Wrestling With Scripture: Can Euro-American Christians and African-American Christians Learn to Read Scripture Together?

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> From first to last, this has been the work of God. He has reconciled us to himself through Christ, and he has enlisted us in this service of reconciliation. What I mean is, that God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself, no longer holding men's misdeeds against them, and that he has entrusted us with the message of reconciliation. We come therefore as Christ's ambassadors.
>
> --2 Corinthians 5:18-20 (NEB)

Introduction: Remembering the Failure and the Hope of Christian Racial Reconciliation

"Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly..." (Col. 3:16) These words from the Letter to the Colossians challenge the moral imaginations of those of us, black and white alike, who claim to be followers of Jesus Christ. What might it mean for the Word of Christ to dwell among our congregations in such a rich way that our lives--individually and corporately--were actually constituted by it in the richest, most morally significant sense? This question haunts Euro-American and African-American Christians alike because--in ways that both converge and diverge with one another-- "We have been believers." [1] With a sense of delight as well as awe, we have borne witness to the transformative work of God in our lives, and we have testified to our hope that God has "more truth to break forth from God's Holy Word" [2] than what we have thus far discovered.

And yet, we have not always followed through on what has been revealed to us. Indeed, one of the great paradoxes of the history of Christianity in America is that Euro-American Evangelicalism and the historic Black Church share a commitment to the centrality of Scripture, and yet it is precisely these communions which have been divided in American cultural history. For several years now, this verse from the Letter to the Colossians has been an inspiring as well as haunting reminder for me of what God expects the church to look like--a reconciled body--in contrast to what most churches in America appear to be when we gather at "the most segregated hour of the week--eleven o'clock on sunday morning," surely one of the most lamentable symbols of *the absence* of reconciliation between Christians that can be imagined.

As Toni Morrison has shown in very evocative ways in her essays Playing in the Dark:Whiteness and the Literary Imagination, whether we are black or white, it is by no means a straightforward task to begin to come to grips with the effects of racism on our (moral and literary) imaginations. To begin to do what Morrison calls "critical geography" is, among other things, to probe "the wider landscape" [3] of our culture and begin to identify those features of our lives that have been constituted by the mythologies of "whiteness"--including the ways we do and do not read the Bible. This kind of critical inquiry cannot but be painful, as black and white alike we confront the illusions of the racist mythologies that populate our imaginations. But as Morrison also stresses, this kind of investigation need not lead only to disappointment and

further alienation. At our best, we will proceed with a sense of delight in what we unearth and the ways in which our moral imaginations can be enriched as we find "space for discovery, intellectual adventure and close exploration" [4] of other facets of our lives, and thereby discover sources for renewal, healing, and reconciliation.[5]

As Morrison's work suggests, some of the most fruitful fields for exploration of the effects of whiteness on our moral and literary imagination can be found close to home. Therefore I begin this essay with a personal example. In 1966 I became an R. A.-- a "Royal Ambassador for Christ" (based on the Pauline image of 2 Cor. 5:20) at First Baptist Church, Mountain View, Arkansas. I can remember how excited I was as an eight-year old, to wear the uniform, to get the achievement awards (I still have my RA "shield" medallion!) and to participate in various service projects of this Southern Baptist discipleship training program for boys. As I became a "Squire" and began my "Crusader Quest" up the mountain of life, making stops along the way in the "castles" of home, church, and state, I learned something about what it means to be a disciple of Jesus Christ. Although, this was not my only spiritual formation as a Christian, it was certainly the church program that captured my imagination as I embarked on my "Christian Adventure." Not coincidentally, it was during this time that I first made a commitment to follow Jesus. In those Wednesday night "R. A." chapter meetings, I learned to "serve others in Christ's name" (the RA motto) and was taught that missionary activity is central to the Christian life for those whom God has "entrusted...with the message of reconciliation." (2 Cor. 5:20) Certainly these are significant images of discipleship for a little boy to learn.

I also learned other things in the Southern Baptist congregations of my childhood. I participated in religious ceremonies and heard sermons about the superiority of being Southern, and often I heard folks (in and out of the church) say that "the South shall rise again." Although my Christian education took place a century after the Civil War, vestiges of the “Lost Cause” still were present, and so I learned that the world would be a better place if folks like us-- Southern Euro-Americans -- were (back) in control. Along the way I also learned that most of the Christians in these congregations also believed in the segregation of the races, a belief for which I was told there was support in the Bible. After all, "the Bible says, 'birds of a feather flock together'" the old folks said. (In fact, my father had taken a fifteen per cent pay cut and my parents had moved across the state to a county in the Ozark hills-- where very few if any

African-Americans lived--to avoid court-ordered bussing of elementary school children to acheive racial integration.)

The same congregations that helped to form me as a person of faith were constituted in ways that effectively prevented me from imagining why it was necessary to be reconciled with African-Americans who were also Christians. Worse still, the same congregations that taught me to imagine myself as a "Royal Ambassador for Christ" also taught me, by precept and example, to look upon African-Americans as deficient, inferior, ugly and dangerous. It is with profound sadness that I note that it was not on the playground or in the bowling alley, but *in a Christian church*, that I remember first hearing a Euro-American adult claim that "*The Bible says* that interracial marriage is an abomination before God." For me, this statement--and all the would-be saints of God who surround it in my memory--constitutes a landmark in the reconstruction of the critical geography of my own struggle with the mythology of whiteness.

Ultimately, I left the southern church of my childhood in large part because I came to realize that the racism within (myself and others) was not being challenged by these congregations that proclaimed to be based on the Bible but whose moral imaginations had been captured by an ideology of racial hatred. As I have come to think of this period of my life, it is as if the voice of God (the Word) was being squelched by the ideological distortions of human beings whose interests it serves that the "wildness" of the Word be domesticated, channeled, and the status quo thereby remain untouched, undisturbed, and unchallenged. As Bonhoeffer might have put it, we had lost the capacity to read the Bible "against ourselves"[6] as the Word *beyond* our human words. I came to believe that I had to leave the church of my childhood not only to continue to be a Christian but also to discover more about what the journey of Christian discipleship involves. In the process I have discovered other images of the Christian life, that enrich my conception of the possibilities of what it might mean for me to be a "royal ambassador" for Christ in the fullest sense, but I have also discovered that the Christian adventure is not so much about medieval images of knighthood and crusades, as it is about learning to live in the world as a community that knows what it means to live “out of control” because we bear witness to another Kingdom. To live this way involves learning to see the church as a different kind of community than what I first encountered in the segregated churches of my childhood. And that, in turn, involves what I call “wrestling with Scripture” in the midst of

the gospel mandate to be reconciled with one another and with God.

I

Can Euro-American/Christians and African-American/Christians read scripture together? As the foregoing discussion suggests, I believe it is a profound mistake to attempt to answer the hermeneutical question in isolation from the question of the cultural sources and structures of our moral imaginations. This is a haunting and difficult question for anyone who knows the intertwined histories of racism and Christianity in American culture. From the Richard Allen-led exodus from Old St. George's Methodist Episcopal Church in Philadelphia in 1792 to the exclusion of an interracial couple from Barnett's Creek Baptist Church in Thomasville, Georgia in 1996, the story of the *segregated gospel* is a sad litany of Euro-American failure to embody the Gospel of reconciliation in the midst of the persistent refusal of African-Americans to give up hope that God's Word is operative in the world bringing about the possibility of reconciliation. There are many ways to register the failure, and at times it seems like there are too few stories that embody the hope.

I deliberately begin this essay by highlighting the pathos of our situation. That I should begin in this way should *not* be taken as an indication that I think that Euro-Americans and African-Americans are incapable of reading Scripture together. Far from it! In fact the brunt of my argument in this essay will be to argue that it is possible as well as necessary for us to read Scripture in communion. From the beginning, we found ourselves "wrestling" with scripture in the midst of our (interracial) struggles with one another as "blacks" and "whites." Indeed, the broader outlines of the story of the origins of the African-American Christian tradition of biblical interpretation lie in the Great Awakening that swept the early American Republic during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. As Albert Raboteau, Donald Matthews and other historians of Afro-American religion have shown, African slaves "responded to the Europeans' evangelical preaching and piety, especially the emphasis on conversion experience as the sign of God's acceptance of the worth of the individual, and the often spontaneous formation of communities of the converted for fellowship and mutual affirmation."

> Because testimony regarding personal experience with God was the single most important criterion -- relativizing, though not obliterating social status and racial identification -- for entry into the evangelical communities, and because that

> criterion held the promise of a degree of egalitarianism and affirmation, it was no wonder that the Africans began to respond in great numbers. . . [7]

So great was the power of the Gospel message that African-American converts actually dared to imagine being reconciled with those who enslaved them, as several extant slave narratives clearly show. But as historians have also discovered, the egalitarian promise of the first and second "great awakenings" was rarely realized in the interracial congregations of the North and the South.

In his book Slave Religion, Albert Raboteau recounts the story of one such interracial congregation on the American frontier in the early days of the Second Great Awakening.

> When the Forks of Elkhorn Baptist Church in Kentucky held its monthly church conference on the second Saturday of January 1806, Brother Palmer brought before the church a complaint against Brother Stephens and his wife "*for not dealing with Nancy their Negroe Woman and bringing her before the Church and for putting her in Irons.*" Brother Stephens was acquitted of the charge. A second charge was brought against Sister Stephens "*for giving their Negroe Woman the lye*." Sister Stephens was acquitted of both charges. But Brother Palmer and the slave member Nancy didn't let the matter rest there: on the second Saturday of April 1806 Palmer once again "*brought a complaint against Bro. Stephens and Wife for not leeting [sic] Nancy come to see her Child....*" This time Sister Stephens countered with a complaint against Nancy for falsely reporting that "*Brother Stephens said he would give her a hundred stripes and every Six stripes dip the Cow hide in Salt and Water--And saying while she was in Irons she suffered every day for [want of] Fire, Victuals and Water--And for saying when ever she and the Children fell out they would not hear her, but believe the Children and whip her....*" Decision on the charges was delayed until the next meeting, at which time Brother Stephens and Sister Stephens were once more acquitted. Nancy was found guilty and excluded from church fellowship. [8]

This incident can be taken as representative of the kind of moral problem that many Christian congregations faced in the antebellum period. [9] While the particulars in question may or may not be distinctive, many of the elements in the account are familiar: here is an asymmetrical account in which the slave is treated as *less-than-a-full member* of the congregation, and therefore needs someone to be her advocate in order to get a hearing before the congregation. Yet at the same time Nancy is regarded as a moral agent to be held accountable when her mistress wanted to bring charges against her. [10] Or to use the pious language of the Second Great Awakening, she was--at one and the same time--a "sister in Christ" (in the "spiritual" sense

as one who has responded to the Gospel) and "no sister" (socially, ecclesially). What I have described hardly constitutes a reconciled community.

What happened to this "sister in the wilderness"[11] is a chilling reminder of the tragically impoverished moral imaginations of Euro-American Christians in that era. But what is most remarkable about this incident is that ["Sister"] Nancy dared to confront the evils of the slavocracy in the context of this Baptist congregation, and thereby evoked a congregational conversation in which Euro-American Christians *began to confront one another* about the inherent abuses and injustices of slavery. And thereby ["Sister"] Nancy, whether she realized it or not, raised the question of the church in relation to the world. As Albert Raboteau observes in his perceptive commentary on this incident,

> Though she failed, it is interesting that Nancy attempted to seek recourse for her problems with her master and mistress in the church. Even though she had to do so indirectly, through a white spokesman, Brother Palmer, who voiced her accusations for her. Even so, she apparently had reason to hope that the church would intervene on her behalf or at the very least serve as a forum for her complaint. (One can only wonder if she succeeded in embarrassing Brother Stephens and Sister Stephens, and at what cost.) The church, after all, did take up her charge instead of dismissing it out of hand. [12]

Despite the fact that the congregation did eventually render its decision in this case, there is a strong sense in which this account displays the *unfinished* character of the church's ongoing dialogue with Scripture. I have come to think of Nancy's attempt(s) to "tell it to the church" (Matt. 18:17) as a microcosm of the history of unreconciled relationship between Euro-Americans and African-Americans. [13] As such, it is a haunting reminder of the Church's *never-ending* conversation with Scripture, and therefore also displays the ongoing struggle of Euro-American/Christians and African-American/ Christians to act, to use, to embody Scripture in the midst of a culture that continues to be torn by racial strife. That is, it is about our common struggle with Scripture.

["Sister"] Nancy's story also suggests some of the ideological factors that have not only sharply limited who participates in this ecclesial conversation (after all, Nancy was given voice only through the interventions of "Brother Palmer"), but also the ways these ideologies can and do *shape* the Church's conversation with Scripture not to mention the ways we do and do not imagine ourselves being reconciled, and with whom we are obligated to seek reconciliation.

Then, as now, Euro-American Christians and African-American Christians find it difficult to read Scripture "over against" ourselves, [14] and therefore we confront the need to continue our conversation with Christian Scripture. Moreover, this account also displays the moral agency of ["Sister"] Nancy in attempting to "tell it to the church" (see the famous church discipline passage of Matthew 18:15-20). However much Euro-American Christians may have tried to distort the gospel, slaves like Nancy recognized the *power* of the Word of the Gospel and simply joined the "never-ending congregational conversation"[15] with Scripture, thereby calling attention to the limits of the moral imaginations of their Euro-American counterparts.

Obviously, the example that I have presented hardly constitutes a *faithful* performance of Scripture by the congregation in question! But then much of what we see in American congregations at present is also quite unattractive, and arguably just as unfaithful. The question yet to be addressed is *what if anything can we learn* from such incidents as this one? This is *not* the occasion for saying all that I think I have learned from my ongoing study of the historic black church's tradition of biblical interpretation. However, I am prepared to say at least this much: here we see a striking example of a "conflict of interpretations" in which divergent performances of Scripture are made visible in the midst of interracial struggle between Christians. This interpretive conflict is all the more remarkable precisely because of the *shared* ecclesial practice(s) of fraternal admonition and church discipline.

While there is much that is unclear about this incident, it is clear that Nancy's master and mistress believe that the Bible supports them in their dealings with their slavewoman, whereas (illiterate)["Sister"] Nancy obviously is engaging the Gospel in a way that transcends social boundaries. And while this narrative displays a community of faith whose moral sensibilities are seriously impaired, such poverty of moral vision has almost nothing to do with the prescriptive use of Scripture associated with the practices of church discipline and fraternal admonition. In fact, I would argue that it is precisely when we explore the conflicts of interpretation that surround these practices that we begin to confront the heart of the matter: the *ecclesiological* issue of what it means for the Church to be a "social embodiment"[16] of Scripture, which among other things has to do with the embodiment of reconciliation--as the Body of Christ in the world.

