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The Interconnection between Race, Religion and Economics: Black Christian Identity
and Economic Justice in the Rural South

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An abstract of
A dissertation submitted to the Faculty of the Graduate School of Emory University in
partial fulfillment of the requirements for the of Doctor of Philosophy
In Religion
2009

Abstract

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Race, religion, and economics have intersected in diverse ways to shape African American rural southern Christian experience. This dissertation assumes a correlation between black Christian identity and economic justice and examines this assumption through an analysis of theological traditions which fall on a continuum of black church activism regarding economic justice. The significance of this study is the construction of a framework for a black Christian economic ethic, at the heart of which is a womanist conception of well being, relevant to the rural black experience. Thus, the assumption is that a linked set of values and norms which provide the basis for such an ethic exists. Mining the rich sources of the various ways the black church has engaged economic justice elucidates the components of this economic ethic. To this end, this study examines three specific theological traditions: black liberation theology, prosperity gospel, and self help/social uplift. Socio-historical, categorical, and comparative analyses of these theological traditions yield principles which provide the framework for a Black Christian Economic Ethic of Well Being (BCEEWB). The intent of this framework for a BCEEWB is to serve as a prescriptive and critical analytical tool to spur a re-evaluation of the economic ethics of post-Civil Rights black churches. Widening economic disparities and sedimented inequalities which diminish the economic well being of individuals in the rural South call for this re-evaluation.

Data on perspectives of people in the pews and the pulpit regarding Christian behavior in the marketplace and about economic justice critique this theoretical

framework of a BCEEWB. Personal interviews, focus groups, and participant observation in Macon County, the heart of the Alabama Black Belt, provide insights into the theological and normative foundations of the engagement (or lack thereof) with issues of economic justice in the rural South by black churches. A significant feature of this analysis is the critical reappropriation of the self help/social uplift tradition of the black church.

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Acknowledgements

Open my lips Lord and my mouth will show forth your praise! All praise to God on High! I am grateful for God's unending presence during this process of intellectual stretching and spiritual development. Truly God's presence was felt through the words of encouragement; kindest gestures of care and concern for my well being; and loving and intellectually stimulating conversations with family, friends and my dynamic Sister Circle (you know who you are). I know new facets of God's love and care for me because of the love, prayers and support of my husband, Norbert, my mother, father and our families. Norbert, you have been a phenomenal source of love, strength and joy throughout this process—thanks so much for believing in me and for your ministry of presence—every step of the way! I appreciate you and love you dearly.

To my advisor, Liz, and to Dr. Pollard and Dr. M. Owens, my committee members, I am grateful for your demand for excellence throughout this process. Your standard of excellence helped to form me as a scholar and most importantly, fostered an intellectual growth that I am excited to see continue as I grow in my career. Liz, your patience and diligence are so much appreciated, thank you for not focusing on my shortcomings but on my potential—you have been a constant source of compassion and grace in this process. Dr. Pollard, you have been a constant source of encouragement, you've always called forth greatness that I could not (and still do not fully see) in myself; I absolutely appreciate the visionary that you are, I am grateful to have drank from your fountain of wisdom. Dr. Owens, I have always admired your scholarship and appreciate you taking the time to be apart of my committee, I know that it was a sacrifice of time and energy and I am so grateful for your kindness and spirit of excellence. To my pastors, Wells, Ella, and Rev. McQueen, you guys are the best! Your spiritual nurture and love has continued to propel me deeper into a thoughtful faith life, one that is vibrant and fed by spiritual disciplines that enrich my life holistically. Love you so much!

To the sweetest folks in my study site, all the pastors and laity who agreed to participate in my study—your joy and willingness helped to sustain me in the dark moments of this process. You are a blessing and have added great joy to my existence! Thank you to my faith communities in Tallahassee, Ithaca, Atlanta, Auburn, and Paris (you all know who you are) for believing in me and seeing potential in me when I could only see my present limitations. Your vision of greatness (not measured in fame or wealth, but measured in terms of service to others) for me has served as great encouragement and stimulus to move forward in confidence.

Uli, I am so grateful for you, I appreciate your responsiveness and caring nature.

