [whole] issue of tongues as initial evidence is more a matter of epistemology than pneumatology in the strictest." \[142\] Turner clarifies: "the Spirit’s work in the church and world is not presented in the New Testament as the subject of human scrutiny and approval. That is, the gift of the Spirit and the Spirit’s work in the church are subjected to human scrutiny only as a concession to disbelief and demonic duplication." \[143\] This epistemological concern arises from what Turner suggests are prescriptive readings of the Lukan Pentecost narrative - in which the narrative is read as a prescription for the contemporary church - rather than reading the Pentecost narrative as a description of the life of the early church. And while Turner is not suggesting that God cannot provide tangible evidence of the Spirit's works, he argues that evidence is an inferior posture to faith, for “as evidence, tongues-speaking may well indicate another human effort to dominate in matters where the sovereignty of God is to be sufficient.” \[144\]

Turner’s pneumatology is careful to safeguard the sovereignty of the Holy Spirit in that the Spirit as divine person can “resist the believer and the Church.” \[145\] However, for Turner, "the question of the church is whether to concede to flawed

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\[143\] Ibid., 137
\[144\] Ibid., 140.
epistemology, or whether the task of pneumatology is to challenge the flaw. To concede means to accept the criteria of science and history and to supply evidence at the demand of another.\textsuperscript{146} As Turner understands it:

evidence is essentially an epistemological issue that reacts to the currents of the time. One is on more solid ground biblically and theologically by following the trajectory of manifestation \textit{(phanerosis)}. With evidence, the human subject is the inspector, with manifestation the focus is on God as actor.\textsuperscript{147}

According to Turner, an emphasis on \textit{phanerosis}, or “manifestation [of the Spirit] that defies reduction to speech and words,”\textsuperscript{148} envisions a pneumatology in which the Spirit as divine person is actor. In the non-contingent, "free movement of the Spirit,"\textsuperscript{149} the sole concern of the believer is acceptance of the works of God and not the satisfaction of the inspecting human mind. Turner stresses the importance of the Spirit’s freedom to manifest as God wills when he writes:

\begin{quote}
The gift of the Spirit to the church and the believer is first and foremost a divine manifestation. It comes with brilliance, like light that shines in darkness, like rushing mighty wind, like fire that burns. The manifestation comes without permission; it does not require approval; its validity is not subject to inspection or human approbation. Rather, it compels acquiescence, humility, submission, worship and the offering of glory to God. It is on God’s terms and God’s terms alone.\textsuperscript{150}
\end{quote}

For Turner, the purpose of all the “grace gifts” \textit{(charismata)} including glossolalia, “is to enrich the entire Body” and that “those outside the Body would be convicted

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\end{itemize}
and brought into the fellowship of believers.”151 Understanding that the “gifts are not ends in themselves,” Turner argues that instead, the gifts of the Spirit are for “fashioning a Body that witnesses to the work of Christ in the world and to his return to rule the world in righteousness.”152

5.9 Preaching

In his 2005 article entitled Preaching The Spirit: The Liberation of Preaching, Turner by his own admission, "attempts to make a case for preaching as theological method for testing the veracity of systematic [theological] projects."153 Conceiving of the Christian minister as "pulpit theologian,"154 and the preaching event as "wrestl[ing] with the present reality of God among the people,"155 Turner emphasizes the matter of "rediscovering the pulpit as the place to do serious theology."156 Having "no interest in the patterns where homiletics stands alone, or where it is grounded in [theories of] communication or rhetoric," Turner argues "the history of preaching shows that it has ever been grounded in the theological disciplines. Or, one might say that the theological disciplines flow from preaching as the fresh, relevant interpretation of the scriptures among the people of a God."157 While Turner understands the preacher as pulpit theologian and the sermon itself as a theological method, equally as intriguing in his writings on preaching is his theology of the homiletical enterprise - or the means by which he conceives theologically of preaching itself. Turner’s theology of preaching is informed by the spiritualities of

152 Ibid.
154 Ibid., 13.
155 Ibid., 6.
Pentecostalism and African American Christianity, and Turner’s homiletic highlights preaching’s "transcendence over ordinary speech." In addition to addressing the "dimension wherein the preacher is outside-of-self and speaking on behalf of a divine power," Turner's theology emphasizes the manifestation of this power in the world, through preaching, by the aid of the Holy Spirit.

Turner defines preaching as "a charismatic act that relies utterly on the grace given by the Spirit to speak for God and bring the hearer into the presence of God." Turner seeks at every stage of the creative process to make explicit the work of the Spirit in the preaching enterprise, beginning at the earliest phase of preparing sermon notes, a deeply spiritual moment he calls “scribbling.” Turner uses the metaphor of scribbling to suggest “a priceless moment in spirituality wherein meditation and spiritual discipline pass over into an act that is preparatory to speech.” Turner likens scribbling to “the image…of a pen being moved to touch paper for the sake of capturing what is being received" by the preacher from the Holy Spirit. Concerning this process, Turner writes:

The script that has vitality begins with scribble. In scribble the Spirit is free to brood, hover, inseminate fecundity for the creative work that precedes preaching. It is this pneumatic moment that sets preaching apart from ordinary speech, a lecture, an exercise in rhetoric, or an act of oratory. If preaching is for God, there must be openness for God to infuse it. Otherwise, it remains in a state of tehom. The fruit remains unripened; the treasures remain buried, as with an egg that does not hatch. Only following incubation

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159 Ibid.
161 William Clair Turner, Preaching that Makes the Word Plain, 23.
162 Ibid.
is there release of power that permits fruitful speech - speech that performs, that brings forth anything God can call good.\textsuperscript{163}

In describing the Spirit’s work in the process of preparation for preaching, Turner argues that "scribbling is rooted in the silence from which the living word emerges."\textsuperscript{164} If the preacher is open to the movement of the Spirit, “the divine effluvium can flow” and the sermon can become a receptacle by which “the Spirit can penetrate and saturate.”\textsuperscript{165} It is in the Spirit’s penetration and saturation of the creation through preaching, that the Spirit disrupts the present order and God's power is manifested in world.

In further elaborating on the Holy Spirit's relationship to the preaching event, Turner suggests that the sermon itself "amounts to an invocation of the Spirit."\textsuperscript{166} According to Turner, "as an act of epiclesis, [preaching] summons the Spirit to be present and to perform whatever is claimed for God. Further, to the extent that the delivery of the message is enveloped in a ritual, preaching is a means by which grace is extended to those who receive it, thereby taking on sacramental dimensions."\textsuperscript{167} Turner embraces the notion of preaching as sacrament, or a means by which grace is transmitted; and within his theology of preaching, he also conceives of the sermon as a mode of communication of divine power. Accordingly, Turner writes:

within the tradition of the black church, preaching is a truly a manifestation of power, or to use the language of Mircea Eliade, a “kratophany.” As in a theophany, which is a manifestation of deity, kratophany refers to an object that opens people to an understanding of the transcendent while

\textsuperscript{163} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{164} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{165} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{167} Ibid.
simultaneously being rooted in the world of tangible, historical reality…in preaching, the *kratophany* is the spoken word itself and its accompanying layers of gesture. Especially within the context of the culture that sustains black preaching, there is no more *kratophanic* object, none more indicative of the presence of deity, power, and intrusion from another world, than that of the preached word.168

Within Turner’s theology, the preached word is charged with both grace and power, thereby opening the hearers to a “confrontation” between “belief or unbelief…that cannot be avoided.”169 As kratophany, the preached word is always rooted in the realities of everyday life with a “keen and penetrating focus on “this world;” in like manner, according to Turner, Christian preaching should always be understood “as a word coming from another world.”170

5.10 Ecclesiology

Theologian Frederick Ware points to William Turner as a critical source for understanding Pentecostal ecclesial and institutional life, particularly to refute those who argue that Pentecostalism has a borrowed ecclesiology and that the tradition has given no sustained attention to the doctrine.171 Turner draws upon his research in theology, black church studies, sociology of religion and religious phenomenology to provide a distinctive window into both Black Church and Pentecostal ecclesiologies, thus demonstrating the relevance of both ecclesial visions for other denominational theologies of the church. Turner conceives of the church as the *charismatically constituted community* and as such, focuses upon the “dynamic, energetic movement

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of the Spirit" within the believer and the church.  