The fact that I place this issue simultaneously as an ecclesiological problem and a hermeneutical problem as well as a problem at the heart of American culture is intended to signal

that I think it is very tricky to answer the question "Are we reading the same Bible?" in a straightforward way without misrepresenting something important about ourselves, our relationships, and our moral imaginations. Or to put the matter more pointedly, I believe that the most significant divisions between Christians in American culture are *moral* and *theological*, but in claiming this to be the case, I do not want to appear to be disacknowledging the racial divisions that have existed and continue to exist . Rather, I want to interpret the racial--as well as racist--divisions *in relation to* the moral failures and theological hopes. In the second part of this essay, I want to explore some of these moral and theological discontinuities even as I try to articulate why I continue to maintain that African-American and Euro-American Christian can learn to read Scripture together, despite the fact that at times it appears as if we have been reading different Bibles.

II

In the conclusion of this essay, I will have more to say about the notion of the "never-ending conversation" with Scripture and how such a conversation needs to be focused, congregationally and cross-racially speaking. In this part of my argument, I want to focus on some of the reasons why Nancy and her master and mistress could agree that it was important to "tell it to the church" -- that is they shared a practice of discipleship -- but could not agree about how interpret the Bible so as to bring the Gospel to bear on the situation in which they found themselves. In the process, I hope to provide a more careful explanation why I as a Euro-American Christian continue to have hope that racial reconciliation can come about in the midst of the historic failures or why I would insist that Euro-American/Christians and African-American/Christians *can* learn to read Scripture together.

I have *limited* myself to seven claims, although I would hasten to say that these affirmations and cautions hardly should be regarded as exhausting the subject.

1) Yes, Euro-American Christians and African-American Christians can learn to read Scripture together, but only if we begin to recognize and expose the hidden histories that constitute our identities as "white" and "black" in this culture. I have deliberately begun by calling attention to examples of local congregations and communities where the unreconciled state of the community of faith is at issue. I do so, in part, because it is local

history of congregations like the Forks of the Elkhorn River Baptist Church that Euro-Americans are most tempted to forget. However, as much as we would like to divorce ourselves from such scene of the past and present, these are the contexts that oftentimes are most constitutive of our identity, and therefore the contexts that most distort our Christian witness in this culture.

The problem that I am describing here is what the historian and cultural critic Michael Kammen has identified as the problem of *nostalgia* (in relation to tradition) in American Culture. As Michael Kammen has argued, "American culture contains a dualistic tension where myths are concerned. We can be iconoclastic"[especially about European traditions] "but we are much more likely to be permissive and self-indulgent about myth" [17] In his book, The Mystic Chords of Memory: The Transformation of Tradition in American Culture (Knopf, 1991), Kammen explores the problem of American *amnesia* in relation to (or as a function of) "the American inclination to depoliticize the past in order to minimize memories (and causes) of conflict." [18] I believe Kammen's thesis helps to account for much of what we see in our culture, especially with respect to Euro-American Christian denials of the depth of the racial fissure in American culture.

Let us not mince words, but speak truth in love. The memories are very painful--so painful that most "white" Americans will do almost anything to avoid confronting them. Most of us who are Euro-Americans find it difficult to hear the Derrick Bell conclusion that "Racism is a permanent feature of American life."[19] But we simply cannot afford to deny that racist practices continue to be reproduced inside as well as outside our congregations. The question is: how do we come to grips with this cultural dynamic? Charles Long has offered one of the most trenchant analyses of this problem that I have ever read: "The religion of the American people centers around the telling and retelling of the mighty deeds of the white conquerors. This hermeneutic mask thus conceals the true experience of Americans from their very eyes."[20] If Long is right, then we should take more seriously than we sometimes do the heuristic power of popular culture portrayals of the relationship of Euro-Americans and African-American, because it is in such portrayals that interpretive masking occurs at the level of myth and symbol. James Baldwin identifies D. W. Griffith's 1915 film *The Birth of a Nation* (which was based on the Thomas Dixon novel, The Clansman) as one of the most important popular culture mediations in this complex process of concealment. At our worst, those of us who are Euro-Americans "see"

the world in terms of racist stereotypes portrayed in such films, narratives that mediate a picture of the world in which black men and white women are structured within what Baldwin calls the "legend of the nigger" -- the image of as black males as sex-starved rapists who prey upon innocent white women. [21]

So it is no accident that our relationships are so deeply conflicted in American culture, because the relationships between African-Americans and Euro-Americans are in fact socially *constructed* in ways that we often find difficult to acknowledge to ourselves. As a result, our divergent uses of the Bible are sometimes concealed in ways that we cannot admit, precisely because we are reading Scripture within imaginative structures that are quite literally *peopled* with culturally constructed monsters. [22] African-American Christians therefore find themselves having to deconstruct these social constructions of themselves not only in the minds of Euro-Americans, but also in their own psyches. To the extent that Euro-Americans have used -- and continue to use -- the Bible to reinforces these stereotypical oppositions, African-Americans have had to disentangle Christian Scripture from the literary imagination of "whiteness," which among other things means rediscovering the power of the Word as it transcends the cultural constraints imposed upon it by racist practices.

2) Yes, we can learn to read Scripture together if we take seriously that for much of our history, Euro-Americans and African-Americans have had a different kind of struggle with the Bible. That is to say we have "wrestled with Scripture" in largely separate ways.

One of the my favorite examples of this tension is taken from a first-person account by a Lutheran pastor who preached to a congregation of African-American Christians at the Bethel congregation in Charleston, South Carolina. Pastor Chreitzburg found himself perplexed by the meanings ascribed to his 1862 sermon by the Black congregation. Speaking of himself rather ruefully (in the third person), Chreitzburg recalled the different way that the congregation read the biblical text that was the basis of his sermon: ***"What was figurative they interpreted literally."***

> He thought of but one ending of the war; they quite another. He remembers the 68th Psalm as affording numerous texts for their delectation, e.g., *"Let God arise, let his enemies be scattered"*; His *"march through the wilderness"*; *"The Chariots of God are twenty thousand"*; "*The hill of God is as the hill of Basham"*;...and especially, *"Though ye have lain among the pots, yet shall yet be as the wings of a dove covered with silver, and her feathers with yellow gold"...* It is mortifying

> now to think that his comprehension was not equal to the African intellect. All he thought about was relief from the servitude of sin, and freedom from the bondage of the devil; and as to the wings of silver and feathers of gold, that was only strong hyperbole for spiritual good. But they interpreted it literally in the good time coming, which of course could not but make their ebony complexion attractive, very. [23]

Pastor Chreitzburg's way of accounting for the difference in interpretations of Psalm 68 is fascinating, if ultimately inadequate. The categories of "literal" and "figurative" readings do not really do justice to the intricate ways in which the African-American christian congregants were imaginatively reconstructing the text of the Bible in relation to the sermon of this Euro-American Christian pastor. As Chreitzburg's final comment suggests, the way African-Americans read Psalm 68 had the effect of *reconfiguring* the significance of their own visages, not merely as individuals but also *as a people*. [24]

This reconfiguration of the text(s) of the Bible in the face of self-serving readings (by Euro-Americans) is also an example of what I have called the "double-voiced" character of the African-American Christian tradition of biblical interpretation. [25] By double-voiced, I mean the assertion of *life-affirming* readings of the Bible presented in the face of dominant *death-dealing* interpretations. Where nineteenth century Euro-American Christians read the Bible "for themselves" African-American Christians imaginatively re-read the Bible "over against" the ideological distortions of the slavocracy.

While I believe that the double-voiced reading of Scripture characterizes of the Black Church tradition of reading Scripture--at its best--this is not the only way that African-American Christians read the Bible. In my ongoing effort to reconstruct the tradition of African-American Christian biblical interpretation, I have been learned much from an essay by Vincent Wimbush published as part of the collection on African American Biblical interpretation entitled Stony the Road We Trod (1991). In "The Bible and African Americans," Wimbush proposed "a working outline" of five "collective readings" of the Bible by African Americans that have emerged during the past three-to-four hundred years. Although each of the readings Wimbush has identified are distinct, temporally and hermeneutically, they also can be seen to overlap with one another. [26]

1. **Beginning of African American Experience in the New World:** The first reading

corresponds to the earliest experiences of "Rejection, Suspicion, and Awe" of the Bible. [27] It roughly corresponds to the denial of African-American *presence* as enforced by the racist hermeneutic associated with "Curse of Ham" interpretation of Genesis. Here the Bible is viewed as a kind of distorted icon of the *absence* of African American *presence*. Thus, while African Americans were awed by the power of the Bible, they were also deeply suspicious of the way the Bible was used against them, and to the extent that those uses of Scripture persuaded them that this was what the Bible "said", they were also tempted to reject the Bible. More often than not they did not reject the Bible; however, they did reject the racist message imputed to Christian Scriptures.

2. Beginning of Mass Conversions in the Eighteenth Century: If the first reading is marked by ambivalence and rejection, Wimbush believes the second reading can best be characterized as *experiential* and transformative. As various historians have observed, it was only *after* the beginning of the religious revivals in America in the eighteenth century that enslaved Africans began to convert to Christianity in large numbers. In the process of conversion, African-Americans began to appropriate the Bible *for themselves* as a *community* of faith, especially through the sermons of the slave preachers and the spirituals or slave songs. According to Wimbush, this second reading should be regarded as "foundational" [28] for *all* subsequent readings of Scripture in the Black Church tradition. "All other readings to come would in some sense be built upon and judged against it. This reading is in fact the classical reading of the biblical text for African Americans; it reflects the classical period in the history of African Americans (the eighteenth century)." [29]

3. Beginning of Independent Church Movements in the Nineteenth Century: The "Establishment of Canon and Hermeneutical Principle" is the label Wimbush assigns to the third collective reading. [30] With this third interpretive matrix, the shape of Wimbush's "working outline" shifts significantly. Associated with the beginnings of the independent church movement among African-American Methodists and Baptists, the emergence of this third type of biblical interpretation "symbolized the oppositional (that is, primarily anti-racist) civil rights agenda and character of African American religion." [31] Wimbush characterizes the use of the Bible in this period as a "prophetic apology," meaning that African Americans used the Bible "in order to make self-assertive claims against a racist America that claimed to be a biblical nation."

[32] During this era, Galatians 3:28--"There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free; there neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus"--becomes the "*locus classicus"* of what would become their central "ethical and moral principle." [33]

4. Esoteric Readings in the Early Twentieth Century to the Present: With the fourth reading, which he describes as "Esoteric and Elitist Hermeneutical Principles and Texts," Wimbush turns to a set of twentieth century developments that are related to a diverse collection of groups "with little or no formal ties to one another." [34] Wimbush calls for "a typology that can more accurately register the religious diversity among African Americans," (and in some senses his own essay can be seen as meeting this criterion). Wimbush correlates this fourth pattern of interpretation with the reading strategies of "the Black Muslims, Black Jews, the African Orthodox, the Garvey Movement, the Holiness/Pentecostal churches, and the Reverend Ike's United Church and Science of Living Institute," [35] *all of which*--while differing from one another--claim esoteric knowledge and principles of interpretation which, in turn, reflect their rejection of the boundaries that are accepted by "mainstream" black churches. But as Wimbush also points out, the appeal to esoteric sources of interpretation and knowledge is not the only way that the Black Church tradition has been challenged in the twentieth century.

5. Late Twentieth Century Fundamentalism: The fifth reading of the Bible that Wimbush identifies is said to be "largely confined" to the late twentieth century, and reflects "a crisis--of thinking, of security" experienced by African Americans, prompted by the cumulative effects of a variety of social changes that have occurred since the end of the nineteenth century. Because of the magnitude of the numbers of African-Americans flocking to fundamentalist churches, Wimbush speculates about some of the reasons for this embrace of fundamentalism. “Their crisis has to do with their perception of the inadequacy of culturalist religion--African American religion--to vouchsafe, or guarantee, the traditions that are ‘Christian.’” Therefore, this reading of the Bible is marked by "[t]he intentional attempt to embrace Christian traditions, specifically the attempt to interpret the Bible, without respect for the historical experiences of persons of African descent in this country...". [36] Wimbush sees *this turn away from history* toward some "timeless" iteration of the Gospels as a development that poses grave dangers for the historic black church as well as for the wider community of African Americans, precisely because it disengages from the historic struggle with Euro-Americans about the persistence of

racist practices in this culture. In sum, this fifth reading constitutes a denial of the historical situation of African-Americans in American culture.

When taken together, these five readings display the diversity of African-American biblical interpretation as well as hint at the complex patterns of -- what Theophus Smith has described elsewhere as the "biblical formations of black America."[37] At the same time, these five readings remind us that there is *another set* of traditions of reading the Bible that must be taken into account, a set of Euro-American/Christian readings that exists in a structured and largely oppositional relationship to each of these African-American/Christian readings.

3) Yes, Euro-Americans and African Americans can learn to read Scripture together, but this will not happen if we do not take into account the different ways that we have read Scripture in the past, and the ways these different practices of reading Scripture help to constitute our largely segregated present. In sum, we must come to grips with the conflict of interpretations in which both African-American Christianity and Euro-American Christianity continues to be constituted.

In ways that are obvious as well as subtle, Euro-American/Christian readings of the Bible and African-American/Christian readings of the Bible can be said to exist alongside one another as *largely segregated* practices of biblical interpretation. Not incidentally, these patterns of interpretation exist in relation to the social practices of our still largely segregated congregations. Of course, this is not an uncommon occurrence in American popular religion.[38] However, I would argue that the peculiar ways in which ecclesiological, cultural and hermeneutic issues converge with one another demands that this conflict of interpretations be analyzed very carefully. All too often, however, historians and theologians have tended to discuss these issues as if the hermeneutic issues are primarily cultural, without giving adequate attention to the ecclesiological dimensions of the interpretive conflict.

With this observation in view, I want to return to Wimbush's typology of readings. As I think Prof. Wimbush would agree, the typology of five African-American readings of the Bible can also be said to serve as a kind of argument about what is most central, hermeneutically speaking, for African-American engagement with the Bible. In this respect, the central opposition between the third and fifth readings in his typology cannot be missed. The fifth reading (Fundamentalism), which in certain respects is the most recent of the readings to come

into being, is the reading that Wimbush appears to regard as the most pernicious, whereas the third reading (the Black Independent Church movement), which is deeply embedded in the historic black church tradition is the most favored (or most significant) hermeneutical model of reading for engaging the problems facing African-American Christians. At several points, Wimbush makes very clear that the third reading is the interpretation that has the most import for the present.

> This reading of the Bible among African Americans extends at least from the nineteenth century up to the present. It has historically reflected and shaped the ethos and thinking of the majority of African Americans. If the period of enslavement...represents the classical period, the nineteenth century represents the period of self-conscious articulation, consolidation, and institutionalization. [39]

Prof. Wimbush also links the third reading with the African-American tradition of *liberation*.[40] Thus, the cultural problematic associated with African American identity comes to be seen as most central for the hermeneutical task, according to Wimbush's analysis of the hermeneutical conflict. Accordingly, Wimbush lines up passages from the writings of David Walker and Frederick Douglass, which, when grouped with the episcopal statement introducing the A.M.E. motto "God our Father; Christ our Redeemer; Man our Brother" and comparable statements made by the president National Baptist Convention in 1922, begin to look very much like a *canonical tradition* of moral wisdom that is deeply embedded in the African-American tradition. And it is this canonical tradition of moral wisdom that Wimbush sees being re-articulated in the Black Theology movement, albeit with new slants and new emphases, from new positions (in the academy) in American culture.