Great appreciation to the Fund for Theological Education (FTE), and Dr. Sharon Fluker. The FTE dissertation fellowship exceeded my expectations, not only was I provided with financial resources to complete my dissertation, but the time and energy poured into my development as a scholar served as a source of invigoration and encouragement—thank you so much FTE and Dr. Fluker!

Pescha—you will never know how blessed my life has been because of your presence. You are a calming and reassuring force that has always been there for me throughout this program. There are no words that will do justice to my grateful heart—I'm so grateful for you!

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Chapter 1 Introduction

1.1 Overview of Dissertation

Main Street in Tuskegee, the county seat of Macon County, is impressive—for its empty storefronts, peeling paint, and rusted iron frames and posts. Its small town square in part resembles a ghost town; for along with a few more established small businesses that have survived and some newer businesses that make you wonder how long it will be before they also become small business start-up statistics, there are many of these empty and increasingly dilapidated storefronts. Yet one can see some efforts at restoration in the town square: beside the courthouse, there is a row of newly painted storefronts, a couple of the businesses which have been there for at least ten years, interspersed with a few younger businesses.

About twenty miles from Tuskegee is the neighboring town of Auburn, which, like Tuskegee, is also a college town. Auburn has a bustling, vibrant town square with many long-time and stable businesses. There are no signs of visible disrepair, only signs of growth and development. That two towns so close together can be so starkly different in terms of economic development is to a great extent explained by their histories. Tuskegee is the heart of the Alabama Black Belt and the home of the historically black Tuskegee University. Auburn, by contrast, has a historically predominantly white population and, at its University, a majority white student body. These two neighboring towns are representative of many small Southern towns in terms of segregated populations and various social and physical markers of historical and contemporary disparity.

To reach the small rural church in Macon County, I turn off Main Street and drive along rural roads with little in sight except a few homes, farm animals, small farms, and trees, trees for miles. I finally arrive at the rural church which at first sight looks very similar to a single family home. That the congregation doesn't have abundant financial resources is evident in the modesty of the wood-frame building which the caring congregation of rural folks keeps clean and in decent repair. I enter and witness enthusiastic worship with a mix of contemporary gospel, Negro spirituals, and "old time" African American hymns sung during the service. After the "testimony service", the pastor, a young woman in her late thirties, gets up to preach on "The Power of a Transformed Life," using Romans 12: 1-2 as her text. After admonishing the congregation to live holy, sacrificial lives, she begins to talk very candidly about the material aspects of life, admonishing:

Don't try to adapt to the world's way of doing things. As believers we are wrestling with identification [wanting to fit into American culture]... American culture is not necessarily godly. America is a capitalistic society; only the strong survive, however, God doesn't say this. ...Because we're in a capitalistic society we believe that we have to possess certain things to show that we have 'arrived'; ...but your motivation needs to be changed. Stop conforming to the standards the world has set; ...what's important is where your heart is. To know where your heart is, look at your checkbook register [referring to the scripture: where your treasure is there lies your heart also]; the way we spend our money will show where our hearts are.

She confesses that she looked at her checkbook and noted that all her money went to things for herself, and declares this not good, adding, "that had to change, because it displayed selfishness. We [likewise] need to be mindful of our desires and conversation." She further argues against the prevailing values of individualism, materialism, and consumerism that mark American culture, saying:

The status quo is not good enough for God. Jesus did not conform to the status quo...everybody wants the American Dream and this has caused the Body of Christ to be in a drunken stupor...pastors and prophets will begin to preach the American dream and Christians will become a people searching for things and not talking about holiness. As Christians, we have to be different to make a difference in this world. When you conform to the world, you lose power...it's your lifestyle that's important.....

The following Sunday, I attend another local church, which for quite different reasons stands out among the rural and small town churches that I've been attending within my research study area. This church plant meets in a storefront of the local strip mall. It has services streamed in live via the internet from a large megachurch in another state. The local pastor directs this congregation to get involved in every "sphere of life" in the community, particularly in politics. During the time for announcements, the local pastor reminds us that:

God does not call you to work in this church only but to work out there. My main concern is what we do when we leave here: where are we letting our lights shine? ...That's why we [Christians] are here...to change the world. It's all about stewardship...are you in your purpose? You cannot come to church to hide; you have to face the issues of the world... There is a report that says that Tuskegee is dreary and nothing is going on here save this mall being built...God told us to be stewards of the earth so we are supposed to be involved in politics...