According to Turner, "it is this vigorous movement that is the source of renewal and resistance to stasis." As the animating energy of the church and believer, in Turner's ecclesial vision, the Holy Spirit is free to move in ways that are both static and ecstatic. The charismatic constitution of the church is most clearly made manifest in this free movement of the Spirit, both within and outside of established ecclesial structures.

Understanding Black Holiness-Pentecostalism as both "a structural component of" and a "reform movement within the Black church," Turner notes that the movement's founders were among a small cadre of "black Christians around the turn of the century who came out of the mainline black denominational churches, seeking the deeper life of entire sanctification and Spirit baptism." In further elucidating the theological challenges which prompted their departure from the mainline churches, Turner writes:

Their initial concern was not so much to start a new denomination as to call the existing ones back to the wells of their spirituality. This group often found that its brand of prophetic faith and spiritual exercises were not welcomed by brothers and sisters who regarded existing forms as sufficient. Although they left both voluntarily and involuntarily, the departing ones never lost the sense of being part of the true Christian church, and they made every effort to retain purity in their faith. In their own words, they strove to "contend for the faith once delivered unto the saints."  

In light of the aforementioned comment, it is important to note the theological motivations of the early Black Pentecostal reformers. Turner highlights their personal quest for deeper experiences of the Spirit and suggests that their desire was

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173 Ibid.
176 Ibid.
to simply form charismatic fellowships of like minded persons so moved by the Spirit; fellowships characterized by freedom, vitality and the unbounded movement of the Spirit.

In articulating the need for embracing an ecclesial identity, Turner contrasts how African Americans are defined within the culture as opposed to the way in which the “charisms which are given to individual believers,” constitutes “what the epistle writer in Peter calls “lively stones,” an active expression of their new ecclesial identities in the Spirit. He writes:

Conveniently, we are often defined in this culture by our race. We stand out because of the color of our skin and the meaning that has been placed on the fact of difference within this civilization. Along with the fact of our color is a history of oppression, suppression, reaction, and struggle. If we allow it, we can be defined by our economic status or the section of town in which we live. Or we can be defined by denomination and traditional factors that begin with and magnify our lack of continuity with others.

In contrast, Turner suggests that within the body of Christ, all who have received the Spirit are defined anew:

Th[is] community is likened to a spiritual house built of stones. These are living stones, they give life to the edifice. The materials within a building have limited value outside of the structure. Put another way, the church has no life without lively members, and the members have limited life apart from a lively church.

The members of the body of Christ are drawn in by the Spirit to embrace a new ecclesial identity, not an identity dependent upon cultural identifiers such as race or socio-economic status. In drawing upon the metaphor referenced in I Peter 2:5, Turner suggests that it is only in a “spiritual house,” where everyone’s identity is

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178 William Clair Turner, Discipleship for African American Christians, 2.
179 Ibid., 3.
rooted and grounded in the Spirit, that an ecclesial structure can thrive and that apart from this structure, neither the members nor the community can be sustained.

As it relates to the activity of the Spirit within Pentecostalism (one incarnation of a charismatically constituted community), Turner argues that the “greatest and clearest” common belief of black Pentecostals is their emphasis on the reality and work of the Holy Spirit in “clearly evident ways.”180 Turner further suggests that the Holy Spirit, for black Pentecostals, is not merely a “symbol or a name in the creeds and confessions,” nor something to be contained within “structures, limited by boundaries, or impeded by any human obstacle.”181 Instead, Turner insists that:

the Spirit is held to be active, alive, and powerful in ways that are manifested within both the invisible and the visible realms of reality. Within the spiritual realm, the Spirit is experienced in intense personal and communal ways. In the visible realm, the Spirit moves upon the material world to effect demonstrations, miracles, and other acts that show God's favor and judgment. In a real sense, the entirety of the Christian life is but the movement of the Spirit.182

Turner identifies the Holy Spirit as the animating principle within the community of faith at the very center of life for the Christian believer; to be in Christ is to live ever more deeply into this movement of the Spirit. It is in this intense fellowship of believers, that they experience what Turner identifies as “communitas,” or the “shared consciousness and profound communion intentionally forged” through their participation in the movement of the Spirit.183 It is in this regard, that for Turner, “anyone in whom the Spirit dwells, producing the life of Christ, can be called a

180 William Clair Turner, “Movements in the Spirit,” 44.
181 Ibid.
182 Ibid.
Pentecostal” and the very designation of “Christian” is “limited to those who have been regenerated and filled by the Spirit, and in whom the Spirit dwells.”184 Because the very Church itself has been constituted by the Spirit, a non-Charismatic Christian is a contradiction of terms for Turner. And while Turner is the youngest of the four theologians in this study, considering them as a cohort allows for an examination of structural similarities and family resemblances between their respective theological programs and the impact of these programs upon the church, the academy and the broader society.

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Chapter Six

More Than Tongues Can Tell: On the Theologically Generous Vision of Black Pentecostal Thought

6.1 A Theologically Generous Pentecostalism?

In his monumental study, Pentecostalism: Origins and Developments Worldwide, Swiss intercultural theologian Walter Hollenweger argues for an interpretation of global Pentecostalism that is at once sui generis and also deeply ecumenical. Locating the movement’s genius in its multifarious theological roots, which he identifies as the "Black oral root," "Catholic root," "Evangelical root," "critical root" and "ecumenical root," Hollenweger seeks to credit each contributing tradition for its unique gift to the movement worldwide.\(^1\) Hollenweger summarizes the theological contribution African Americans have made to global Pentecostalism, or the “Black oral root,” as consisting of the following:

[their] orality of liturgy; narrativity of theology and witness; maximum participation at the levels of reflection, prayer and decision-making and therefore a form of community that is reconciliatory; inclusion of dreams and visions into personal and public forms of worship [which] function as a kind of icon for the individual and the community; [and] an understanding of the body/mind relationship that is informed by experiences of correspondence between body and mind, the most striking application of this insight being the ministry of healing by prayer and liturgical dance.\(^2\)

And while Hollenweger assigns a prominent role to African American spirituality in the development of a global Pentecostal theology, in relegating the theological contribution of black spirituality to orality, embodiment and other non-literary modes

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\(^2\) Ibid., 18-19.
of theologizing, Hollenweger fails to acknowledge the critical tradition of African American Pentecostal theology, which begins within the second generation of the movement with the theological writings of Ozro Jones Jr., and other black Pentecostal scholars who followed. As the examination of the four individuals in this study demonstrates, alongside the non-literary theological contributions of Black Pentecostalism, there is also a long-neglected critical theological tradition of written African-American Pentecostal theology. While this tradition has grown significantly, until now, an account is yet to be given of the ways in which African American Pentecostal theology differs from dominant paradigms of Pentecostal theology emanating from North America. The "family resemblance"\textsuperscript{3} between the theological projects of Jones, Clemmons, Forbes and Turner illustrate a distinctive yet cohesive trajectory of black Pentecostal thought, existing alongside of non-literary modes of theologizing and thus problematizing Hollenweger’s overly simplistic interpretation.