I have found Wimbush's outline of African-American readings of the Bible to be very suggestive for my own ongoing attempt to reconstruct the Black Church hermeneutic in relation to the interpretive practices of Euro-American Protestantism. What intrigues me about Wimbush's outline is that arguably his own typology of readings can be said to be constructed *within* the context of a very complex conflict of interpretations, an ongoing conflict between African-American Christianity and Euro-American Christianity (although Wimbush does not appear to realize that this is the case). It is also important to notice that Wimbush's own disposition to this conflict of interpretations has been shaped in a very positive sense by the Black Theology movement, which he sees in substantial continuity with the third reading, and

negatively by his reaction to Black Evangelicals. As such, Wimbush's outline needs to be expanded in several senses, precisely because of the conflict of interpretations that it both presupposes and -- at least to some extent -- obscures.

This becomes clearer when Wimbush's earlier article "'Rescue the Perishing:' The Importance of Biblical Scholarship in Black Christianity" (1983) is brought into view. In that essay, Wimbush identified the interpretive problem in a similar way, except that he characterizes the problem more oppositionally as a conflict between being "black" and "evangelical". He sees the latter orientation as *traducing* all that is exemplary in the African-American tradition of biblical interpretation. Wimbush opines:

> "[A] strange and frightening thing has happened to black people--including black Christians--on their way to progress and liberation. As the larger society has eased a bit its oppressive grip on the black community, granting, for example, limited educational opportunities, a very unfortunate specter has appeared--the white specter of doctrinalist Christianity in the black community." [41]

Wimbush concludes "Rescue the Perishing" by offering the following provocative diagnosis of the problem facing the Black Church: **"Black evangelical Christianity, for example, is more *evangelical* (read: doctrinalist, traditionally nonblack) than *black*."** [42]

I have puzzled over this statement since I first read it several years ago, not because the statement itself is unclear, but because it is not at all clear *what kinds of practices* it is supposed to describe. What is obvious about the statement is that Wimbush thinks that contemporary African-American Evangelicals are largely fundamentalist (or *monological* as opposed to "double-voiced" in the way they read Scripture). But what is less clear is what are the social practices that Wimbush has in mind that presumably would make someone like William J. Pannell or Ronald C. Potter less "black" because these men are clearly identifiable as evangelical in the way they live the Christian faith. In correspondence with Prof. Wimbush I have tried to clarify this issue by inquiring about how he understands this circumstance to have come about. He responded to my query this way:

> As for fundamentalism, I am convinced that Black religion, always conservative evangelical, was never before the last couple of decades, allowed the luxury of being defined in any of its diverse parts as fundamentalist. This is because of virulent racism in the United States. So black religion had always ultimately to be racialist--in response to the dominant culture. Only the last couple of decades allowed a relaxation such that Black religion could relax on race issues. But then

> it found itself stuck with the conservative evangelical language! And some--this is the rub--have begun to take this seriously. That is, to define the black religious world according to the rhetorics and language of protestant evangelicalism and fundamentalism. The Black culturalist aspect got underplayed or lost. None of this means that there was not black fundamentalism in the early twentieth century. But lynchings, etc., did not allow blacks to make their religious world anything other than anti-racialist. [43]

I find Wimbush's remarks helpful because they bring into view the cultural history that informs his judgment. Surely he is correct to remind us of the ways in which "the ethics of Jim Crow"[44] constituted a reign of terror for African-American Christians in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. In that respect, he does advance our understanding of the interpretive conflict by locating fundamentalism as a reaction to a particular cultural situation. And surely Prof. Wimbush is also correct to call attention to the pathos of African-Americans who describe themselves and the God they worship in such dehistoricized ways.

However, I am concerned that Vincent Wimbush's reaction to this state of affairs appears to thrust African-American evangelicals into an overdetermined dilemma, one in which there appears to be no ecclesial resources available for resolution of the dilemma. If we take Wimbush at his word, then Black evangelicals do not have the conceptual resources available -- except through liberatory biblical scholarship, it would seem -- to engage the problem of racism. Quite literally, Wimbush points to biblical scholars, not the Holy Spirit or the interpretive practices of the black church, as *the means* by which African-Americans can be "rescued" from the destructive patterns of reading the Bible displayed in the esoteric and fundamentalist readings of the Bible. In effect, if not in intent, Wimbush appears to deny the possibility of a *theological* reading of Scripture that would re-situate both the cultural reading that he advocates and the fundamentalist reading that he clearly finds to be inadequate. I regret that space does not permit me to unfold several such alternative readings. But in some sense, it may not be necessary for me to do so because African-American Christian theologians such as Willie Jennings and Cheryl Sanders (as well as others represented in this volume) are beginning to enunciate readings that not only are oriented within richly ecclesiological and pneumatological practices and embodiments of the Gospel but also engage the cultural issues that cause Wimbush such concern.[45]

I have highlighted this issue because it is clear that Wimbush is describing a recent

development, which in his view diverges sharply from the reading of the Bible that he thinks is most central to the Black Church tradition (namely the third reading). Yet, it is not the kind of claim that I believe can be said adequately to characterize the situation of the second reading (the experiential and transformative readings of slave religion which are perhaps best represented by the tradition of "the spirituals"), where there is clearly a rich overlap between Euro-American Protestants and African-American Christians. To put the matter somewhat differently, I fear that Wimbush has *overstated* the continuity between the third reading and Black theology while *understating* the continuities that exist between the first and second readings as well as ignoring the distinctive connections between these readings and the ways African-Americans in the Holiness/Pentecostal tradition read Scripture. (One might even argue that by locating the Sanctified Church as part of the "Esoteric reading", Wimbush ignores both the imaginative creativity and the faithful performance of Scripture which has often occurred in the congregations of the Holiness/Pentecostal Churches.)

While Wimbush clearly says that the second reading is foundational, I would argue that is only as the third reading is resourced by such hermeneutically rich resources as "singing of Spirituals" and "preaching of the Word" that the so-called prophetic apology can be said to continue to be effective. In other words, Wimbush not only *accepts* the segregated state of biblical interpretation in the Black Church, but *extends* it in a way that separates it from the very practices in relation to which African-American Christianity came into being in the context of the evangelical revivals of the first and second Great Awakenings.

My own assessment takes a different trajectory than Wimbush's polemical account, although I do find his typology to provide a basis for building upon. First, I argue that it is important to situate all of these readings *in relation to* Euro-American readings, both in terms of the areas of overlap and the areas of distinction. When we do so, we discover that there are *more than five* readings. (Thus far, I have identified at least six sets of readings.) In each case, an African-American reading can be correlated with an Euro-American/Christian reading either in the sense that the former is a reaction to the latter, or as a response or refutation. At the center of this tradition, is what I call the "double-voiced" hermeneutic of the Black Church tradition, which I have argued is embedded in the practices of singing the spirituals, and preaching the Word, practices which are not only characteristic of the independent black churches (Wimbush's

third reading), but also can be found in the "invisible institution" of slave religion as well as in contempory evangelical black churches as well as African-American holiness-pentecostal congregations.

Whereas Wimbush traces continuity in the *political ethic* of African-American culture, I would trace continuity in the more dialogical reading of Scripture that is embedded in the ecclesial practices of the Black Church tradition. Because at least some of these practices of the Black Church are shared with many Euro-American Christians, there is an overlap between these two traditions of biblical interpretation, which cannot be ignored precisely because it highlights the moral conflicts that exist among and between congregations that are primarily African-american and predominantly Euro-american congregations. All of which means that the conflict of interpretations that exists between Euro-American/Christians and African-American Christians is, at one and the same time, cultural and ecclesial, as well as hermeneutical. This brings me to my fourth affirmation.

4) Yes,we can learn to read the Bible together, but only if we understand that the "chains" of biblical interpretation can never be frozen precisely because readings of the Bible are always linked with other utterances, diachronically and synchronically. Not to recognize this is to deny the social character of our own reading practices. That is to say, contrary to what we may initially think, traditions of interpreting Scripture are not hermetically sealed off from one another; they are more like the confluence of streams of influence. They are always moving and melding; clashing and splashing over one another, and therefore can be said to influence one another, even if the interpreters, critics and analysts are not always aware of this fact. When we take the time to chart the linkages that exist across time (diachronically) and at any given point in time (synchronically), we begin to discover the ways in which the “chains of signification” still exist between the historic Black Church and Euro-American Christianity.

To illustrate this point, I want to gesture toward some nineteenth century developments, which are roughly contemporaneous, and which initially may appear to have little to do with one another, but which--I would argue--do have much to do with the ways biblical interpretation in the Black Church and Euro-American Christian congregations came to be segregated from one another. I have chosen to focus on the period of time immediately following the Civil War, a time of great social upheaval for African-Americans and Euro-Americans alike, as well as a time

when Christians in America, black and white alike, found the shape of their congregations and practices changing in a variety of ways.

The first example, oddly enough, is architectural and musical. "Memorial Hall" at Fisk University stands as a monument to the extraordinary cultural acheivements of the justly famous "Jubilee Singers," whose tours throughout the United States and Great Britain during the 1870s and 1880s did much to make the traditions of "the spirituals" famous, as well as to provide new embodiments of African-American identity during the early years of Reconstruction. For many Euro-American Christians, the tours of the Jubilee Singers marked an important moment in the way Euro-American Christians viewed African-Americans *as a people*; this shift occurred when they stopped seeing African-Americans as inferior beings and began to see them for the first time as a people with gifts for culture, a moment of imaginative reorientation and dislocation -- for black and white alike -- that has best been captured by Arna Bontemps.[46]

This was also the period in which the spirituals first came to be known *outside* the "invisible institution" of slave religion. For African-Americans, the tours and the related publications of the spirituals (with arrangements by Euro-American composers) marked a shift in the performance of the spirituals. This created a kind of dissonance for some African-American/Christians as the "sorrow songs" of slavery became packaged for a wider public, and over time began to be appreciated as a kind of cultural contribution not unlike the cultural offerings of the peoples of Europe. As W. E. B. DuBois would articulate later at the end of the nineteenth century, these songs could be seen as the most sublime expression of the "souls of black folk" and therefore “the gift of the race” to world culture.[47] Given all that transpired during the tours of the Jubilee Singers, it is appropriate that a building memorializes their national and transatlantic tours.

Memorial Hall at Fisk University is also an example of an architectural style known as "frozen music"--a style of brickwork that gestures to the musicality of the group of singers it was designed to commemorate. Visitors notice the way in which the vertical and horizontal lines of the building appear to "move" despite the fact that the bricks and mortar are set. Obviously, it is not possible fully to capture the musicality of the Jubilee Singers in architecture any more than it is possible to fully capture the dynamic encouter with the Word that characterizes the practices of "singing the Spirituals" and "preaching the Word" in the Black Church tradition. *Mutatis*

mutandis, I would argue that it is a mistake for Euro-American Christians and African American Christians to think that the "dialogue" with the Bible can ever be frozen. Yet that is what Euro-American readers of the Bible have often appeared to do. (And as Vincent Wimbush might argue, the fact that some African-American readers are being tempted to adopt Fundamentalist readings suggests that this problem is not confined to Euro-American Christians.)

For now, I want to probe into the emergence of a very particular pattern Euro-American interpretation of the Bible that epitomizes the notion of a "frozen" hermeneutic. The example that I have chosen to explore is dispensationalist premillennialism, [48] a hermeneutical schema that has been fairly prominent among Euro-American evangelicals and fundamentalists throughout much of the twentieth century, but which actually began to attract the attention of Euro-American evangelicals in the years immediately following the Civil War. It is intriguing to note that while there are some instances of premillenial interpretation of the Bible in the Black Church in the late nineteenth century, there are no instances that I have been able to uncover of premillenial dispensationalist interpretation of the Bible. [49] While I can only speculate about why this is the case, in the discussion which follows, I will try to suggest some possible reasons for this divergence.

In my judgment, no one who has provided a more penetrating analysis of the ways in which nineteenth century Euro-American evangelicals struggled with themselves and with God –not to mention how they "wrestled with Scripture"--than Douglas Frank. In his remarkably synthetic study Less Than Conquerors: How Evangelicals Entered the Twentieth Century (1986). Frank has done an admirable job of delineating the complex of interpretive practices that supported the interpretive web that we have come to know as dispensationalist premillenialism. Although he does not attempt to assess the implications of this struggle for the way evangelicals engaged and disengaged from the struggle with racism, I believe Frank's analysis provides several clues that suggest that there may have been more of a relationship between the emergence of Fundamentalism and "the ethics of Jim Crow" than has been noticed heretofore.

First, Frank calls attention to the shift that begins in the mid-nineteenth century, when Euro-American evangelical Protestants in both the North and the South began to see their position in the culture shift in ways that they did not like. The cumulative effective of influx of new European immigrants, the upheaval wrought by the recent American Civil War, and

industrial and governmental changes left them feeling that they were losing control of the culture. Frank argues that "the wildfire growth of premillennialism in the decades after the Civil War really represented a bold move on the part of evangelicals to recapture their control of history." [50] For premillennialists, there could be no surprises. The fears of losing control were thus transformed into claims of possessing control. As Frank goes on to demonstrate, *premillenialism alone* came to be thought of as inadequate as a way of using the Bible to make sense of history. "Sometime during the 1880s and 1890s, it seems, most premillennialist evangelicals also adopted *dispensationalism*." [51] This is precisely the point at which John Nelson Darby's influence peaks.

Frank observes: "The genesis of Darby's unique understanding of Scripture seems to have come in the midst of his deep disillusionment with the established Church of England."[52] Darby felt that the established church was implicated in his own lack of spiritual power and his works orientation in the days before his deliverance. This assessment led Darby to offer a slightly different articulation of the declining times than the one provided by John Wesley in the eighteenth century. Darby's judgment of the situation was blunt: "The Church is in ruins." Socially speaking, Darby recognized that the church had become the world, but oddly enough, Darby's critique of the church *did not* lead him to call for reform. "In his opinion, the church was beyond repair. Believers might better forsake the established church and separate themselves from this embodiment of evil, keeping their worship pure by assembling instead in small groups where, without ritual or hierarchy, they could symbolize the unity of the true church in Christ Jesus." [53]

It is equally significant that Darby thought that it was not possible to predict when the Second Coming would occur. Darby based this belief on a principle that he believed that he had discovered in the Bible. "*Historical* premillennialism," as Darby thought of it, viewed the church as "the spiritual successor of Israel as the people of God, comprised both of Jews and Gentiles."