Because of this church's belief in "stewardship over the earth", they put time and energy into educating and training members so that they can become "resources for the community." This church advocates social and political activism because of its interpretation of biblical stewardship.

After the announcements and comments on stewardship, the local pastor turns our attention to the large screens in the front of the church on which the service is being streamed in from their parent church. The head pastor of the parent megachurch is

teaching on the “law of seedtime and harvest” before the offering is taken up, and during this teaching, he argues that,

...I am determined to get you rich. Turn to 2 Corinthians 8:9, ...what does rich mean [according to this text]? ...it means abundantly supplied. Now go to Isaiah 1:19 [he reads from the Living Bible Translation]...the word ‘abound’ means extremely rich...God is making you extremely rich so you can make others extremely rich...

He then gives the example of wealth “outside the kingdom”, or in the “world”, where, “a few are rich and some are starving and lots are [simply] making it from day to day.

However, this is not so in the Kingdom. In the Kingdom, everybody is rich. ...So, if you’re falling short on money to buy those Christmas gifts, then what do you need to do?” He asked, and the people in the congregation responded, “Sow”, and he confirmed that that was correct, because, “...it’s impossible for you to sow seed and not get a harvest...”

These experiences of two congregations in Macon County offer a snapshot of the diversity in the African American religious landscape in the rural and small town South. In these two churches I observed tensions over the nature and meaning of work and the meaning and role of wealth in the life of the believer. One subscribes to the prosperity gospel and therefore work does not have the same meaning that it does for the church which is shaped more by the Protestant work ethic. Within prosperity doctrine, one does not place one’s faith in the rewards of hard work but in following spiritual laws in order to receive a supernatural blessing of wealth. Understood this way, wealth is likewise a reward for one’s obedient faith life and piety, a divine right of the children of God, whereas in the church which ascribes to more orthodox Protestant doctrine, wealth is not

a divine right for all believers and the emphasis is more on being a good steward of what one actually has, whether it is an abundance of wealth and possessions or not.

This doctrinal and theological diversity has implications for social and political activism and involvement in social justice issues, specifically economic justice issues. This diversity becomes clear as I examine how various traditions provide a particular viewpoint of Christian behavior in the marketplace. The various religious expressions signal the attitude Christians are expected to have regarding poverty, wealth, work, stewardship, and possessions—basically, perceptions regarding normative behavior in the marketplace.

In turn, this dissertation grows out of my interest in the complexity of the relationship between black religious experience and black economic activity in the United States. African American religious expression and black Christian identity are influenced by the historical economic reality of African Americans in a society marred by a long history of racism, sexism, and classism. This economic reality is characterized by deprivation and exploitation, beginning with enslaved Africans' experience as property in colonial America, an experience that deliberately stripped them of their human identity. Existence under the weight of such economic, social, and political injustice, segregation, and discrimination inevitably produced disempowered racial identities.¹ In this context, the black church assisted African Americans in developing a sense of worth and dignity that countered the negative racist propaganda of the white planter class. African American religious experience thus allowed the production and reproduction of humanizing black Christian identity in response to an oppressive existence within an

¹ Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham, *Righteous Discontent: The Women's Movement in the Black Baptist Church, 1880-1920*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993), 5.

exploitative, dehumanizing economic system. In his book, *The Black Church in America: African American Spirituality*, Michael Battle goes so far as to contend that the black church emerged in response to the need to redefine African American identity, particularly with respect to European identity, because it was in this particular context of Africans and Europeans that racism as we know it today emerged.² Indeed,

The struggle over human identity for African American Christian spirituality has been to make such a dominant understanding of negative identity obsolete, through mutual and integral practices of becoming what is now understood as a Black Church.³

He claims that the narrative that defines African American morality and mission explains personal and communal identity through the process of surviving slavery in America.⁴ Thus, African American structures, experiences of life, and context are made available through interpreted narratives of growing up in a context of oppression.⁵ Therefore, he argues, African Americans have always sought new identity. This new identity is brought about through the interplay of the person and the community continually discovering and creating a history or identifying narrative together.⁶ Part of this history of the black religious experience is its engagement with economic justice.