In his 1979 article, “Exclusivist Tendencies in Pentecostal Self-Definition: A Critique from Black Theology,” Black Pentecostal political scientist James Tinney spotlights what for him constitutes the major problems of North American Pentecostal theology. Tinney forcefully opines: "the truth of the matter is, certain glossolalic denominations which have had access to wealth and mass media have waged an effective, if exclusivistic, campaign to define the term Pentecostal in a very

\textsuperscript{3} The term "family resemblance" as used here is taken from Viennese philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein. Please see Ludwig Wittgenstein’s *Philosophical Investigations* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1967).
narrow theological, racial and cultural sense.”

Tinney discusses the implications of this limited theological definition at length when he writes:

Resulting from this has been implicit parochialism, chauvinism, and racism among the white classical Pentecostals. This exclusivistic tendency is extremely unfortunate for several reasons: (1) It reveals the domination of Pentecostalism by non-Pentecostal, fundamentalist doctrines; (2) It perpetuates isolation of various sects and prevents wider inter-Pentecostal activities; (3) it prevents many glossolalic denominations from enjoying full acceptance and fellowship within white interdenominational agencies and groups… (4) It reinforces social and political divisions, relegating to a subordinate category those churches which represent mostly Blacks, the unemployed and underemployed, radical religionist, and indigenous believers; (5) it has an unbelievable impact on non-Western countries in which distinctions and definitions [originating in the United States] are cited as authoritative for derivative distinctions made [outside of the West]--effectively excluding most of the work of God from fellowship with missionary Pentecostalism.

In counter to the narrow foci and exclusivistic tendencies that dominate the broader scope of North American Pentecostalism, within the scholarly tradition of African American Pentecostal theology, there exists what I define here as a “theologically generous” Pentecostal vision as demonstrated through the writings of the scholars in this study. My concept of theological generosity is conceptually indebted to postliberal theologian Hans Frei’s notion of “generous orthodoxy.” In this case, theological generosity seeks to avoid a combative fundamentalist orientation to Pentecostalism and seeks an open engagement with a variety of theological currents associated with evangelical, liberal and liberation theologies. Through examination of several key "family resemblances" within the theological programs of the cohort of Black Pentecostal theologians examined here, their theologically generous vision

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5 Ibid., 33.
is more clearly revealed. Highlighting family resemblances within the theological programs of these four figures reveal their construction of the outline of a common theological project. The theologically generous Pentecostalism of Jones, Clemmons, Forbes and Turner, through its shared revisionist Pentecostal pneumatology, deep ecumenical openness borne of this pneumatological understanding, and its relationship to church, academy and society provides an alternative modeling of Pentecostal theology within North America. But nowhere is the theologically generosity of African American theological thought more apparent than in the tradition's broad and dynamic understanding of the Holy Spirit.

6.2 Family Resemblances: Pneumatological Reconfigurations

As evidenced within the preceding chapters, this study clearly demonstrates that for black Pentecostal theologians, as is the case for nearly all Pentecostal theologians, the central category for theological reflection is pneumatology. Informing and influencing Black Pentecostalism’s entire theological system, pneumatology is understood as a means to both "correct and complement the mainly Western approach that has dominated" the pneumatological discourse.⁷ For most North American Pentecostal theologians, pneumatology has focused primarily on Spirit baptism, as evidenced and attended by tongues-speech. But for Turner, the “contribution of African American Pentecostal theologians” is to refuse to use tongues-speech as the “Pentecostal litmus test" which makes glossolalia normative or even compulsory.⁸ Turner argues that black Pentecostal pneumatology differs in that

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⁸ William Clair Turner, “Pneumatology: Contributions From African American Christian Thought to the Pentecostal Theological Task,” in *AfroPentecostalism: Black Pentecostal and Charismatic*
it "gestures toward making explicit the pneumatological hermeneutic implicit in its prophetic version of Christian faith."\(^9\) This faith, having been "baptized both in the Spirit…and in the fires of racist oppression"\(^10\) within America, "has borne witness, in the sighs of afflicted bodies, to the liberating mission of the Spirit."\(^11\)

In their respective theologies of the Spirit, these scholars are theologically charitable and non-reductionist, thus resisting a glossocentric pneumatological framework. They do not limit the Holy Spirit to *glossolalia* nor do they elevate *glossolalia* as the definitive mark of the Holy Spirit's work; and neither do they regard *glossolalia* as the indisputable, essential evidence of Holy Spirit baptism. And while it is noteworthy that each of these scholars attempt to dislodge the theological construction of Spirit baptism accompanied by evidential *glossolalia*, equally as intriguing is the distinctive strategies used by these theologians in their attempts to dislodge this dogmatic epistemological construction. Within the critical tradition of Black Pentecostal thought, *glossolalia*, along with other gifts of the Spirit, are better understood as significations of the Spirit, pointing beyond themselves to the sovereignty of the Spirit who is God.

In seeking to dismantle theological proposals that sought to elevate one spiritual gift above another, Clemmons argued that "the supreme gift of the Spirit is not the spectacular power by which the individual may gain preeminence, but the self-effacing love by which the body is built up and knit together."\(^12\)

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\(^10\) Ibid.

\(^11\) Ibid., 186.

\(^12\) Ithiel Clemmons, "The Church of God in Christ and the Initial Evidence Controversy of 1907," Inaugural International Holy Ghost Conference of the Church of God in Christ (Birmingham, AL, January 16-18, 1990), 10.
by the attempts of some to "pin down" or normativize manifestations of the Spirit,

Clemmons argues for the many-sidedness of the Spirit. According to Clemmons:

The constant quest to locate [the Spirit] here or there is elusive and a
testimony to the many-sidedness of God. From the very beginning the
biblical references to the activity of the Spirit shows [that] on the one hand
[the Spirit] is illuminating, ordering, guiding; on the other hand [the Spirit's]
distinctive manifestations are in power, strength and ecstasy. At one time [the
Spirit] is at work in one way, [then] again [the Spirit] is at work in another
way...we could go on endlessly illustrating the many-sidedness of God's
Spirit...for different persons and peoples, at different times, in different ways,
for different purposes."13

For Clemmons, the Spirit has many sides and the Spirit's work is neither exhausted
or limited due to the believer's experience of one particular charism. In addition to
Clemmons' contention for a range of manifestations and experiences of the Spirit,
Jones concurs when he states "the Holy Spirit performs more than one work in the
believer; [the Spirit] not only “baptizes” with the Spirit, but [the Spirit] convinces,
convicts, converts, gives a new birth, sanctifies, gives gifts. In fact, since the Spirit,
too, is God, and therefore cannot be limited, neither can the works of the Spirit be
limited or numbered."14

Like Clemmons and Jones before him, Forbes’ own pneumatology insists that
the Spirit does not "only manifest…in one or two ways,"15 but rather the Spirit
manifests in “varied ways and sundry places, sometimes in ways we have known
before and sometimes in ways that are strange”16 to believers. Forbes argues that:
"the Holy Spirit is sovereign and not bound to [human] expectation. [The Spirit] is
free to bless when and where and whom [the Spirit] pleases and under conditions of