> For Darby, Israel was God's earthly people and the church his heavenly people. God had pledged himself to make Israel a great nation, through which all the world would be blessed. Even though the Jews were unfaithful in keeping the Law of Moses, God was going to keep his promise, foretold in the prophets, of giving them an earthly kingdom of peace and prosperity under his personal rule. According to Darby, Jesus came to offer that kingdom and himself as Israel's

> long-awaited king. When the Jews rejected Jesus, God determined to create a "heavenly" people, a church made of Gentiles who acknowledged Christ as their Savior, and who lived not under law but under grace. This church would be the witness of God's salvation in the interim--of unknown duration--between Jesus' First and Second Comings. Although by this means God was postponing the establishment of the kingdom, he was not to be thwarted in fulfilling his promise to Israel. In the end, Jesus would return to establish an earthly kingdom for the Jews, to be centered in Jerusalem. This would be the long-awaited millennium [54]

With these conceptual distinctions in place, Darby argued that Israel and the Church were located in entirely different historical "dispensations." Oddly enough, by introducing a set of Platonic distinctions, Darby refigures the relationship between the Church and Israel at the same time that he sets the stage for a rationalist hermeneutic.

Accordingly, Darby believed that all the Old Testament prophecies, as well as Jesus' predictions, regarding the last times, referred *only to Israel*, not to the church.

> The church is a wholly new thing, he said, not the beneficiary of the prophecies of Israel; the church is heavenly, not earthly. This means that predicted future events are irrelevant to the church. But how could this be so? Won't the church be at least mildly affected by the unfolding of God's judgment and God's promise to the Jews? It would not, according to Darby, because of a most ingenious "biblical" teaching: the secret, pretribulational rapture of the church. Before the unfolding of the specific events of the last times, Christ will return in the air for his saints. He will secretly remove them from history, and take them with him to heaven. Then the predicted events will occur on earth: the rise of the AntiChrist, the persecution of believing Jews, the attempted destruction of Israel by the armies of the world, and the battle of Armageddon in northern Israel. Finally, at the time of this battle, after seven years of absence, the church will return to the earth with Christ at his Second Coming. The Antichrist will be thwarted, Satan bound, the nations judged, and the millennial kingdom established in Jerusalem. Jesus will reign for a thousand years, after which he will have put down one last Satanic rebellion before the Resurrection of the Dead, the Last Judgment, and the creation of a new heaven and a new earth for his redeemed ones. [55]

With this historical eschatological schema in place, dispensationalists were able to "read each Scripture passage with a view toward putting it into its appropriate doctrinal category so that they could be sure of understanding its implications for history and prophecy aright. Their system is an intricately woven cloth with few loose threads." [56] As George Marsden and others have observed, this hermeneutic turns out to be a strange amalgam of Baconian science and Scottish common-sense realism. As Frank observes, "it was just this quality of dispensationalism

-- its rationalistic neatness and systematic comprehensiveness -- that recommended it to the [Euro-American] evangelicals who, during the perilous times at the turn of the nineteenth century, were casting about for some means to bring history back under their control." [57]

> Dispensationalism assumed the Bible to be a thinly disguised guidebook to human history: all one needed in order to decode its message and thus to acquire God's master scheme, according to dispensationalist, was a commitment to a commonsense, literalistic reading of Scripture and the assumption that Israel and the church were two very distinct entities. Using these tools, one could essentially take Scripture apart, verse by verse, and rearrange it into a tight, coherent system of truth--one, for example, that could be displayed graphically on a carefully drawn chart and hung in front of the church auditorium for all the faithful to see. [58]

C. I. Scofield of Dallas Theological Seminary capitalized upon this interest in dispensationalism. Scofield stressed the importance of the "Doctrine of the Ages" for teaching students to read the Bible: "It has the same relation to the right understanding of the Scriptures that correct outline work has to map-making."[59] As George Marsden has noted, dispensationalists like Scofield were predisposed "to divide and classify everything." Building on Marsden's observation, Frank probes this hermeneutical orientation to the text of the Bible.

> All the better to control it. In Scofield's hands, the Bible shed its mysteries and became a jigsaw puzzle that men like Darby had fortunately figured out just in time to let Christians in on the secrets of the ages. To many evangelicals...Scofield's notes and dispensationalism generally came with the force of a revelation: so this is what the Bible is about! So that is why the Sermon on the Mount sounds different from Paul's gospel! The beauty of Darby's "postponed kingdom" and his secret rapture as techniques for fitting together Scripture's inconsistencies must have thrilled the souls of many a sincere believer. What a privilege: to possess in one's hand the key of all history, handed down by God himself! For many, the Bible must have seemed like a whole new book that was suddenly clear in its application to history for the first time... As a way to identify with the God who was still clearly in control of history, and to be assured that the control would work to the benefit of the righteous like oneself, Scofield and his dispensational teachings were unparalleled. [60]

What we find here, then, is the equivalent of a "frozen chain" of signification in which the geography of the moral imagination has excluded the very social struggles that Euro-American evangelicals had found to be so unsettling.

The codification (and/or canonization) of dispensationalism in the Scofield Reference

Bible first published in 1909, brought about a situation in which Euro-American Christian readers came to understand that passages of the Bible have meaning or significance primarily in relation to the *categories* in which they are placed. As a result, the dynamic of an ongoing encounter with Scripture is lost, and with this frozen hermeneutic in place, I would argue that the capacity to read Scripture "over against" ourselves has been largely eliminated. As Frank observes, for the reader of the Bible who thinks of himself or herself as "rightly dividing the word of truth,"[61] there are "no surprises" within dispensationalist premillenialist readings of the Bible. And, I would add, where there are no interpretive surprises there is *no need to wrestle with Scripture* in the midst of a nation in which the Reconstruction had been stopped, the "Jim Crow" regime had taken over, and the hegemony of "whiteness" had once again reasserted itself in the imaginations of Euro-American Christians.

In effect, what Frank has sketched is a portrait of Euro-American Christians who, like biblical Jacob, find themselves wrestling with God (Genesis 32:23) in the midst of their disengagement from the consequences and effects of their active evasion of the sufferings of those around them. Frank provides a fascinating as well as insightful psycho-social profile of several Euro-American Christian leaders, comparing them to the position in which the Hebrew prophet Habbakuk found himself struggling with God in the midst of a very troubling era of Israel's history. As Frank shows, like Habbakuk, nineteenth century Euro-American evangelicals had hoped to control history by using God. But they met a bigger and freer God than they expected. But whereas Habbakuk -- who was not only puzzled but anguished about the the unfaithfulness of the people of God -- struggled through and learned something profound about the surprising way that God was working in history to save Israel from itself, advocates of dispensational premillenialism appear to have been more interested in maintaining control than they were in discovering something new about the God who surprises.

In sum, the problem is not just that the hermeneutic of Darby, Scofield, et al is overly tidy, abstract and narrowly focused in terms of inductive patterns of common sense reasoning. The real problem with the dispensationalist hermeneutic is that it constitutes a way of *disengaging* from the historical struggle between the church and the world. More serious still is the way this hermeneutic enables Euro-Americans to escape from history, particularly the history of human suffering. Further, dispensationalist premillenialism promises that Christians *will not*

have to suffer. That is to say that what we are dealing with is a kind of cultural fantasy in which the very way that Euro-American Christians are taught to read the Bible leads them to disengage from the history of earthly struggle in the church and in the world.

But as Douglas Frank goes on to make clear, the "social vision" of the dispensationalists was also "diametrically opposed" to that of the prophets of the Old Testament. Frank concludes his analysis with a fascinating observation about one of the consequences of the dispensational premillennialist reading of the Bible.

> It seems a pity that the dispensationalists so segregated the Old Testament from the New that they inevitably diminished the importance of the psalms to the church. Had they heard these cries for help as their own cries, they might have come to know the God that Habbakuk knew. They might have heard a surprising word from that God, one their common sense could not believe, a word of suffering but by the same token a word of grace. They might have recognized themselves, as Habbakuk knew himself, as poor and needy rather than as the controllers of a history that exempted them from judgment. In other words, had they heard the Psalms, they might also have heard the gospel in them.[62]

Lest it be missed, I would call the reader's attention to Frank's wording in the previous paragraph. The problem stemmed from the *segregation* of the Old Testament from the New, of Israel from the Church, of the people of God from human history -- and by implication from those who have no choice about whether they will suffer or not, which in that era would include the newly freed African-American men and women who struggled in the midst of that "unfinished revolution" known as Reconstruction.

Drawing on Frank's earlier argument, we can extend our analysis further. The problem is the result of a pattern of commonsensical thinking about the Christian life that assumes that there is an *ultimate*--as opposed to a penultimate--separation between Israel and the church, the kingdom of heaven versus the kingdom of God, etc.[63] This kind of "spiritual segregation" converges with, and indirectly can be taken to support various forms of social segregation that were (re-)emerging during the era of Jim Crow. Various kinds of prohibitions of interracial marriage, often presented as an "abomination" before God (thereby supposedly warranted by the Bible) are but one example that can be cited. Euro-American Christians in both the North and the South both consented to and often actively supported attempts to segregate social spaces ranging from housing to churches to bathrooms.

Ideological segregation also converges with segregation of church practices. This is also the era when the liturgical practices of the Black Church and Euro-American Evangelicalism began to be so segregated. If Sandra Sizer's analysis of the practice of singing during this period can be taken as valid, then there is also evidence that Fundamentalists were in fact sealing themselves off from the very practices that were so strongly present in the Black Church. According to Sizer, during the era of Moody and Sankey, hymns of praise were diminishing in importance. Instead, sentimental prayer hymns and exhortations to conversion increasingly were being sung by Euro-American evangelicals. Frank's conclusion focuses on the correlation with the "nest rattling" that Evangelicals were experiencing in this era. "The experience...had taken some of the joyous praise out of the mouths of evangelicals." [64]

But, make no mistake about it, the dispensationalist view of the church required just this kind of historical, eschatological, and social segregation. As we have already seen, Darby's conception of "the true church" was erected upon an elaborate eschatological and historical schema cast within a set of Neo-Platonic distinctions. But it also depended upon an elaborate doctrinal structure as well. For Darby, the true church is the "heavenly" entity, composed of "heavenly" people whose true place is with Christ in glory. As such, they are "in the forefront of Christ's interest" and "the *ultimate"* of God's plan for humanity. [65] As Darby put it:

> It is this conviction that the Church is properly heavenly, in its calling and relationship with Christ, forming no part of the course of events of the earth, which makes the rapture so simple and clear: and on the other hand, it shows how the denial of its rapture brings down the Church to an earthly position, and destroys its whole spiritual character and position. [66]

This is a frozen “chain of signification” indeed! Consider that most powerful symbol of Jim Crow era: after *Plessy V. Ferguson (1896)*, there were courtrooms where African-Americans were asked to swear on *a different Bible* than the ones that Euro-Americans swore on. Here too, they bore witness to a different truth. One is tempted to say that, in this case, they were in fact reading a different Bible precisely because they were worshipping a different god. In retrospect, it is not too difficult to chart the ways that dispensationalist readings of the Bible contribute to the misreading and misapplication of the gospel mandate to participate in the ministry of reconciliation in the world. The more challenging task is to explore the critical geography where cultural narratives have shaped religious practices, often in alliance with

fundamentalist readings of the Bible.

5) Yes, we can learn to read Scripture together, but not until we Euro-American/Christians and African-American/Christians learn to disentangle the cultural conflicts from the ecclesial conflicts, and therefore recognize that as Christians we have been-- and are now--wrestling with "the principalities and powers of this dark age."

This is a difficult matter with which to come to grips not only because of the seeming intractability of the ecclesial conflicts in which Christians black and white find themselves, but also because of the profound sense in which we have yet to grasp the moral significance of the racial divisions within our culture. For most of us, the conflicts that constitute our lives are so intricately entangled that we do not fully realize where the roots are, and how these social structures distort our experience of Christianity and therefore our capacity as African-Americans and Euro-Americans to even *imagine* ourselves being reconciled with one another.

To begin to disentangle the two sets of conflicts requires us to begin making judgments that for many of us strike so close to home that those of us who are Euro-American Christians cannot bear to listen even when our African-American "brothers" and "sisters" in Christ *dare* to speak the truth in love to us. It is a very difficult thing to have to acknowledge that what you think you are about is not at all what you are actually doing with your life. It is one thing to begin to realize the social dislocations which have contributed to compartamentalized readings of biblical texts such as 2 Cor. 5:19-20, it is quite another to begin to realize how pervasively one's conception of Christianity has been captured by ideological structures.

Earlier in this essay, I described the significance of my having become a "Royal Ambassador for Christ" at eight years of age, an image of Christian identity that has stayed with me for more than thirty years, and which in significant ways continues to inform how I think of myself as a Christian. I also noted that I was raised in an ethos that was strongly determined by "the Lost Cause," a narrative of Southern history and particularly of the "War Between the States" that is marked by a distinctive moral perspective, particularly with respect to personal honor. In the wake of the Confederate defeat in 1865, many Southerners discovered an important religious lesson from their defeat in a holy war: "God's chosen people did not give up that chosen status when defeated." At one and the same time, the religion of the Lost Cause manifested itself in "a paradoxical blend of fatalism and a heightened sensitivity to combat evil."

[67] Interestingly, unlike dispensationalist premillennialism, the myth of the Lost Cause did not deny the necessity of suffering, but placed suffering in a different context of divine purpose., as the following prayer illustrates:

> Arouse yourselves, children of God; and while you humble yourselves under the mighty hand of God, forget not that you are Christ's servants, bound to do His work in the church militant upon earth, and to advance His kingdom wherever He may spread the banner of the Cross. Instead of permitting suffering to overcome your faith, let it rather lead you on to perfection. [68]

As early as the 1870s, educational efforts targeted children, particularly boys, with the purpose of inculcating fervor for this amalgam of religious and cultural piety. Southern Baptist ministers like J. William Jones preached a gospel that was populated by the heroes of the Confederate cause, and children and adults alike were exhorted to imitate those "Christian knights" of the Lost Cause: Stonewall Jackson and Robert E. Lee. Space does not permit me to provide the full genealogy that links the Southern Baptist "Royal Ambassadors" discipleship training program for boys with the efforts of Jones and other advocates of the religion of the Lost Cause, however, the imaginative connections between the two complexes of ideas are clearly converge at several levels. Vestiges of the cultural fantasy of the "Lost Cause" focus the attention of Southerners in ways that encouraged them to ignore the reality of racial injustice.

One of the earliest, longest and perhaps the most significant of the apologia for the lost cause was written by Edward A. Pollard, a Virginian who articulated a spiritual geography for Southern Christians that invited the defeated Confederacy to reimagine itself as God's chosen people. The final paragraphs of Pollard's preroration provide an example of the determined social resistance that the myth of the lost cause evoked in the years immediately after the Civil War and, even today, continues to evoke in some quarters.

> The War has not swallowed up everything...the South...must submit fiarly and truthfully to *what the war has properly decided*. But the war properly decided only what was put in issue: the restoration of the Union and the excision of slavery; and to these two conditions the South submits. But the war did not decide negro equality; it did not decide negro suffrage; it did not decide States Rights, although it may have exploded their abuse; it did not decide the orthodoxy of the Democratic Party; it did not decide the right of a people to show dignity in mis-fortune, and to maintain self-respect in the face of adversity. And these things, which the war did not decide, the Southern people will still cling to, still claim, and still assert in them their rights and views.