13 Ibid., 11-12.
14 Ozro Jones, As We Walk with God: A Collection of Original Topics of the Young People's Willing
15 James A. Forbes Jr., “Shall We Call This Dream Progressive Pentecostalism?,” Spirit: A Journal
16 Ibid., 15.
[the Spirit’s] own choice.”17 Concerning the question of evidential tongues accompanying Spirit baptism, Forbes confesses: “I am not prepared to describe or limit the way by which such baptismal experience will be manifested.”18 For Forbes, like other manifestations of the Spirit, Spirit baptism “is God’s gift of power and therefore is to be received when, where and in what manner God chooses to send it.”19 Calling into question the very notion of evidence (as a theological meaning) and believing that Pentecostalism is “far more than a tongues movement,” Turner’s preference is to “discuss tongues under the caption of charisms (grace gifts) and not as the litmus for orthodox experience of God.”20 While regarding glossolalia as “one among many gifts of the Spirit,” for Turner, “it is to be cherished, but not as the greatest gift, and surely not to puff up the believer.”21 For Turner, while tongues is a manifestation of the Spirit, it is never to be regarded as supreme nor is it to be regarded as the subject of human scrutiny or validation. Neither Jones, Clemmons, Forbes, or Turner regard glossolalia as the theological benchmark for the Spirit’s manifestation, nor do they uphold tongues as supreme above the other gifts of the Spirit. For the individuals examined, glossolalia is but one of the Spirit's gifts and must be understood alongside of other charisms of the Spirit as signs of the sovereign Spirit of God.

In this cohort’s insistence on safeguarding the sovereignty of the Spirit and in their refusal to limit the free movement of the Spirit to any one particular

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18 Ibid., 98.
19 Ibid., 110.
21 Ibid.
manifestation, these scholars find resonance with the improvisationally inflected pneumatology of black intercultural theologian David Emmanuel Goatley.

Employing the concept of “improvisation” as used within critical jazz theory, Goatley sees improvisation as a “useful hermeneutic for pneumatology.”22 While admitting that the “idea of improvisation is frightening to some who insist on arguing for the consistency of God,”23 Goatley suggests that seeing the consistency in God “can never include constricting God to behave in ways consistent with human predictions of God's activity.”24 Goatley goes on to say “that to predict accurately God's activity with any reliability is presumptuous at best and blasphemous at worst.”25 He continues:

While God is consistent in Godself, and while we can expect God to act in certain ways, God is not obligated to act in ways predicted or prescribed by humanity. Neither is God forbidden to act in ways prohibited or proscribed by humanity. God can and does exceedingly abundantly more than we can think or ask. God never ceases to amaze and surprise. God does work in mysterious ways, God's wonders to perform. This, at heart, can be understood in terms of the improvisation of God.26

Like the theologians in this study, Goatley’s pneumatology insists upon the free and sovereign movement of the Spirit in the life of the believer. Just as Goatley suggests that “improvisation requires a certain degree of expectancy, but it also entails surprise and unpredictability,”27 the Spirit remains free to move as God wills. In ways uncharacteristic of the dominant paradigm of North American Pentecostal theology, this improvisational understanding and emphasis on the sovereignty of the

23 Ibid., 12.
24 Ibid.
25 Ibid.
26 Ibid., 11.
27 Ibid., 12.
Spirit creates space for dialogue and fellowship with other Christians who have differing experiences of God.

Dale Irvin, president of New York Theological Seminary, argues that the impact of this cohort’s theological vision is that it has helped the church to find its “way to a more dynamic understanding of the baptism of the Spirit and the gift of tongues.”

Sonja Horvath, a Caucasian missionary and convert to COGIC, provides a personal example of the impact of this broadened pneumatological vision upon her own spirituality. Horvath heard a message preached by Clemmons in 1982, while she was a student at Moody Bible Institute and new to the Pentecostal movement. In a tribute written in memory of Clemmons after his death, Horvath recalls:

I had been indoctrinated from the evangelical perspective. I was taught that unknown tongues, charismatic gifts, and the miracles of the early church had now subsided. It was people like Bishop Clemmons who could articulate the Pentecostal experience that helped bridge the gap in my understanding of the full gospel. By spearheading forums such as the two sessions of the Holy Ghost Conference, he opened the door for many of us who desired to comprehend the ongoing work of God's Spirit.

Horvath’s comments about Clemmons are indicative of the impact that he, along with Jones, Forbes and Turner, had upon expanding the discourse about pneumatology within the church. In fashioning “an alternative to Pentecostalism as evangelicalism,” this group, in “circumventing evangelical theology,” was able to expand “Pentecostal theological distinctives beyond glossolalia.” As an alternative to evangelicalism, this theologically generous vision freed them to engage with

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28 Dale Irvin, interview by Eric Williams, July 9, 2014.
30 David Daniels, interview by Eric Williams, March 8, 2014.
31 David Daniels, interview by Eric Williams, March 8, 2014.
theological traditions beyond Pentecostalism and allowed for ecumenical theology to become their dominant theological paradigm.32

6.3 Family Resemblances: Ecumenical Inclinations

The theologically generous Pentecostalism of the examined cohort, borne of its pneumatology, is deeply ecumenical in nature, which enables an inclusive ecclesiology. This significant ecclesial inclusivity enabled the various members of the cohort to identify with and, to varying degrees, seek to serve the wider church beyond their own cultural, theological and denominational silos. In his paper, “Racialized Ecclesiology, Oneness, and Catholicity,” given at the 2008 Gathering of The Ekklesia Project, white Baptist theologian Michael Broadway argues for the relevancy of Turner’s 2002 study, Discipleship for African American Christians: A Journey Through the Church Covenant for the broader ecumenical church.

According to Broadway:

[Turner’s] writing displays his immersion and formation in the wisdom and strength of the black church tradition. However, the marketing strategy of the publisher, who targeted it for “African American Christians,” misses some of the point. Turner cannot help but do theology from an African American perspective. It is who he is, and it is the setting in which God has taken hold of him to be a servant. But Turner is also a catholic theologian…Turner deserves to be treated as more than a sectarian from among the black churches. His theology speaks to the church catholic. It is only by receiving this catholic word from those usually categorized as residing at the margins that the contemporary failures of catholicity and oneness can be challenged. One only need look to another of his published works to realize that Turner is not writing in a theological ghetto. His work on the United Holy Church of America, brimming with pneumatological insight, was solicited and

32 In their engagement of ecumenical theology, their primary interlocutors are systematic theology, Christian existentialism, political theology, and black theology.
While Broadway must be challenged for conflating marketing efforts to "African American Christians" with "a theological ghetto," it is significant that he names Turner as a “catholic theologian” because of Turner’s ecumenical orientation in his ministry and scholarship. This shared catholic orientation toward ecumenism is evident in the theological programs of this entire cohort of Pentecostal scholars, as Clemmons, Jones, Forbes and Turner all engaged in ecumenical outreach in ways still uncommon to the broader North American Pentecostal traditions. This shared catholic orientation and broad ecclesial vision modeled by this cohort enabled them to each symbolically testify to the unity of the church through their engagement with other Christian reformations beyond their formative black Pentecostal tradition.

While the entirety of Jones' ministerial career was spent within COGIC, Jones' ecumenical contribution to the broader Christian church was made from his office as bishop. Jones used his position, and his own theological convictions regarding women’s equality, to ordain nineteen COGIC women between the years of 1982-1990. Jones helped some of them to secure meaningful contexts for ordained ministry beyond the denomination, given the limitations placed upon women ministers within COGIC. According to the Reverend Dr. Del Rio Ligons-Berry, one of the women whom Jones ordained and recommended for pastoral ministry within the PCUSA, Jones "gave a freedom and respect to women which allowed them a

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platform to be ordained and to serve.” While some served as military chaplains and missionaries abroad, Ligons-Berry notes that some also "served as hospital, university and police chaplains and pastors," and that "several have distinguished themselves in denominations outside of Church of God in Christ." In Jones’ willingness to ordain both male and female ministers within COGIC, and send them forth for ecumenical service within other Christian denominations, we can see his significant ecumenical contribution to the broader church.

While Jones’ recommendation of COGIC ministers for service within other denominations demonstrates his catholic and democratic orientation to ministry, Clemmons had a more intentional ecumenical agenda. Clemmons was heavily involved with the various Protestant ecumenical councils in New York City and various ventures in Black church ecumenism in the United States, but it was his work in intra-Pentecostal dialogue which remains the distinguishing feature of his engagement in ecumenical relations. As a strong proponent of intra-Pentecostal dialogue, Clemmons spent significant time and energy challenging the leaders of various Pentecostal denominations to live up to their confession of faith concerning the unity of the Spirit. In articulating the single greatest obstacle that Pentecostalism needed to overcome for viability in the future, Clemmons noted:

the great challenge faced by North American Pentecostal leaders is language - theological, historiographical, cultural, ecclesiological, racial, national, political, economic...We face a formidable task of moving away from the

36 Ibid., 10.
fear-inspired, hegemonic, fundamentalistic, exclusivistic linguistics of the past to the language of inclusion needed for the future.\textsuperscript{37}

For Clemmons, it was imperative that Pentecostal denominations overcome divisions internal to their own tradition before dialogue with the wider church was possible. Believing that such a vision would "demand patience, imagination, flexibility, honesty, openness as well as prayerfulness and worship," Clemmons promoted this unity for the duration of his life, in both his ministry and scholarship.

And while Clemmons worked to promote Christian unity through his participation in intra-Pentecostal ecumenical exchanges, Forbes did so as an ordained Pentecostal minister who promoted Christian unity while working from the outside. As one who very early on "sense[d] a call to ecumenical ministry,"\textsuperscript{38} Forbes' vocation "involved searching for ways to help the larger church community experience the empowerment found in the Pentecostal emphasis on the experience of the Spirit."\textsuperscript{39} As the pastor of a liberal Protestant, interdenominational church, a professor at a non-denominational seminary and a highly sought after lecturer, preacher and conference speaker, Forbes' trans-denominational liaisons were so frequent that he would self-described as an "ecumenical missionary."\textsuperscript{40} In commenting upon the ecumenical ministry of Forbes and his impact upon the American church, Dale Irvin states that Forbes, his former pastor and friend, "showed how to build bridges in ministry from the Pentecostal tradition to the wider Christian world, all the while challenging the classical doctrine of tongues as initial


\textsuperscript{39}Ibid.

\textsuperscript{40}James A. Forbes Jr., “But By My Spirit” (Presentation, 91st Annual Holy Convocation of the Church of Christ in Christ, Memphis, TN, November 13, 1998.)
evidence as being sufficient for the fuller theological explication of the tradition." In doing so, says Irvin, "Forbes helped redefine Pentecostalism in the eyes of the wider academic world." Irvin also argues that "by being invited to teach at Union, then later lecture at such places as Princeton and Yale...Forbes has had a major impact upon Protestant theological education." In addition to his impact upon the church and American theological education, Forbes' openness to and radical hospitality toward other faith traditions would thrust him into a vocation of interfaith cooperation.

Like Forbes, though ordained within the UHCA, Turner's ecumenism was also broad enough to allow him to pastor outside of his own denomination. In addition to pastoring within the Baptist tradition, Turner's entire teaching career has been spent on the theological faculty of a United Methodist Church (UMC) divinity school. Turner was an early participant in the dialogue of the PCCNA, slated as a major presenter at the historic 1994 conference in Memphis, and he continues to participate in SPS as an intra-Pentecostal scholarly project. However, given the particularities of his own formation, training and vocation as a theological educator and pastor, his primary public for ecumenical engagement is the black church. Given his understanding of the black church as a "midwife of emancipation to a people seeking to be free," Turner promotes dialogue between various Black church traditions, while also simultaneously maintaining "there can be no real ecumenical

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41 Dale Irvin, interview by Eric Williams, July 9, 2014.
42 Dale Irvin, interview by Eric Williams, July 9, 2014.
43 Dale Irvin, interview by Eric Williams, July 9, 2014.
movement [in America] until...the black tradition is truly incorporated."\textsuperscript{45}

Concerned with the exclusion of the Black Church from the wider ecumenical conversation, Turner opines that the story of American Christianity "cannot even approach accuracy without due consideration of the Black Church and its traditions."\textsuperscript{46} Without the witness of African American Christianity, says Turner, "the ecumenical movement can never be more than a farce."\textsuperscript{47} Turner understands both the Black church tradition and the Pentecostal movement as being reflective of traditions of "protest...[against] enlightenment...religion," and he further argues that post-enlightenment Christian theologies within the West often leave "too little room for mystery."\textsuperscript{48} Turner’s desire to preserve “mystery” as a theological category within Christian spirituality reconnects his traditions to the longer history of the ecumenical church.

As the spiritual heirs of both the black church and the Pentecostal traditions Jones, Clemmons, Forbes and Turner, each believed that the gifts of their inherited traditions could enrich and potentially be enriched by the gifts of the wider Christian community. As self-conscious "theological narrators"\textsuperscript{49} and ecumenical "bridge-building theologians,"\textsuperscript{50} the examined individuals sought to "enter dialogue with others without the advantage of a privileged cultural [or theological] position."\textsuperscript{51}

According to Forbes, such bridge-building theologians "bring respect and sensitivity

\textsuperscript{46} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{47} Turner, "The Black Tradition and the Ecumenical Movement," p.45
\textsuperscript{48} Ibid., 52-53.
\textsuperscript{49} L. Roger Owens, \textit{The Shape of Participation: A Theology of Church Practices} (Eugene: Cascade Books, 2010), 12.
\textsuperscript{51} Ibid.
for cross-cultural conversations in which dogmatic and systematic formulations [are]...not the primary or preferred form of theological expression.” Given their shared catholic theological orientation and ecumenical openness, this cohort was able to craft a vision of Pentecostal ecclesiality, deeply connected to the larger Christian body, which could learn from and be engaged with the broader Christian tradition.

6.4 Family Resemblances: Racial Considerations

Perhaps the single most divisive issue to emerge within the over one hundred year history of the Pentecostal movement in North America is the bedeviling problematic of racism. Though it had been said during the early days of the "collective effervescence” of the Azusa Street Revival that, "the color-line had been washed away by the blood,” it would not be long at all before the stain of the color-line would mysteriously reappear. In a real sense, however, the problem of racism, and the troubling constructions of whiteness and blackness, has haunted the American church since the very beginning. In his very insightful and challenging study, Beyond Ontological Blackness: An Essay on African American Religious and Cultural Criticism, black philosophical theologian Victor Anderson castigates James Cone (and the theologians who inherit his flaw), for developing a theological system built upon “the dialectical structures that categorical racism and white racial ideology bequeathed to African-American intellectuals.” In doing so, Anderson claims that

52 Ibid.
53 This term “collective effervescence” was coined by Émile Durkheim in his early work, The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life, originally published in 1912.
modern black theologians have created a closed system of oppression, perpetually yoking the oppressor with the oppressed.