> This is not the language of insolance and faction. It is the stark letter of right, and the plain syllogism of common sense. It is not untimely or unreasonable to tell the South to cultivate her superiority as a people; to maintain her old schools of literature and scholarship; to assert, in the forms of her thought, and in the style of her manners, her peculiar civilization and to convince the North that, instead of subjugating an inferior country, she has obtained the alliance of a noble and cultivated people, and secured a bond of association with those she may be proud to call brethren.
>
> In such a condition there may possibly be a solid and honourable peace; and one in which the South may still preserve many things dear to her in the past. There may not be a political South. Yet there may be a social and intellectual South. But if, on the ohter hand, the South, mistaking the consequences of the war, accepts the position of the inferior, and gives up what was never claimed or conquered in the war; surrenders her schools of intellect and thought, and is left only with the brutal desire of the conquered for "bread and games;" then indeed to her people may be applied what Tacitus wrote of those who existed under the Roman Empire: "We cannot be said to have lived, but rather to have crawled in silence, the young towards the decrepitude of age and the old to dishonorable graves. [69]

This statement is remarkable for several reasons. This is a notable attempt to "freeze" the transmission of the traditions of culture at a time when change is already occuring in ways that would prove to be disorienting for blacks and whites alike in the South. It is also fascinating to note the parallelism with the structures of thought that populate dispensationalist thinking for Pollard was calling for the maintenance of a "social and intellectual south" that is not embodied as such in political institutions. His invocation of common sense reasoning in combination with a reading strategy anchored in the plain sense of texts also locates additional areas of convergence with the hermeneutic of that former Confederate soldier from Tennessee, C. I. Scofield.

Perhaps most telling is the fact that Pollard's closing statement is prefaced by an explicit invocation of "the Christian world" which the author not only considers himself to be a part of, but which he clearly believes the South to be one of the foremost cultural representatives. This is no accident. According to the historian Charles R. Wilson, religiosity "was at the heart of this dream" [70] of the Lost Cause. Even more significant, for my purposes, is the fact that Southern white clergy were among the most active proponents of this mythology. In fact, Charles Reagan Wilson observes that southern clergy "saw little difference between their religious and cultural values, and they promoted the link by constructing Lost Cause ritualistic forms that celebrated

their regional, mythological, and theological beliefs." [71] In effect, the religion of the Lost Cause provided Southerners with a renewed sense of chosenness and the possibility of spiritual victory in the aftermath of the Confederacy's political defeat. Wilson probess the powerful imagery associated with this mythology when he calls attention to the ways in which the southern churches believed themselves to have been "baptized in blood." More significant still--these white Southern Christians also believed that if they would be faithful to their calling, they would "rise again"to greater spiritual heights. [72] It would be a mistake to think that the mythology of the Lost Cause is a relic of the past. There are Christians in American culture today who can be found participating in the rituals, celebrations and ceremonies of this nostalgic narrative.[73] Clearly this particular ideology of "whiteness" continues to generate itself in the midst of new ideological challenges.

The Post-Civil War mythology of "the Lost Cause" not only displays the accuracy of Michael Kammen's thesis about the role of myth in relation to the transformation of tradition in American culture, but also provides an example of the social appeal of what I have described as as a frozen hermeneutic at a time when the very identity African-Americans was being re-configured. Although this mythology was not directly shaped by premillennialism, as Charles Reagan Wilson has shown, the dispensationalist hermeneutic was sometimes used in the service of the religion of the Lost Cause. [74] Elsewhere Bill Leonard has described the significance of this mythology for Southern churches, particularly the Southern Baptist Convention,[75] but to my knowledge no one has charted the connections between the mythology of the religion of the Lost Cause and the hermeneutical schema of dispensationalist premillenialism.

It is beyond the scope of this essay to chart all the similarities that could be noted between these two hermeneutic schemas. However, I do not think it is an accident that both of these conceptions appeal to common sense readings of texts, both have eschatologies that involve the triumph of the righteous chosen ones and the punishment of the wicked reprobates. And most tellingly, both provide the kind of "hermeneutic mask" (to use Charles Long's telling phrase) that allows Euro-Americans to hide from the facts of the matter. While the religion of the Lost Cause can be seen to deal with "the problem of the color line" more explicitly (if only by *denying*, as Pollard did, claims "negro equality") than did the dispensationalist hermeneutic of Scofield and company, the dispensationalist paradigm also can be said to have negative

implications for African-Americans. Well into the late twentieth century, one can find examples of examples of "prophecy belief" interpretations of the Bible which place the black peoples of "Cush" (Genesis 9-10) among the forces of Gog, [76] and/or as among the reprobate peoples who will perish during the Tribulation while (white) Christians are transported to heaven at the time of the Rapture.[77]

I have used examples that are historically specific, personal and regional, for a reason. In addition to adding insight to the ways cultural narratives influenced the religious tradition that was most determinative in my youth, it also displays the displacing effect -- particularly for the issue of racial reconciliation -- that emerges when the Bible comes to be read in light of these kinds of ideologies, with their attendant practices. As Wilson noted, the Lost Cause was not simply articulated in rather obscure historical tomes like that of Pollard, it was also transmitted in more popular ways through the liturgies and ceremonies of churches, which means that in some sense it became part of the way that young girls and boys (like me) growing up in the Southern U. S. were formed as Christians. When "being a Christian" and "being a Southerner" come to be so closely identified in the imaginations of churchmembers, that it is not possible for most Christians to discern the corruption of their faith by the mythology of the Lost Cause, then our conception of Christian reconciliation loses much of its power as a radical force in the world, and texts like 2 Cor. 5:19-20 lose much of their potency as the Word of God.

In this kind of situation, I believe that we must begin to register the power of ideological structures in our midst, which is another way of recognizing that with which we find ourselves wrestling may be larger than we may prefer to think. For me, this point has been made most poignantly in the following passage, which was written by a Christian living in Ruleville, Mississippi, at a time when the victories of the Civil Rights era had been eclipsed by the reality of racial intransigence in both the North and the South.

> We have to realize just how grave the problem is in the United States today, and I think Ephesians 6:11 and 12 helps us to know how grave the problem is, and what it is that we are up against: "*Put on the whole armor of God that ye may be able to stand against the wiles of the devil. For we wrestle not against flesh and blood, but against principalities and powers, against the rulers of the darkness of this world, against spiritual wickedness in high places*." [78]

The words are Mrs. Fannie Lou Hamer's but the judgment is as relevant today as it was twenty-

five years ago when she first uttered this poignant judgment.

I believe that we will continue to struggle with one another and with the Bible, precisely because--whether we fully grasp the significance of the matter or not--we are not only wrestling *with Scripture* in the midst of wrestling *with one another* as black and white Christians living in American culture, but also we are "wrestling with the principalities and powers" (Ephesians 6:12) of our own time. This, I believe, is the sense in which those of us who are Christians, black and white alike, should read Derrick Bell's contention that racism is "a permanent feature of American life." [79] To invoke this strange mythological language of the New Testament is to remind ourselves that the struggle is one that goes beyond ideological constructions of "whiteness" and theories of "ontological blackness" -- and even beyond contemporary proposals and counterproposals of what it might mean to speak of "postmodern blackness" [80] -- to engage a very different kind of struggle, the struggle between *church* and *world*. But to engage this struggle calls upon us to learn to think *outside* the structures of the Constantinianism. For most of us, black and white alike, this is one of the most formidable challenges we face in the reconstruction of our moral imaginations. And I have come to believe that it is one of the most significant steps we can take in fulfilling our mission as Christ's "ambassadors" to the world that in which reconciliation is so rarely evident.

6) **Yes, we Euro-Americans and African-Americans can learn to read Scripture together, but we will not be able to do so unless or until we disavow Constantinianism and resolve to bring the church into visibility again *as the social embodiment of a reconciled people* standing over against as well as *for* the world. When we do so, then our vision of what it means to be the Church in the world is transformed, and with it our imagination of what it looks like to be royal ambassadors for Christ.**

One of the most challenging tasks that lies before us in exploring the critical geography of racial reconciliation is to learn to imagine the church as something different than the Constantinian image of a community of faith focused in terms of the nation-state. "Constantinianism" describes the situation of the church in relation to the nation-state in which the church succumbs to the temptation to "baptize" national purposes in such a way that the social embodiment of "Christian peoplehood" is blurred to the point that the difference between being a Christian and an American (or Euro-American, or Southerner) is no longer recognizable.

It is important to observe that Constantinianism does not exist as a monolithic opposition,[81] but instead constitutes an ongoing temptation wherever churches find themselves in the position in which they are tempted to wield official power and/or political clout. It is precisely in these kinds of situations that Euro-American Christians have been most tempted to make interracial reconciliation secondary to other objectives. Paradoxically, these other objects include the proclamation of the Gospel in evangelism, as if Christianity can be communicated and lives transformed independent of the church's social embodiment of the gospel.

The recent recommendation of the United Methodist Church's General Commission on Religion and Race to the 1996 General Conference of the UMC that persons who hold racist views *not* be barred from church membership in that denomination (a decision which would in effect overturn a decision of the 1992 General Conference) provides a good example of the kind of Constantinianism in which church membership becomes little more than a simulacra of discipline and as a result the social embodiment of the gospel is rendered invisible. Predictably, the "theological rationale" for this decision calls attention to the "all-inclusive" nature of God's grace and the sinfulness of all humanity. But I find it especially noteworthy that the petition on *"Membership in the United Methodist Church and in Supremacist Groups"* specifies that "the church, as representative of the fullness of interaction between church and world, must open its doors to all who enter and join in its community." [82] This is Constantinianism pure and simple. The tension between church and world has been collapsed in favor of accommodating the latter in the name of inclusivity. This is a departure from the historical Wesleyan practices of discipleship. Where once upon a time Methodists received everyone "fleeing from the wrath to come" and enjoined them to keep the "General Rules of the United Societies" or be turned out, it would appear that contemporary United Methodists have lost the sense of what it means to be the kind of people in whom reconciliation is embodied in disciplined forms of discipleship.

But of course, the United Methodist Church is not the only American denomination that is operating a Constantinian concessions with respect to race and church membership. The Southern Baptist Church has only recently begun to express regret for its own responsibility for racism, and many Euro-American Evangelical Protestant leaders have yet to express regret for their lack of leadership in the area of racial reconciliation. In my judgment, the disavowal of Constantinian forms of Christianity, by black and white alike, is one of the most important steps

that Euro-Americans must make. Here we have much to learn from the churches of the Historic Peace traditions, which have long struggled with the distorting effects of Constantinianism on the way the Bible is interpreted. [83]

Until recently there have been very few engagements between those who have struggled against racism as part of the Civil Rights movement and those who have tried to live out the "free church vision" of discipleship. [84] An interesting exception is provided by Will Campbell. In his 1972 essay "Footwashing or the New Hermeneutic?" Campbell provides a suggestive reminder of the social significance of "footwashing" as a powerful reminder of what "royal servanthood" should look like among the people of God (as opposed to Constantinian conceptions of "royal ambassadors" in which Southern whites remain in control, and therefore regard themselves as the arbiters of what "serving others in the name of Christ" looks like). Campbell's essay provides a suggestive reminder of the ways that reading the Bible in the light of such a practice provides a real alternative to the inadequacies of the hermeneutic of Protestant Fundamentalism as well as to the whatever version of modernist "New Hermeneutics" we happen to be confronting at a given time. [85] Although Campbell does not develop the point as carefully as one might want him to do, his basic insight is certainly on target. Namely, with respect to racial reconciliation, the ultimate test of the adequacy of any hermeneutic theory is does it help us to put out the fire of racial hatred.

Will Campbell is also candid about another matter that many of us, black and white alike, shy away from admitting. And that is this: in the kind of world that we live in, racial reconciliation quite often is going to look "sectarian" when compared to those Constantinian embodiments of church where the color line is not crossed. As Brother Will explains: "But what hope is there among us, within us, the church?. . . .Whatever ways for witness that we may find as Christians will be witness of *church*, or it will not be witness at all." [86] Here I would argue that we cannot underestimate the significance of what it might mean in the context of American culture to *embody* a mode of reconciliation that runs counter to the all-too-common practice of segregation by race. We need to recover the radically biblical sense of what it means to be a gathered community in the midst of our social differences, for only then will we begin to rediscover the signs and wonders of Christian racial reconciliation. [87] Here I have in mind communities of faith as distinctive (and as socially significant) as Voice of Calvary Fellowship

in Jackson, Mississippi and Azusa Christian Community in Dorchester, Massachusetts--*churches* (in the sense of Campbell's usage)--which in different respects have disavowed the establishment idols of Euro-American Protestant Christianity as well as African-American versions of Constantinianism.[88]

To make visible our unity in Christ, then, requires that we leave aside the temptation to become "chaplain" to the world in favor of becoming the kind of " Ambassadors" for Christ who bear witness to the Reign of God. A good example of the way this alternative ecclesiological conception can be articulated at the level of congregational life is found in Samuel Hines' challenge a quarter of a century ago to the congregation of Washington, D. C.'s Third Street Church of God (Anderson) to become "Ambassadors for Christ in the Nation's Capitol."

> We are ambassadors for Christ in the Nation's Capitol, committed to be a totally open, evangelistic, metropolitan caring fellowship of believers. To this end, we are being discipled in a community of Christian faith, centered in the love of Jesus Christ and administered by the Holy Spirit. We are covenanted to honor God, obey His Word, celebrate His grace, and demonstrate a lifestyle of servanthood. Accordingly, we seek to proclaim and offer to the world a full cycle ministry of reconciliation and wholeness.[89]

As Cheryl Sanders has noted, among other things, what it means for this congregation to "offer the world a full cycle of ministry of reconciliation and wholeness" is to *cross the lines* of race and class and national identity. No less significant, Sanders argues, is the fact that this congregation embodies a "three-dimensional holiness ethic, mandating not only holy living for individuals but also holy worship in the churches and holy justice in the social order...In the Sanctified church tradition, the possessing Spirit is the Holy Spirit, the pursuit of social justice is a holy mandate, and the purity of the saint is a testament to God's holiness." [90] Obviously, the social embodiment of what it means to be a "royal ambassador" for Christ in this congregation is quite different than what I was taught in the Southern churches of my childhood! Significantly, as a result of having a "three-dimensional" embodiment of ethics, the congregation is able to imagine a wider set of possibilities for its ministry than congregations whose imagination of ministry is limited to one or another of these dimensions of Christian living.

This is where I believe that Cheryl Sanders' discussion of the ecclesiological significance of the practices of "the Sanctified Church" can be very helpful. In her book Saints in Exile,

Sanders articulates the ecclesiological significance of the biblical concept of exile for Holiness--Pentecostal strand of the Black Church tradition. "The exilic concept allows for honest appraisal of and response to white racism, without, at the same time, having one's own identity totally shaped by it; the dialectical understanding of existence need not become totally collapsed under the weight of oppression." [91] Sanders concludes her study with an extended discussion of the ecclesiological significance of the congregations like Third Street Church of God in Washington, D.C.

> As a faith community whose dual heritage is rooted in the evangelical imperatives of holiness and unity associated with the egalitarian Holiness movement and the fires of Azusa Street that set the Pentecostal revival ablaze in the twentieth century as a global, multicultural phenomenon, the Sanctified church in America is challenged to sustain a socially conscious and profoundly spiritual Christian witness. The worship and music of the Sanctified churches embody a host of ethical responses to the exilic existence imposed on African-Americans as a consequence of white racism, both in the church and outside of it. The genius of this embodied ethics is that it promotes racial reconciliation without obliterating racial identity. [92]

Sanders is not unaware of the "imperiled future" of the Sanctified Church in a North American context marked by a wide variety of practices, including practices that look very much like an African-American forms of Constantinianism. Her response is to claim the hope that comes from embracing the calling to be an exilic people who display distinctive (Holiness-Pentecostal) practices of discipleship and liturgy in the midst of a cultural situation that she describes as "this North American Babylon." [93]

I believe that Sanders' discussion of the *non-Constantinian* approach of the "Saints in Exile" suggests a way forward for renewed conversation between African-Americans and Euro-Americans about what it means to embody the church in the world. Indeed, Sanders own adaptation of a typology originally developed by Euro-American Evangelical, the Episcopal priest and theologian Ephraim Radner, [94] suggests that at some levels the renewed "dialogue" between African-American Christians and Euro-American Christians that I and others are seeking may already have begun. But we dare not underestimate the obstacles to sustaining such dialogue between Euro-American and African-American Christians. Sanders herself notes that while several Euro-American Christian theologians have re-discovered the power of the Pentecostal tradition in recent years, as Cheryl Sanders has noted, "The appeal of the exilic

metaphor to white Christians remains problematic." [95] The reason, I would argue, has everything to do with the continuing grip of Constantinian habits and practices in the congregations of predominantly Euro-American congregations.

7. **Yes, we Euro-Americans and African-American Christians can learn to read Scripture together, but we will not be able to do so until we recognize that reconciliation is an ongoing process, and it must always take place first among the people of God, in whom the world's renewal has begun, and this may only happen as we recover and/or reconstruct the practices of fraternal admonition and church discipline as disciplines of discernment and reconciliation.**

Racial reconciliation is one part of that ongoing process by which the lives of Christians are being transformed by God's grace. Racial reconciliation is one stage in the ultimate restoration of all things, but should not be thought of as stage that can be deferred. To quote a line from A Declaration on Peace, a little book jointly authored by representatives of the Historic Peace Churches, *"In God's People, the World's Renewal Has Begun."* More pointedly, "When the people of God embodies the way of peace *now*, it becomes a sacrament of salvation for the world."[96] This is what it means to be ambassadors for Christ, and anything less than such social embodiment is to opt out of what we have been called to be in the world. We must resist the Constantinian temptation to participate in practices of royal domination masked as "servanthood." This is why the kinds of ministry taking place in such places at the Third Street Church of God, Azusa Christian Community, in Dorchester Massachusetts and in Jackson, Mississipi are so important for Euro-Americans to take seriously. Those of us who are Euro-American Christians must *re-imagine* what it means to be "Royal Ambassadors for Christ," and the way this will take place is through the practice of disciplines of discipleship like "fraternal admonition" which makes truthtelling normative for what it means to be church.

Among other things, to aspire to be a non-Constantinian Church means to turn aside from variants of the cultural fantasy of "the once and future" church (the nostalgic remembrance of the apostolic era as a dehistoricized context) in favor of the *here-and-now* struggle to engage the apostolic mandate to embody the Gospel *in* the world and--where necessary-- *over against* the world. It involves congregations learning to take responsibility for our own discipline, which means that we are going to have to rediscover what it means to engage in moral "reproof" and

"fraternal admonition" within and across congregations. Although these practices do exist in residual forms in various Protestant traditions, they largely exist in debased forms, and where examples can be found, they are often ignored even when articulated in provocative ways.

For example, several years ago in an article published by Christianity Today, the Reverend Billy Graham expressed regret about his own role in neglecting the issue of racial reconcilation, but Graham's *mea culpa* on this matter came more than twenty-five years after two fellow Southern Baptist ministers wrote an "open letter" to Graham in which they admonished Dr. Graham as their "Baptist brother" about the meagerness of Graham's actions in the area of racial reconciliatio in relation to the opportunities that he had to speak truth to power. James Holloway and Will Campbell did not accuse Graham of racism per se. They would have known about some of Graham's stands in the 1950s in the early days of the Civil Rights movement, and no doubt they appreciated the significance of those actions. [97] Rather, they admonished Billy Graham about *the way* he and others went about dealing with problems like racism in relation to his ministry of evangelism. [98]

From the point of view of Holloway and Campbell, Graham was allowing his status as "court prophet" to the American Presidency to structure the way he was going about racial reconciliation; this is the focus of the fraternal admonition by Campbell and Holloway. Graham and the "New Evangelicals" had gone to great lengths in the 1950s to put themselves in the position of cultural power that they had achieved. [99] Drawing on what *"the Bible says"* about the role of the prophet in I Kings 22:1-38 (most of which they reproduced in the text of their letter), Holloway and Campbell reproved Dr. Graham for his role as "court prophet" in the tradition of Zedekiah son of Kenaanah and called upon him to stand forth as a prophet of God without concern for the loss of political power and influence. [100]

Of course, this is not the way Dr. Graham and many other "new evangelicals" have tended to think about the problem. So it is quite possible to admit as Dr. Graham does in Peace is the Will of God that "the church has failed in solving this great human problem," and shortly thereafter say, "But in the final analysis the only real solution will be found at the foot of the cross where we come together in brotherly love. The closer the people of all races get to Christ and his cross, the closer they will get to one another. . . .The ground is level at the foot of the cross." [101] But to say this kind of thing--without embodying it in practice in the context of

congregational life--is to *disengage* from the reality of the struggle to be reconciled with African-Americans. It is to perpetuate the notion, advocated by Darby et al., that the church on earth really is not that important. To borrow and re-apply a title from Carl F. H. Henry, this form of Constantinian disengagement might be said to be one source of the "uneasy conscience" of contemporary evangelicals. Because many Euro-American Evangelicals continue to interpret the Bible within the context of a dispensational premillennialist eschatology, they do not regard the "ruin" of the church--as a racially segregated body--to be a terribly difficult problem, and therefore they do not really engage the problem of racism in the church, because from this framework nothing "ultimate" is really at stake.

Our goal as people of God who are are engaged in the project of reading the Bible in reconciliation with one another should not be to be chaplain to the world. On the contrary, we must resist the temptation to baptize ideological commitments and programmatic projects even as we look for opportunities to engage the principalities and the powers in our own time and place. Only as we engage the world from the vantage point of the reconciled body, can we proclaim the good news to the principalities and powers, and thereby live out the vocation to which we are called in hope, as ambassadors of the reconciliation that God began in Jesus Christ and that continues wherever the church is socially embodied as the *reconciled* body of Christ.

Conclusion: Reading in Reconciliation--The Church's *Never-ending* Dialogue with Scripture

"Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly..." (Col. 3:16). This admonition by the author of Colossians describes the matrix for the ongoing conversation that Christians past and present, African-American and Euro-American alike, have had and will continue to have with Christian Scripture. Of course, what it means for the "word" of Christ to "dwell" in a community of God's people, while very suggestive, is by no means straightforward. There is a sense in which it is easier to say *what it does not mean*, than to convey *what it could mean* in the fullest (or richest) sense. However, I do believe that it means that the church's ongoing conversation with Scripture is constituted by the "always already" character of our relationships as the people of God whose very life together is constituted by the presence of the transformative Word of Christ.

It is in that sense, I now return to my earlier suggestion about the *unfinished* character of

our conversations with one another and with Scripture. I suspect that the temptation -will always be with us to cut short our dialogue with Scripture by creating a grid with a "frozen chain" of signification -- whether in some version of the "New Hermeneutic" or within the framework of dispensationalist premillennialism. I have already noted the problem with rationalistic evangelicalism's common sense reading (Doug Frank), and its failure to grasp the richness of books like the Psalms, with their cries of anguish and suffering. And I have tried to explain why I think that the Black Church's "double-voiced" tradition is much richer, hermeneutically speaking, than the monological readings of Euro-American Christians. But I have also argued that it is possible for Euro-American Evangelicals to read Scripture in "double-voiced" ways; [102] our failure to do so is largely the result of truncated imaginations nurtured by the temptation of prematurely concluding our conversation with Scripture.

This possibility reminds me of a comment by C. H. Mason (an evangelical who was both black and pentecostal) the great "Scriptural Episcopos" of the Church of God in Christ, who was fond of saying that *"the church is like the eye: it has a little black in it and a little white in it, and without both it cannot see."* [103] What a stunning explanation for the stunted growth of our moral imaginations in the racist climate of our culture! I have found Bishop Mason's statement to be a very suggestive -- if oversimple -- image, for what I have described as the *never-ending congregational conversation* with Scripture. By this I mean that we as Christians, black and white alike, are never at a point where we can claim to have *exhausted* the meanings of the Bible, i.e., the "chain of signification" can never be frozen in time; for as Dietrich Bonhoeffer understood so well, it is "only in the infiniteness of its inner relationships" is the wholeness of God's revealing word to be discovered.[104]

Without in any way conflating the "here and now" with the New Jerusalem, I think it is possible to understand Christian racial reconciliation as situated within a "never-ending dialogue" with Scripture, a specifically -- if not exclusively -- *ecclesial* kind of moral conversation, which is -- and I would argue should be -- *polyphonic*, precisely because it is pneumatologically centered and therefore directed by the abiding presence (Matt. 18:20) of "a word" outside itself. I think this is not unrelated to the kind of "directionality" of the Pauline counsel (I Cor. 14:26-33), which makes clear that the multivoiced congregational response to the word is to be *oriented within* and *purposed toward* the edification of the community of

disciples. "For God is not a God of confusion but of peace." (v.33) "*Peaceable* polyphony" strikes me as one good way of describing both the directionality and moral focus that can be linked with various "chains of signification" of the Black Church tradition, not to mention those that are to be found within the Pauline writings, the four Gospels, the Acts of the Apostles, or the Apocalypse of St. John as all of these play off of the Scriptures of the Hebrew Bible.

The defining context of a "faithful hermeneutic" for Christian ethics (and therefore for Christian approaches to racial reconciliation) is *not* only to be discussed in light of the question of whether we are "loyal to the story of God's past actions" as Wayne Meeks has argued; [105] the issue is also to be engaged with respect to the question of whether we are prepared to *follow* in the *direction* of the "works of God" which "*go on* beyond Easter" (to invoke Gerhard Lohfink's wonderfully suggestive image) precisely in the sense that "the eschatological, definitive, all-encompassing work of Jesus' resurrection manifests and unfolds itself now in history as the work of building the church." [106] Therefore, (synchronic) polyphony and (diachronic) directionality need not to be thought of as mutually exclusive. The question is, can we fathom the mystery that the way *the church* engages in moral conversation is *always already* constituted not only by the various sociological and racial configurations of our historical and political situation but also, and most significantly, by the presence of the "word" of Christ in our midst. Ultimately, the richness or poverty of our "performances" of Scripture are to be measured by the degree to which our conversation is oriented by this constitutive word of Christ which comes to us (from outside ourselves) to dwell in our midst.[107]

But as Greg Jones and Stephen Fowl have suggested in their book Reading in Communion, we really cannot pretend that we are being constituted by this transcendent word if our congregations are constituted in such a way as to shut out or silence those "outsiders" who may be in our communities and neighborhoods.[108] This is the reason why the greatest tragedy of the congregation of the Elkhorn Baptist Church in 1806 may be that it lost the opportunity to bear witness to the Gospel in black and white. That is to say that the congregation could very well have embodied the Gospel in such a way that the world might have seen the presence of the Evangel in the "royal servanthood" of a interracial congregation in which "brotherhood" and "sisterhood" extended beyond the color line in such a powerful way as to destroy the institutions of slavery.

The challenge in our own time is to (re-)discover and/or (re-)imagine disciplined forms of congregational life together which are oriented within the task of reconciliation. As a suggestive indicator of what it might look like to participate in such a never-ending congregational conversation with Scripture, I conclude this essay with an anecdote about congregational church discipline, this one from the era of the first Great Awakening. In The Autobiography of Ben Franklin, there is a fascinating account of an exchange between Franklin and Michael Welfare (Wohlfart), leader of the Ephrata community, which broke away from the Brethren in Germantown, Pennsylvania around 1730. Welfare appears to have written to Franklin to complain that his community had been slandered and misunderstood by other groups living in eastern Pennsylvania. Franklin had written back to suggest it would be advisable if they would publish a copy of their discipline for all the world to see. Michael Welfare's response to Franklin's suggestion is intriguing to consider in view of the notion of a "never-ending conversation" with Scripture that I have proposed as one basis for Euro-Americans and African-Americans to think about how they might read Scripture together. Welfare writes that this possibility had been considered at an earlier point, but had been rejected:

> When we were first drawn together as a society, it had pleased God to enlighten our minds so far as to see that some doctrines, which we once esteemed truths, were errors, and that others, which we had esteemed errors, were real truths. From time to time [God] has been pleased to afford us farther light, and our principles have been improving, and our errors diminishing. Now we are not sure that we had arrived at the end of this progression, and at the perfection of spiritual or theological knowledge; and we fear that, if we should feel ourselves as if bound and confined by it, and perhaps be unwilling to receive further improvement, and our successors still more so, as conceiving what we their elders and founders had done, to be something sacred, never departed therefrom.[109]

If I had more space, I would try to tease out several lessons from this fascinating statement by one of the Believers' Church congregations of the eighteenth century. As Donald Durnbaugh has suggested, Welfare's comments can be correlated with the principle of "openness" (to further light) that is found in the Quaker tradition.[110] In addition to this insight, I would want to suggest a slightly different reading of Welfare's statement, one that I hope applies to the role of theology in racial reconciliation. Only congregations that are already practicing reconciliation can sustain the patient practice of discernment that takes place when we locate

ourselves in the never-ending conversation with Scripture. This requires the kind of *hermeneutics of discernment and reconciliation* that recognizes that while the canon of Scripture may be closed, there is no end to our reading of Scripture just as there can be no end to the work of reconciliation this side of the New Jerusalem.