Branding Cone’s flawed existentially and politically binding ideology as ontological blackness, Anderson sees no possibility of cultural transcendence and human fulfillment as long as the category of race is essentialized and not understood as being socially constructed. In further explicating the incongruities and impossibilities associated with such a fatalistic hermeneutic, Anderson writes:

Blackness has become a totality of meaning, it cannot point to any transcendent meaning beyond itself without also fragmenting. Because black life is fundamentally determined by black suffering and resistance to whiteness (the power of non-being), black existence is without the possibility of transcendence from the blackness that whiteness created. Without transcendence from the determinacy of whiteness, black theology’s promise of liberation remains existentially a function of black self-consciousness (to see oneself as black, free, and self-determined).56

Though Anderson carefully and critically deconstructs both the point of departure and telos of Cone’s oppression-determined model, scarce attention has been given to other black theological proposals which do not fall into the trap of ontological blackness. The cohort of theologians in this study attempt to account for race outside of the limited construction of ontological blackness within their theological projects.

In a pastoral meditation written at the height of the Black consciousness era (circa 1965), Jones discussed the issue of blackness in his reflection entitled, "Is Jesus Black Like Us?" Concerned with the "increasing number of Black youth" who were "renouncing Christianity because they regarded it to be a white racist religion, Jones drew upon his philosophical sensibilities to offer his community an image of

56 Ibid., 92.
Jesus who was not ontologically but rather existentially Black.⁵⁷ According to Jones:

The question must not be confused. It is not: is Jesus "black" like us in a racial sense, for there is no way to answer this question with any absolute reliability. Because: a) there is no fool-proof way to determine "race," b) the bible says absolutely nothing about the physical appearance of the "historical" Jesus while he lived on earth. This latter point is crucial, for the Bible is the only authoritative eye-witness account we have about the historical Jesus. The question then that concerns us is: is Jesus "black" like us in an experiential sense (or existentially)? Is Jesus identified with the "black experience?"

Jesus is not only like us in suffering; he is "in all points" like us, and every [person]. Every [person] who is "visibly different" like us shares our "black experience" - even though [their] visible difference may be ethical and moral rather than racial.⁵⁸

As evidenced in Chapter Two, Jones personally struggled with the issue of race, going so far as to construct a post-racial understanding of humanity based upon his theology that in Christ there is no difference between persons. And yet, Jones also responds to the issue of blackness as a Christological concern. He works to create a Christological and existential construction of blackness to include all people, regardless of skin color, who identify with the ethical and moral experience of black people. Like Jones, Clemmons also circumvented a narrow notion of blackness through a theology of symbolic blackness, which was inclusive of persons of non-African descent. Clemmons argued that inherent within this notion of symbolic blackness, blackness “stands for all of the oppressed, for the community of the hurt.”⁵⁹ As early as 1974, Clemmons broadened white German theologian Roswith

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⁵⁷ Ozro Jones, *As We Walk with God*, 684.
⁵⁸ Ibid.
Gerloff’s notion of blackness convincing her that because of her solidarity with oppressed people, she also participated in the experience of blackness.  

Prefiguring the neoteric discourse known as white theology, and drawing upon his Pentecostal sensibilities, as early as 1978, Forbes described racism as demon possession. In order for the American church to live into its vocation, Forbes argued that the church needed to be delivered from this racism. He writes: “but the heart of the matter of exorcising racism is whether people in power will become accountable to the God who made them or whether they will continue to play God by daring to attach to racial difference distinctions which the Creator never intended.”  

For racist whites who dare to make racial distinctions where God has only made difference, thus manifesting the demon of racism, Forbes would call for their deliverance. Seeing racial diversity as a gift of God, for Forbes, the construction of blackness (as well as whiteness) is part of God’s good creation. But when privilege is added to the construction of whiteness, Forbes calls for the “sanctification of whiteness” as an act of *kenosis*.  

Whereas Turner understands Pentecostalism as a “very black thing,” and he believes that the religions of African descended peoples in the Americas possess a “black factor,” in his work on his own tradition, Turner argues that blackness is preserved through the interconnectedness of holiness, spiritual empowerment and

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61 For an example of a study conducted under the rubric of white theology, please see: James W. Perkinson’s *White Theology: Outing Supremacy in Modernity* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2004).  
prophetic social consciousness. For Turner, while the blackness of Black Holiness-Pentecostalism is religious consciousness, race is a social construct of human origins. In his work, Turner deals with the particularity of blackness in own community’s religious consciousness, arguing that a focus on his own tradition is not exclusionary, but actually can be a resource for broadening the wider church’s understanding of the new humanity in Jesus Christ. As with their theologies of ecumenism and the Spirit, in their theological conceptions of race, this cohort of scholars envisions a wider ecclesial community which is more open to difference and diversity; they work to create a community which embodies theological generosity and hospitality. Unlike trajectories of Pentecostalism which are exclusivistic, parochial and narrow in their scope, the shared theological project of Jones, Clemmons, Forbes and Turner grapples with fostering theologies that are open, charitable and affirming of diverse experiences of God.

6.5 More Than Tongues Can Tell

As theologically-trained religious intellectuals, Jones, Clemmons, Forbes and Turner advanced the theological conversation within black Pentecostal circles through their preaching, teaching, pastoring, writing, and ecumenical leadership. As second and third generation Pentecostals, they address the spoken and unspoken theological questions of their generation as well as engaged the questions and issues of the larger society. They were theologians, and as such, they framed their contemporary ecclesial and societal realities in theological terms. They marshaled theological resources to probe and engage these realities and they nurtured new ways of modeling Pentecostal spirituality.
As a theological cohort, these individuals crafted a theological project that was at once progressive, Pentecostal and theologically generous. This charitable and progressive theological vision values the life of the mind within the Pentecostal theological enterprise and is both critical and constructive in its theological engagement. This vision of Pentecostalism is open to ecumenical exchange and is committed to employing theology in emancipatory and liberating ways for both societal and personal transformation. For Jones, Clemmons, Forbes and Turner, theology must be biblically grounded, theologically sound, and practically focused in order for it to be emancipatory, relevant and liberating. Consequently, this broad and charitable theological perspective is progressive on social issues, ecumenical in spirit, generous in disposition, and transformative in orientation.

The theologically generous Pentecostalism modeled by Jones, Clemmons, Forbes and Turner, created a vital space for educated and progressive black Pentecostals during the middle and late 20th century. Pentecostal intellectuals and activists alike were attracted to these new perspectives embodied by these respective individuals. This cohort offered an alternative to the “Pentecostalism as evangelicalism” model, and instead of evangelicalism serving as the dominant theological template, they identified ecumenical theology as a less restrictive theological paradigm. For each of these scholars, different theological interlocutors were chosen: systematic theology, public theology, Christian existentialism, political theology, and black theology. By remaining untethered to evangelical theology, the cohort’s theological generosity enabled them to expand Pentecostal theological distinctives beyond glossolalia. These theologians, through their theological projects and ecclesial leadership, created a space for black Pentecostal seminary graduates to
believe that seminary-educated clergy have a place to serve within the Pentecostal church. They further demonstrated the range of diversity in terms of ministerial and theological orientations within the tradition, thus providing multiple models for embodying black Pentecostal spirituality.

The lives and scholarship of Jones, Clemmons, Forbes and Turner demonstrate the theological complexity of African American Pentecostal thought, a project which serves as a distinctive theological signification within North American Pentecostal theology. Drawing from African American history and colloquial culture, Charles Long describes the process of signifying as casting an alternative discourse which “parallels the real argument [of the dominant discourse] but gains its power of meaning from the structure of the discourse itself without the signification being subjected to the rules of the discourse.” Jones, Clemmons, Forbes and Turner participate within the classical Pentecostal theological discourse as theologians of their respective denominations, but through their ministry and scholarship, they each provide alternative interpretations of cherished Pentecostal beliefs. This cohort embraced broader visions of ecumenism, ecclesiology, pneumatology and vocational identities within their shared theological projects, in contrast to more limited ways of understanding Pentecostal identity. While much of contemporary Pentecostal scholarship has focused on “tongues speech” as the definitive feature of the movement’s theology, the work of Jones, Clemmons, Forbes and Turner decenter glossolalia, proving that the full scope of Pentecostalism is more than tongues can tell, more than the manifestation of a single spiritual gift. The impact and legacy of

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this cohort is a reminder of the fullness and richness of Black Pentecostalism as a field of highly significant cultural and theological meaning.