The task of racial reconciliation, then, like the work of discernment, is an ongoing struggle that must be engaged in all places and in every generation. We can never presume that we have exhausted the riches of Scripture because we have never read it fully. And that is another way of saying that this side of the New Jerusalem, all our readings of Scripture are *at best* penultimate. That is to say, we know now in part (I Cor. 13:10)--even with respect to Scripture, but we will read the text better when we read it in communion with one another as a witness to the capacity of the Gospel to reconcile us. I do not believe that we will ever come to the point when we will stop wrestling with Scripture. To do so, would be to suggest that we have domesticated Scripture, at which point it no longer comes to us as a Word outside ourselves, but only a word that we have captured within one or another ideology. To stop wrestling with Scripture is to forget what it means to read Scripture *over against* ourselves. To do so would be to give up on our ongoing struggle with the principalities and powers of this dark age, and thereby forsake our proper vocation as ambassadors -- "royal servants" -- of the God in whom reconciliation was first embodied in our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

NOTES

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1. Here I borrow the title of Margaret Walker's poignant and highly evocative poem about the African-American experience, in relation to the history of oppression, often at the hands of those whites who also claimed to be believers. In particular, I have in mind the third stanza where Walker employs imagery of reconciliation to describe the indomitable character of African-American belief. "Neither the slavers' whip nor the lynchers' rope nor the bayonet could kill our black belief . In our hunger we beheld the welcome table and in our nakedness the glory of the long white robe. We have been believers in the New Jerusalem." See "We Have Been Believers" by Margaret Walker in For My People (Salem, NH: Ayer Company Publishers, Inc., 1990), 16.

2. Donald F. Durnbaugh, The Believers Church: The History and Character of Radical Protestantism (Scottdale, Penn.: Herald, 1985; New York: Macmillan, 1968), 295. Although most closely associated with the English Puritan John Robinson, this affirmation is also associated with the Quaker and Church of Brethren traditions, each of which interpret it as a principle of openness to the direction of the Holy Spirit for the congregation or meeting.

3. Toni Morrison, Playing in the Dark:Whiteness and the Literary Imagination (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1992), 3. Morrison uses these phrases to describe the task that she has set for herself in the lectures which comprise this book.

4. Ibid.

5. As Vincent Harding, the distinguished historian of African-American freedom struggle, reminds us,we dare not forget the formative role that spirituality plays in the freedom; for "there is a river" (Psalm 46:4) whose streams provide the sources of renewal as well as imaginative moral focus for the struggle toward racial reconciliation. The challenge is to locate the narratives of our our lives in relation to that stream, which includes the saga of the lives of those who have gone before us in the struggle. See the very moving introduction to There is a River: The Black Struggle for Freedom in America, the first volume of Harding's history (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1981), xi-xxvi.

6. In their book Reading in Communion: Scripture and Ethics in Christian Life, (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1991), Stephen E. Fowl and L Gregory Jones call attention to the moral significance of reading Scripture *over against* ourselves. They cite Dietrich Bonhoeffer's address to a youth conference in August 1932 where he called attention to the problem. "Has it not become terrifyingly clear again and again, in everything that we have said to one another, that we are no longer obedient to the Bible? We are more fond of our own thoughts than of the thoughts of the Bible. We no longer read the Bible seriously, we no longer read it over against ourselves, but for ourselves. If the whole of our conference here is to have any great signficance, it may be perhaps that of showing us that we must read the Bible in a quite different way, until we find ourselves again." (Dietrich Bonhoeffer, No Rusty Swords, trans. C. H. Robertson, et al., [London: Collins, 1970], 181, quoted in Jones & Fowl, Reading in Communion, 140).

7. Vincent Wimbush, The Bible and African Americans, in Stony the Road We Trod, Cain Hope Felder (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1991), 85-86.

8. Albert Raboteau, Slave Religion: The "Invisible Institution" in the Antebellum South (New York: Oxford University Press, 1980) p. 182, emphasis mine.

9. At this stage of the historical investigation of antebellum evangelical congregations, we simply do not know "how frequently or infrequently slaves sought redress for maltreatment by appealing to church discipline" (Raboteau, Slave Religion, 183) but there is enough extant evidence to suggest that attempts by slaves to offer fraternal admonition to their slavemasters were by no means unknown during this period of American history.

10. There are numerous accounts of runaway slaves who, upon being returned to their masters, were charged in civil courts with having stolen property [themselves] from their masters. When some of these same slaves inquired why it was not regarded as a violation of the fifth commandment when they were taken from their country and enslaved, they were told that the slave trade did not involve stealing; it was a business.

11. Here I am borrowing from the title of Delores Williams' study Sisters in the Wilderness: The Challenge of Womanist God-Talk (Maryknoll; Orbis, 1993) See especially Chapter Five, "Sisters in the Wilderness and Community Meanings," 108-139.

12. Raboteau, Slave Religion, 182-183.

13. The recent conflict about the burial of a infant of mixed race and the subsequent request of her parents to be married at the Barnetts Creek Baptist Church near Thomasville, Georgia, provides yet another example demonstrating how racial reconciliation remains a challenge for most American congregations. The controversy erupted with one of the deacons of this Southern Baptist congregation told the family of the deceased infant that church leaders wanted the grave to be disinterred and the body of the mixed race child moved to another cemetary. For a detailed reporting of this incident see the aritcle by Kevin Sack, "Burial of Mixed Race Baby Provokes All-White Church" in The New York Times (Friday, March 29, 1996), p. A-8, and subsequent articles

14. Here I borrow a phrase from the work of Dietrich Bonhoeffer. For an insightful discussion of Bonhoeffer's conception of reading Scripture "over against" ourselves, see Stephen E. Fowl and L. Gregory Jones, Reading in Communion: Scripture and Ethics in Christian Life (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1991), 140.

15. Here I borrow a phrase from James Wm. McClendon's book, Ethics: Systematic Theology, (Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 1986), 1: 223. McClendon's discussion of the "politics of forgiveness" in particular and more generally hisconception of the way church discipline and reconciliation interact with one another informs much of this chapter.

16. Wayne Meeks uses the phrase "social embodiment" in his essay "A Hermeneutics of Social Embodiment" Harvard Theological Review 79 (1986), where he argues that "the hermeneutical process has a social dimension at both ends" of the polarity between what it means and what it meant (184). In my essay "The Practice and Performance of Scripture: Grounding Christian Ethics in a Communal Hermeneutic" The Annual for the Society of Christian Ethics 1988 (Washington, D. C.: Georgetown University Press, 1988), 31-53, in which use Meeks' essay to argue that the issue of the use of Scripture in Christian ethics needs to be re-focused in terms of the ecclesiological issue of what it means to embody the Church as the people of God.

17. Michael Kammen, The Mystic Chords of Memory: The Transformation of Tradition in

American Culture (Knopf, 1991), 26.

18. Ibid., 701.

19. Derrick Bell, Faces at the Bottom of the Well: The Permanence of Racism (New York: Basic Books, 1992), 12. As Bell comments more fully in the introduction to his book, the proposition which he wants his readers to consider, even though he knows it is "easier to reject than to refute" is this: *"Black people will never gain full equality in this country. Even those herculean efforts we hail as successful will produce no more than temporary peaks of progress," short-lived victories that slide into irrelevance as racial patterns adapt in ways that maintain white dominance. This is a hard-to-accept fact that all history verifies. We must acknowledge it, not as a sign of submission but as an act of ultimate defiance."* Emphasis in the original.

20. Charles Long, "Civil Rights--Civil Religion: Visible People, Invisible Religion" American Civil Religion, ed. by Richey and Jones, American Civil Religion (Harper Forum Books, 1974). p. 214.

21. James Baldwin, The Devil Finds Work, (New York: Laurel/Dell, 1976), 52-69, especially 57.

22. See James Baldwin's commentary about the cultural potency of the image of the "mulatto" and how this structure gets reproduced cinematically in his collection of essays, The Devil Finds Work, In particular, see the discussion of *In the Heat of the Night*.

23. A. M. Chreitzburg, Early Methodism in the Carolinas (Knoxville: Publishing House of the M. E. Church, South, 1897), 158f, quoted in Robert T. Osborn, "North Carolina Methodist Theology in Post-Bellum Nineteenth Century" in Methodism Alive in North Carolina ed. O. Kelly Ingram (Durham, NC: The Duke Divinity School), 99-100.

24. As Richard Lischer points out, this reading reported by Pastor Chreitzburg also displays what amounts to a *double-reverse*, that is, African-American congregations heard the text *literally* despite the fact that the preacher preached it as a *figurative* meaning. The Preacher King: Martin Luther King, Jr. and the Word That Moved America (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), 201.

25. In my essay on "Ideology and the Interpretation of the Bible in the African-American Christian Tradition" Modern Theology 9 (April 1993), 141-158, I explore the hermeneutical significance of "double-voiced" readings of the Bible found in the historic black church tradition.

26. Vincent Wimbush, "The Bible and African Americans," 81-93.

27. Ibid., 84-85.

28. Ibid., 89.

29. Ibid., 89.

30. Ibid., 90.

31. Ibid.

32. Ibid., 92.

33. Ibid., 90.

34. Ibid., 93.

35. Ibid., 94.

36. Ibid., 96.

37. This phrase comes from the subtitle of Theophus Smith's book, Conjuring Culture: Biblical Formations of Black Culture (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994).

38. As Edith Blumhofer has observed in a different context, the very insularity of popular religion in American culture makes it is quite possible for Fundamentalists and Pentecostals to remain almost entirely ignorant of one another's hermeneutic Edith Blumhofer, "Dispensing With Scofield" [a review of Jack Deere's book Surprised by the Power of the Spirit (Zondervan, 1993)] in Christianity Today (January 10, 1994), 57. As Blumhofer goes on to point out, "Vast networks that encompass thousands of American Christians simply do not overlap."

39. Wimbush, "The Bible and African-American", 91.

40. The possibility that Wimbush and others may have overstated the connection between Black liberation theological reading of Scripture and the third reading is a question that will be taken up in Part Two of this work.

41. Wimbush, "Rescue the Perishing: The Importance of Biblical Scholarship in Black Christianity" in Black Theology: A Documentary History, ed. James H. Cone and Gayraud S. Wilmore, second ed. 2 volumes (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Press, 1993), 2: 212-213.

42. Ibid., 214. It should be noted that Wimbush's claim is put forward in the service of his own *apologia* for biblical scholarship as *essential* to the Black community. In fact, immediately following his provocative declaration about Black evangelicals, Wimbush declares:

> The times require the same creative and intellectual energies that gave birth to the black theology movement to address the present needs of the black communities of faith. We cannot go back to more innocent times when faith came by hearing alone. Nor can we assume that all is well if all is quiet. That we have bodies of black Christians is not indication that we have their minds. They must be rescued from the clutches of dogmatic Christianity and led in more constructive, more affirming directions. For this task biblical scholarship is indispensable. (214)

43. Letter from Prof. Wimbush to the author, 4 October 1995, pp. 1-2.

44. I have borrowed this term from the title of Richard Wright's story "The Ethics of Jim Crow," a semi-autobiographical story of the harsh and cruel ways African-Americans were treated in the mid-South. The story actually is set in the Delta country of Eastern Arkansas.

45. In particular, I would call attention to the work of Willie James Jennings of Duke Divinity school. Jennings appears to be on the track of this kind of alternative reading of Scripture in his recent paper "Between a Rock and A Hard Place: Afro-Reading, Black Christian Identity, and the Bible." I find Jennings's description of this theological reading to be very intriguing. "This would be a reading in which Israel serves not just as a model of an oppressed ethnic community from which we as displaced Africans can continue to gain rhetorical tools and narrative space for the display of our own history of oppression....theological understanding of cultural identity" (Page 30).

46. Arna Bontemps novelized account, Chariot in the Sky: A Story of the Jubilee Singers (Philadelphia: John C. Winston, 1951) probably provides the best account of the psychic dislocation experienced by Euro-Americans and African-Americans alike in the midst of this cultural shift.

47. W. E. B. DuBois, The Souls of Black Folk (Chicago: A. C. McClurg,1903; New York: Penguin Classics, 1989). See in particular the chapter on “The Sorrow Songs,” 204-16.

48. I have intentionally focused my comments on dispensationalist premillenialism, which is but one strand of the incredibly diverse and complex stream of “millenialism” that has shaped the interpretation of the Bible in American culture. Some scholars associated with Dallas Theological Seminary have attempted to rescue dispensationalist premillenialism from the problems that I discuss in the paragraphs which follow. While I do not find this defense to be convincing, the fact that such an argument for “progressive dispensationalism” is being put forth, suggests that there is a growing awareness of the limits of the hermeneutic put forth by Scofield et al. earlier this century. See for example, Craig A. Blaising and Darrell L. Bock, Progressive Dispensationalism (Wheaton, IL: Victor Books, 1993). Where Blaising and Bock would attempt to reform from within, my own argument puts forth an external critique which employs cultural criticism for the purpose of showing how dispensationalist hermeneutic may serve to conceal racist patterns of thought.

49. See for example Theophilus Gould Steward's "double-voiced" re-interpretation of Genesis via Psalm 68:31 in The End of the World (Philadelphia: A. M. E. Book Rooms, 1888). Steward’s hermeneutic was technically pre-millenialist, but it was hardly compatible with the dispensationalist of Arthur Nelson Darby or Cyrus Ingersoll Scofield.

50. Douglas Frank, Less Than Conquerors: How Evangelicals Entered the Twentieth Century

(Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1986), 68.

51. Ibid., 69.

52. Ibid., 70.

53. Frank, 70-71, Frank quoting from Darby's text as cited in C. Norman Kraus's Dispensationalism in America: Its Rise and Its Development (Richmond, VA: John Knox, 1958).. As Darby expressed it, "it is positively stated (2 Tim. 3) that the church would fail and become as bad as heathenism; and the Christian is directed to turn away from evil and turn to the Scriptures, and Christ (Rev. 2- 3) is revealed as judging the state of the churches..."

54. Frank, Less Than Conquerors, 71-72.

55. Ibid., 72.

56. Ibid., 72-73.

57. Ibid., 73.

58. Ibid., 73.

59. Ibid., 73.

60. Ibid., 74-75.

61. As George Marsden points out, C. I. Scofield, "the great systematizer" of the dispensationalist approach, deliberately used this phrase from the King James Bible as the title of his programmatic study. "Scofield interpreted this phrase...to mean that 'the Word of Truth, then, has right divisions...so any study of that Word which ignores those divisions must be in large measure profitless and confusing." See George Marsden, Fundamentalism and American Culture: The Shaping of Twentieth Century Evangelicalism 1870-1925 (New York: Oxford University Press, 1980), 59.

62. Frank, Less Than Conquerors,84-85.

63. Ibid., 74. Frank's discussion on this point is insightful.

64. Ibid.,102.

65. Ibid., 94.

66. Ibid., 94, quoting note 58.

67. Ibid., 78.

68. Charles Reagan Wilson, Baptized in Blood: The Religion of the Lost Cause, 1865-1920. (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 1980), 77. The prayer was offered by by Episcopal Bishop Stephen Elliott.

69. Edward A. Pollard, The Lost Cause: A New Southern History of the War of the Confederates (New York: E. B. Treat & Co., Publishers, 1866), 752. Pollard refers to "the Christian world" at the top of the last page just prior to the passage quoted.