6.6 **In Other Tongues and Other Voices: On Further Extending Generosity**

As an outgrowth of both the vision of Pentecostal community offered in the current study, and the argument presented here concerning Black Pentecostalism’s theological generosity, it is imperative that other trajectories of Black Pentecostalism be engaged for a more robust account of the tradition for the future. These trajectories include the engagement with the scholarship of Pentecostal/Post-Pentecostal women; the influx of African Pentecostal immigrant communities; and the need to situate African American Pentecostalism within its broader African Atlantic mosaic.

6.7 **Future Trajectories: Engagement With Scholarship of Pentecostal & Former Pentecostal Women**

The presence and participation of African American women within the Pentecostal movement has been attested to from the very beginning, including details about women’s conversion experiences, accounts of their healing, and their efforts in early Pentecostal missions and evangelism. Yet, due to the social mores and conventions of the time (and the realities of sexism and patriarchy), male-dominated chronicles of the movement often excluded and minimized the significant work women performed in establishing, leading, and growing the Pentecostal movement. A cursory review of early Pentecostal historiographies reveal the names of early female converts and participants at Azusa, the female founders of various denominations, and famous women civic leaders who were members of Pentecostal churches. This history includes key figures such as: Mother Lizzie Robinson (General Overseer of Women's Work, COGIC); Bishop Ida B. Robinson (founder of
the Mount Sinai Holy Church; Bishop Magdalena Lewis Tate (founder of the Church of the Living God, the Pillar and Ground of the Truth); Fannie Lou Hamer (civil rights activist); Dr. Arena Mallory (president of Saints Industrial and Literary School and Junior College); and Mother Lillian B. Coffey (National Supervisor, Women's Department, COGIC). There also exists a robust literature on the role of church and community mothers within Black Pentecostal churches.67 However, this literature and these histories fail to engage the scholarly productions of African American Pentecostal women and how the perspectives of these women scholars critique, correct and complement blind spots and biases of a male-dominated black Pentecostal scholarship.

One such female scholar whose body of work could be engaged as a counterpoint to the male-dominated scholarship is humanistic anthropologist, Dr. Deidre Crumbley. Crumbley holds a master’s degree from Harvard Divinity School and a doctorate from Northwestern University in anthropology and she is the product of an independent black Pentecostal church in Philadelphia, founded by an African American woman and still under black female leadership.68 Her earlier academic work focused on gender and institution-building in a West African indigenous church movement, culminating in the 2008 publication of Spirit, Structure and Flesh: Gendered Experiences in African Instituted Churches. Crumbley returned to her Pentecostal roots in a series of articles and her 2013 monograph, Saved and

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Sanctified: The Rise of a Storefront Church in Great Migration Philadelphia. Her distinctive angle as a humanistic anthropologist provides new windows of learning to complement other studies of Black Pentecostalism, outside of the field of theology.

Reflecting on her experience of writing about the sanctified church in which she was raised, Crumbley writes:

My career as an anthropologist, including the writing of this work, is an outgrowth of The Church, in which I was imbued with spirit-grounded hermeneutics...growing up "saved and sanctified" means living on the rim of the dominant culture, constantly looking at it askance. The Church has produced its own academic, who by writing this book, has documented its history, explored its sociological significance, and given voice to the saints who are too often silenced by those with the power and resources to control what is published, included in the school curricula, or deemed worthy of media coverage. 69

Those with the power and resources to control what is published within black Pentecostal scholarship are often male scholars, to the exclusion of women’s voices. Crumbley’s anthropological account of her childhood church offers a window into Black Pentecostalism, a movement she calls a “unique formation of Christianity configured within the cultural crucible of the African Diaspora in the United States.”70 And by documenting the history of the African American female founder of this particular congregation, Crumbley fills in historical gaps in Pentecostal scholarship which has often failed to credit women’s leadership roles in the development and growth of the Pentecostal movement.

As opposed to studies of Pentecostalism which focus on contributions to ministry, theology and history, Crumbley explores Black Pentecostalism as a way of being human. She argues that Pentecostalism is about the “universal human quest for

69 Ibid., 172.
70 Ibid., 1.
truth and meaning through faith” and that being a black Pentecostal is “one more way of being human and faithful across historical time and social space.” In addition to Crumbley, women scholars including Anthea Butler, Carla Bowens, Leslie Callahan and Judith Casselberry help to provide cultural, historical and epistemological windows into overlooked dimensions of Black Pentecostalism, thus providing a fuller and more faithful account of the tradition for the future. In addition to highlighting the voices of women, a scholarly focus on the new African diaspora is crucial for the future of Black Pentecostalism in America.

6.8 Future Trajectories: Engagement of New African Diasporan Pentecostalisms in America

In his insightful essay, Meeting Beyond These Shores: Black Pentecostalism, Black Theology, and the Global Context, religious historian Dale Irvin offers a compelling recommendation for the future of dialogue between Black Pentecostalism and Black Theologies in North America. According to Irvin, the two traditions "are never going to get an adequate conversation underway... if their dialogue takes place predominantly on European or North American intellectual and social terrain.” Arguing that this terrain is infused with "colonial memories" and "dominated by the canons of authority that derive exclusively from modern Western experience" and "oppression," to advance the conversation, Irvin calls for new dialogue partners and resources from "beyond the shores" of Western theology. Given that within recent years the West has undergone "significant transformation under the impact of global

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71 Ibid.
72 Ibid., 172.
74 Ibid., 242.
transnational migrations" and that presently "one can find alternative contexts of world Christian experience close at hand," in calling for a dialogue located "beyond the shores" of Western theology, Irvin argues that both traditions can "discover resources that each needs to move forward."

And while Irvin stops short of identifying the non-Western theological interlocutors he envisions participating in this exchange, he is careful to note that this dialogue "need not be physically located in spaces outside North America." In doing so, Irvin signals a contemporary religious and sociological phenomenon that is noted by scholars of religion, social scientists and migration theorists alike: the advent and proliferation of African immigrant religious communities across the nation over the past three decades, which has drastically transformed the American religious landscape. Regarding this vast movement of African immigrants (who bring their religions with them, among other cultural traditions), urban affairs correspondent Sam Roberts of the New York Times notes: "since 1990…more [continental-born Africans] have arrived voluntarily than the total who disembarked in chains before the United States outlawed international slave trafficking in 1807." Accordingly, the religious dimension of this phenomenon, named by scholars of religion as the “new African religious diaspora,” provides an unsurpassed opportunity for dialogue between what is now two distinctive trajectories of African migrants now residing in the United States.

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75 Ibid., 242-3.
76 Ibid., 242.
78 The term “new African religious diaspora” is used to name this parallel sociological phenomenon in North America and Europe. For a series of discussions on historical, theoretical and social scientific perspectives on the new African religious diaspora in the United States see: Jacob Olupona & Regina
And while the New African religious diaspora is comprised of adherents from a myriad of African religious traditions, in this new African religious diaspora, African Christianity is dominant among these expressions.\textsuperscript{79} Of these Christian churches, according to historian of religion, Afe Adogame, the "Pentecostal/Charismatic churches represent the most visible variety" in this new "geo-religious landscape" and these churches represent the "most remarkable geographical spread and mobility" among the new African immigrant congregations.\textsuperscript{80} The future of African American Pentecostal scholarship, if it is to remain viable, must engage with emerging scholarly voices from this African Pentecostal diaspora, given each tradition's common origins in Africa; their common orientation to the Spirit; their common belief structures and religious practices; and both traditions unprecedented growth and influence within the United States over the past 30 years. In establishing a dialogue between New World African and New African Diasporan Pentecostal traditions in America, a number of issues might be considered. While liberation theologians have argued for over half a century that social location shapes the theological conversation, a discussion must first be held about the United States as a hermeneutical situation and Africa as both historical reality and religious image.

Given their involuntary removal from the continent, according to Charles Long, for African Americans, the image of Africa is unique as “the image of the land


points to the religious meaning of the land,” and despite having no residential
experience of Africa, its image in their (in the black) religious imagination[s]
“emerges as one invested with great historical and religious possibilities.”81 For
continental Africans, the image of Africa serves a different religious function
because according to Long, “Africans know and live a concrete relationship” with
Africa, and for them, “Africa as a reality is embedded in their customs, speech, dress
and all the normal forms of cultural and social reality.”82 Due to their vastly different
relationships to the land and the function of the image of Africa as a religious
meaning for both communities, Long notes the various implications for theologizing
about Africa by these two different groups:

The facticity of the land for the African allows his religious thinking and
theologizing to be tempered by topos in a manner that Black American
theologians tend to be utopian in their theologizing with little of the
tempering effects of topos. By topos I mean the sense of being in a place and
knowing what the place means and having traditions, languages, modes of
life that makes that place, your place, an intimate and familiar place. It is
also the sense that one's ancestors know that place, that they humanized it and
gave it a name, and that in their customs and languages there is a wisdom for
the coming generations.83

If African Pentecostals from both diasporas are willing to engage in dialogue, it
would provide African American theologians with an opportunity for a deeper
reflection on Africa as a religious meaning, beyond the usual historical mythic
engagement. It would also provide African immigrant theologians with deeper
insight into the historic experience of African Americans and the development of
their religious consciousness given the social context in which this religious
imagination was formed.

82 Ibid.
83 Ibid.
Given that this dialogue can take place in the United States, a range of issues might be invoked in this conversation. In addition to a theological conversation on comparative Christologies, pneumatologies, theologies of culture and mission, crucial matters of identity must also be considered, including: nationalism, transnationality, politics of victimization and politics of poverty. This dialogue may consider salvation (both spiritual and material), healing (both personal and social) and deliverance (both political and psychosocial), as all are key doctrinal loci in both traditions. This dialogue must also attend to matters of racial justice and equality; African immigrant Pentecostals need to understand more about slavery and its legacy, just as African Americans must learn more about the history and lingering effects of colonialism on the continent. A final issue that could be potentially raised in this dialogue might include the deeply ecclesiological question of “what does it mean to be a pilgrim church and to advance the kingdom of God?” Continental African scholars in North America whose work may potentially be engaged in this trans-diasporan exchange include: theological ethicist Nimi Wariboko; religious historian Ogbu Kalu; pastoral theologian Esther Acolatse; and constructive theologian Adonijah Ogbonnaya. And complementing their work are the voices of African scholars located outside of the United States, working on African Pentecostalism in North America, including: historian of religion Afe Adogame and theologian Kwabena Asamoah-Gyadu.

6.9 Future Trajectories: Engagement of Black British Pentecostal Scholars in the United Kingdom

While the conversation between African American and African immigrant Pentecostalism in North America is important, transatlantic engagement of black Pentecostals in other geographical locations beyond North America remains
necessary. Because of the well-developed and burgeoning scholarship of black Pentecostal scholars in Great Britain, particularly those of Caribbean ancestry, attending to their voices is vital for a dialogue between the various African Pentecostal diasporas. It is important to note how the arrival and increasing numbers of African Caribbean and black Pentecostals in Great Britain was understood by scholars of Pentecostalism as revitalizing British Christianity. In his “Foreword” to Roswith Gerloff’s *A Plea for British Black Theologies: The Black Church Movement in Britain in its Transatlantic Cultural and Theological Interaction*, the first text published in Great Britain bearing the name “Black British Theology,” Walter Hollenweger writes: "Christians in Britain prayed for many years for revival, and when it came they did not recognize it because it was black." The black people to whom Hollenweger refers were largely those early Pentecostal migrants from the Caribbean whose burgeoning charismatic fellowships in homes, community halls, schoolhouses and libraries eventually transformed the British religious landscape. The children and grandchildren of these early Caribbean pilgrims, after receiving formal theological training, became the bearers of the discourse known as Black British Pentecostal theology.

What distinguishes the Pentecostal scholarship of African Caribbean scholars in Britain, from other black Pentecostal discourses of the Atlantic world, is the fact that the majority of these scholars situate their work within the discipline of modern black theology. Black British Methodist theologian Anthony Reddie highlights what

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84 Walter Hollenweger in “Foreword to Roswith Gerloff’, *A Plea for British Black Theologies: The Black Church Movement in Britain in its Transatlantic Cultural and Theological Interaction With Special References to the Pentecostal Oneness (Apostolic) and Sabbatarian Movements* (New York: Peter Lang, 1992), ix.
he sees as the major contribution Black Pentecostal scholars have made to the
development of black theology in Britain when he writes: “black British Pentecostal
[scholarship] has been able to assert the importance of religio-cultural aesthetics and
codified forms of sanctified worship, highlighting the emotive power of black
worship as a countercultural phenomenon in order to counter racism.” In addition
to these contributions, black Pentecostal scholars have broadened the range of the
field of black theology within the UK, particularly in the areas of pastoral theology,
political theology, womanist theology and theo-ethnomusicology. And while the
denominational homes of most black British Pentecostal scholars are extensions of
white, U.S.-based churches (namely, the Church of God and the Church of God of
Prophecy), these African Caribbean scholars have offered serious critiques of racism,
pneumatologies and the neo-colonial hegemony of their parent denominational
bodies abroad.

To establish a transatlantic dialogue between African American and Black
British Pentecostalism, given their shared pneumatological sensibilities, common
belief structures and practices and minority statuses within white-majority cultures, a
number of issues might be initially considered. African American and Black British
Pentecostals share a New World African identity and both groups have come to
consciousness within the Western world; these shared issues of identity and common
DuBoisian double consciousness form the basis of a necessary conversation
regarding the politics of identity construction. Other items for consideration include:
pneumatologies; christologies; racism; Western capitalism; classism; sexism; and

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85 Anthony Reddie, “Black Theology in Britain” in The Cambridge Companion to Black Theology
86 Please see Joseph Evans, Lifting the Veil Over Eurocentrism: The DuBoisian Hermeneutic of
theologies of culture. Some of the scholars to be enjoined in this conversation include: political theologians Robert Beckford, Joe Aldred and David Muir; womanist theologians Valentina Alexander and Maxine Howell; missiologist Clifton Clarke; pastoral theologian Delroy Hall; and theo-ethnomusicologist Dulcie McKenzie. As evidenced by the preceding pages of this postscript, much scholarship is needed in order to present a more robust picture of Black Pentecostalism in both its American and African Atlantic contexts. This future research is necessary for both mapping the shifting contours of American religion and the increasingly sophisticated tapestry of African religions in the Western world.
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