70. Wilson, Baptized in Blood, 1. See also Bill J. Leonard, God's Last and Only Hope: The Fragmentation of the Southern Bapist Convention (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1990), 11

71. Ibid., 11.

72. Ibid., 8.

73. In some cases, the rhetorical twists and turns of Pollard's ur-text have inspired contemporary articulations. For a contemporary invocation of "the Lost Cause" see "Compatriot" Tim Waggener's remarks on the occasion of Confederate Memorial Day, April 28, 1996 from the The Reveille [the newsletter of the Sons of Confederate Veterans, Jefferson Davis Camp, No. 635] Vol. 26 (May 1996): 2-3:

> "I am honored today to have been asked to offer some remarks on this memorial occasion, as have others before me in unbroken succession since 1865. It is proper and right that we continue to observe this day to honor the Confederate Dead--May it ever so remain.
>
> It is with appreciation that I am reminded that our Memorial Day for the Conferate Dead remains one of the few unspoiled holidays of American life. Marketing, advertising, unrelated ideology, which have somehow managed to ruin many of our national occasions have largely untouched our special day. . .
>
> For our Confederates, true, the Cause was lost. The country was lost. The War was lost. Countless lives were lost. The slaves were lost. The sons and daughters, men-servants and maid-servants, the oxen and cattle were lost. Homes and lands were lost.
>
> But courage and honor and fidelity were not lost, and on them the foundation of a new world was made!...

74. Ibid., 64-65. For a specific example, see Wilson's discussion of J. W. Sandell's interpretation of history and the Bible found in his book The United States in Scripture, the Union Agains the States, God, and Government (Jackson, MS: n. p., 1907).

75. William Leonard, God's Last and Only Hope: The Fragmentation of the Southern Baptist Church (Eerdmans, 1990), especially 11-15 and following.

76. See Paul Boyer, When Time Shall Be No More: Prophecy Belief in Modern American Culture (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard U. Press, 1992), 166-167.

77. See for example, Hal Lindsey's bestseller The Late Great Planet Earth (Zondervan, 1970), 78-80, where Lindsey encourages his readers to "put together" the various biblical prophecies in a dispensationalist framework in which the opposition between the forces of God and the forces of Satan are identified in terms that place the "black African nations" (contemporary representatives of "Cush") in alliance with Arabs in large part because of their pursuit of the "liberation" cause. In fairness to Lindsey, it is not entirely clear what this would mean for African-Americans, but the fact that his usage of "Cush" in this way converges with the old pro-slavery arguments at several levels cannot be denied.

78. Fannie Lou Hamer, "Sick and Tired of Being Sick and Tired," in The Failure and the Hope: Essays of Southern Churchmen, ed. Will D. Cambpell and James Y. Holloway (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1972), 164.

79. Derrick Bell, Faces at the Bottom of the Well: The Permanence of Racism (New York: Basic Books, 1992), 12.

80. In his recent study Beyond Ontological Blackness: An Essay in American Religious and Cultural Criticism (New York: Continuum, 1995), Victor Anderson argues for a new paradigm--"postmodern blackness"--and against the tradition of "ontological blackness."

81. This point is made most effectively by John Howard Yoder in his essay, "The Otherness of the Church" in The Royal Priesthood: Essays Ecclesiological and Ecumenical ed. Michael G. Cartwright (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1994), 53-64.

> For the early church, "church" and "world" were visibly distinct, yet affirmed in faith to have one and the same Lord. This pair of affirmations is what the so-called Constantinian transformation changes (The name Constantine is used merely as a label for this transformation, which began before A.D. 200 and took over 200 years; the use of his name does not mean an evaluation of his person or work). The most pertinent fact about the new state of things after Constantine and Augustine is not that Christians were no longer persecuted and began to be privileged, nor that emperors built churches and presided over ecumenical deliberations about the Trinity; what matters is that the two visible realities, church and world, were fused. There is no longer anything to call "world"; state, economy, art, rhetoric, superstition and war have all been baptized. (57)

82. Petition Number 20968-IC-NonDis-0, "Membership in the United Methodist Church and

Supremacist Groups," as printed in the 1996 Daily Christian Advocate Advance Edition (Nashville, Tenn.: United Methodist Publishing House), pp. 868-70.

The background of this petition is noteworthy. The petition was prepared by the UMC's General Commission on Religion and Race (GCORR) in response to a petition presented at the 1992 General Conference, which sought to amend paragraph 208 of the 1988 Book of Discipline of the UMC by adding the following sentence: *"However, since membership in the United Methodist Church cannot coexist with membership in racial and supremist [sic] groups, any persons who holds [sic] membership in racial and ethnic supremist groups shall not hold membership in the United Methodist Church"* (emphasis added). The 1996 General Conference approved the petition put forward by GCORR, thereby agreeing not to bar persons from being members of such groups as the Ku Klux Klan.

It should be noted that the GCORR also made a recommendation in which it acknowledged "the deep inconsistency between the Gospel of Jesus Christ and the philosophy of racial and ethnic supremacist groups" (p. 869). This recommendation parallels other stands of the UMC on such issues as military service, where despite the fact that the church notes that war is incompatible with the gospel of Jesus Christ, it recognizes and accepts those persons who are conscientious objectors to war and those who choose to serve in the military.

83. Constantinianism takes many guises, and Constantianian practices have infiltrated too many of our habits of reading Scripture. For too long Euro-American Protestants have used the Parable of the Wheat and the Tares (Matt. 13:24-30, 36-44) not only as a proof-text for amillennialism and against pre-millennialism but also as a means of fending off the fraternal admonition of the "Believers' Church" traditions. Yet these are the very traditions which have most to contribute to our understanding of the distinction between church and world.

84. During the Civil Rights movement of the 1960s, several theologians involved in the Church Peace Mission (an effort launched by the three Historic Peace Churches), hosted a conference on "Revolution, Non-Violence and the Church" at Black Mountain, NC (9-12 December 1963). On that occasion, John H. Yoder made a presentation on the topic of "The Racial Revolution in Theological Perspective" in which he raised the issue of the distorting effects of Constantinianism in relation to the struggle for racial reconciliation in American society. It appears that the majority of participants in the conference, which included...did not grasp the significance of Yoder's presentation, although some years later Will Campbell began to explore non-Constantinian approaches to racial reconciliation. Yoder's presentation, which was not published at the time, will be included in the forthcoming collection <u>For the Nations: Essays Public and Political</u> (Eerdmans, 1997).

85. Will Campbell, "Footwashing or the New Hermeneutic?" in <u>The Failure and the Hope: Essays of Southern Churchmen</u>, ed. James Y. Holloway and Will D. Campbell (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1974), 106-107. "The real point is that the idols of the sects are not as secure as those of the established church...this may be the hope for renewal is we in the establishment learn to think sect! It may be significant that after offering this comment, Will Campbell

playfully explains what “think sect” means through a series of double-voiced images (107) of sect over against the practices of the established churches.

86. Ibid., 99. Of course, we need not wallow in the shibboleth of “sectarianism”; a better characterization of what is involved would probably be to describe the church as a kind of "polis" as Stanley Hauerwas has tended to do in his important body of work as a theological ethicist. For an important and carefully wrought study of the significance of Hauerwas's "theological politics" see Arne Rasmusson's study The Church as *Polis* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1995).

87. To invoke John Howard Yoder's phrase, this means that we must recover the "otherness" of the church in a culture in which "church" and "world" have become indistinguishable. Of course, Yoder has also effectively argued, in the wake of the collapse of the so-called Holy Roman Empire with its One Church, there is no one standard sociological configuration that Constantinianism takes (just as, I might add, there is no one social configuration of racism). Rather, there are various forms of "Constantinianism" which have adapted to specific cultural situations. The Constantianism of the Church of England is logically different than that of the Constantinianism of officially dis-established but culturally entrenched Euro-American Protestantism of the nineteenth century, and both of these can be differentiated from the Constantinianism of the religion of the Lost Cause.

88. For another provocative example of this kind of non-Constantinian approach, see Eugene Rivers’ keynote address “The Responsibility of Evangelical Intellectuals in the Age of White Supremacy” elsewhere in this volume.

Here we must remember that while in the most technical of senses, the historic Black Church has always been (sociologically speaking) a "free church" in American culture, that designation cannot account for the complex social configurations of congregations in the African-American Christian tradition living in a largely segregated cultural context. Moreover, when you take into account the different historical conflicts between Euro-Americans and African Americans, it is simply not possible to assume that all forms of the Black Church are non-Constantinian simply because they are non-majoritarian. In fact, we know that there are forms of authoritarianism and patriarchalism in the Black Church that reflect dreams of church-state empires that are specifically African-American, but hardly constitute the fullness of Christian practice. If we are going to be able to envision moving beyond the veil of racism that has constituted our relationships, then the Black Church as well as Euro-American Christianity must leave aside its Constantinian habits.

89. Cheryl Sanders, Saints in Exile: The Holiness-Pentecostal Experience in African American Religion and Culture (New York: Oxford U. Press, 1996), 40. This is the text of the 1972 Ministry statement of the congregation of Third Street Church of God in Washington, D. C., which has served as a missional purpose for that congregation for much of the past twenty-five years.

90. Ibid., 132.

91. Ibid.,125.

92. Ibid., 150.

93. Ibid., 150-151. Although Sanders does not use the word *Constantinianism* to describe the practices that she lists, the fact that she so carefully makes the distinction between church and world (at several levels) in the context of using the exilic metaphor for what it means for the congregation to be the people of God suggests to me that my use of this designation is not incorrect.

94. Ibid., pp. 125-152. Ephraim Radner's article was published as "From 'Liberation' to 'Exile': A New Image for Church Mission" in The Christian Century 106, n. 30 (Oct. 18, 1989), 931. As Sanders notes (Saints in Exile, p. 126) , Radner's ecclesiological proposals "were directed toward his own context, the churches of white Protestant mainstream, but his allusions and applications related as well to the Sanctified churches on the margins."

95. Sanders, Saints in Exile, p. 150. As a case in point, Sanders calls attention to the ambivalence expressed in the conclusion of Harvey Cox's recent study, Fire From Heaven: The Rise of Pentecostal Spirituality and the Reshaping of Religion in the Twenty-first Century (Reading, Mass.: Addison-Wesley, 1995), pp. 320-321.

96. Douglas Gwyn, et al., sponsored by the Church of the Brethren et al., A Declaration on Peace: In God's People the World's Renewal Has Begun (Scottdale, Penn.: Herald Press, 1991).

97. James Y. Holloway and Will D. Campbell, "An Open Letter to Billy Graham," in The Failure and the Hope: Essays of Southern Churchmen, ed. Will D. Campbell and James Y. Holloway (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1972), pp. 109-19. Hollaway and Campbell would have know that in the 1950s that Graham had moved to integrate his own organization by inviting Howard O. Jones, a young black pastor from Cleveland to join his evangelistic team. They would have known about Graham's "bold step" of inviting Martin Luther King, Jr. to discuss the racial situation with his team and to lead in prayer at the Madison Square Garden crusade of 1957. And they would have been aware of the fact that Dr. Graham had "personally removed the ropes separating the white and colored sections at a Chattanooga crusade" after he had become convinced that segregation is wrong. These and other "socially progressive" actions of Graham are narrated in Martin's review of Graham's life, "A Workman That Needeth Not Be Ashamed," Christianity Today, Nov.13, 1995, 22-23.

98. Holloway and Campbell, "Open Letter," 114.

99. For Graham to baptize Eisenhower shortly after his inauguration was tantamount to having become chaplain to the U. S. presidency, a position that Graham would hold for much of the next four decades.

100. Holloway and Campbell, The Failure and the Hope, 115.

101. Billy Graham, Peace With God (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1953), 195.

102. Bonhoeffer's little book The Psalms: Prayer Book of the Bible (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1974) provides an example of this kind of polyphonic reading of Scripture. Finding in the Psalms, the key to reading the Bible, Bonhoeffer urges readers not to identify their voice with the voice of the psalm but instead to learn to place their voices in relation to the voices of Christ.

In a different way, Bonhoeffer's study of Life Together calls attention to the never-ending dialogue that we are to have with the Bible. Bonhoeffer writes: "As a whole, the Scriptures are God's revealing Word. Only in the infiniteness of its inner relationships, in the connection of Old and New Testaments, of promise and fulfillment, sacrifice and law, law and gospel, cross and resurrection, faith and obedience, having and hoping, will the full witness to Jesus Christ the Lord be perceived." Describing this dialogical context of reading in language that suggests musical analogies, Bonhoeffer observes: "The Scripture is a whole and every word, every sentence possesses such multiple relationships with the whole that it is impossible always to keep the whole in view when listening to details. It becomes apparent therefore, that the whole of Scripture and hence every passage in it as well far surpasses our understanding." (Bonhoeffer, Life Together [New York: Harper and Row, 1954], 51). I would like to think that Bonhoeffer's conception of reading Scripture owes something to his experience with the Black Church (for a time he participated in Harlem's Abyssinian Baptist Church) and in particular his enjoyment of the spirituals.

103. C. H. Mason, quoted by Joe Maxwell in"Building the Church (of God in Christ)," in Christianity Today, April 8, 1996, p. 26.

104. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Life Together (New York: Harper and Row, 1954), 51.

105. Contra Wayne Meeks, The Origins of Christian Morality, 216.

106. Gerhard Lohfink The Work of God Goes On (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1987), 26. The focus of Lohfink's meditation is Acts 4-5.

107. This leads me to my final point which is that there is an important difference to be drawn between the kind of "*ad hoc* correlation" that lies behind the Puritan John Robinson's phrase *"The Lord hath more truth to break forth out of His holy Word"* which is pneumatologically oriented, and the Troeltschian conception of *correlation* that locates the origins or "invention" of Christian morality solely *within* human culture. The first places the Christian community within the context of a "never-ending conversation" with Scripture that is pneumatologically authorized and enabled; the second places Christian communities within a never-ending conversation with culture, which among other things invites us to style our witness after something else than the Gospel. In the first instance, to practice the peaceable polyphony that is made possible by the Word that dwells in the midst of our words is part of what it means to live *provisionally* this side of the New Jerusalem; in the second, polyphony is situated *politically* in

human culture. To use the trinity of terms that Wayne Meeks employs in his discussion, this political polyphony takes place within the within the overlapping contexts of "History, Pluralism, and Morality." See Meeks, Origins of Christian Morality, pp. 211-19

108. Jones and Fowl, Reading in Communion: Scripture and Ethics in Christian Life (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1991); see especially chap. 6.

109. Michael Welfare's explanation to Benjamin Franklin of why the Ephrata community did not publish its rules of discipline is found in H. W. Schneider, ed., Benjamin Franklin: The Autobiography (New York: Liberal Arts, 1949), p. 115. See also Donald F. Durnbaugh, *The Believers Church: The History and Character of Radical Protestantism* (Scottdale, Penn.: Herald, 1985; New York: Macmillan, 1968), pp. 295-96.

110. Durnbaugh, Believers Church, 296.