This dissertation focuses on the relationship between black Christian identity and economic justice particularly in the rural South. The black church has engaged economic justice through a continuum of theological traditions and expressions, but broadly through the somewhat simplistic binary distinction of cultures of resistance/liberation and of accommodation. In particular, this dissertation focuses on such engagement through

² Michael Battle, *The Black Church in America: African American Christian Spirituality*, (Malden, Massachusetts: Blackwell Publishing, 2006), 28.

³ Ibid

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid., 26.

⁶ Ibid., 27.

black liberation theology (BLT), self help/social uplift (SHSU), and the prosperity gospel tradition within African American religious experience. From a theological-ethical analysis of these traditions, I derive principles that provide the basis for a framework of a Black Christian Economic Ethic of Well Being (BCEEWB). My assumption is that there is a linked set of norms and values that provide the framework for such an ethic. This proposed BCEEWB I intend to be a prescriptive and critical analytical tool for churches to use in their engagement with economic justice, the purpose of which is to spur a re-evaluation of their economic ethics.

My work is informed by a womanist perspective to which wholeness, unity, and community are central. In fact, this womanist perspective is at the heart of the conception of well being in this black Christian economic ethic. Driving this work is the question of how might such an ethic look as articulated by black male intelligentsia, informed by womanist criticism of the black church and a case study of rural southern African Americans in the Black Belt?

Another important feature of this study is my construction of a NeoSHSU framework for the black churches in my study site, the majority of whom are firmly rooted within the SHSU heritage of the black church. This construction is a critical reappropriation of the SHSU tradition within the black religious experience. I consider this revised approach to the SHSU tradition necessary because the black church, particularly within my study area, has a rich intellectual heritage in the liberationist and womanist traditions that is not evidently appropriated in its praxis. I contend that in its diligence in carrying out its priestly ministry, the black church has fallen short in various aspects of its prophetic ministry. These shortcomings are highlighted by various

scholars, particularly womanists in their critiques of the black church which this dissertation engages. For example, Emilie Townes' critique of the church is that it is mute within its current postmodern context and its lack of challenge or response to the status quo. Likewise, Delores Williams indicts the church for its many "sins" which include those regarding economic justice, such as its failure to pool resources across denominational and class lines to deal effectively with issues of poverty, hunger and other problems that plague the black community.

I contend that the most significant aspect of its prophetic ministry, and a focus of this dissertation, is the church's moral agency on behalf of securing economic justice for its most marginalized rural constituents. Through its SHSU tradition, the black church has heeded the call to do sacred work on behalf of the "least of these" within its community. However, a critical reappropriation of this tradition is necessary—one informed by other intellectual religious traditions, such as liberationist and womanist traditions, in order to address its failure to carry out the most vital aspect of its ministry—securing economic justice for those most marginalized within its community. In addition to the BCEEWB, this critical reappropriation or revised approach to the SHSU tradition, which I refer to as the NeoSHSU tradition is one of the important features of this work. This NeoSHSU heritage of the black church is where I bring together insights from the three predominant forms of engagement with economic justice (SHSU, BLT, prosperity gospel), along with the womanist tradition and the insights from my data from the field. My own intellectual commitments lie in the womanist and BLT perspectives, as well as a SHSU tradition which is informed by these intellectual traditions (hence the construction of a NeoSHSU framework). Although the prosperity gospel is one of the predominant

forms of engagement within this work, its value lies mostly in places where it has picked up the SHSU tradition. Therefore, I envision a NeoSHSU framework which is a critical reappropriation of (a revised approach to) the SHSU tradition of the black church informed by the principles from womanist criticism, BLT, and field data. The centrality of the womanist critical tradition in this work is that its principles support, reinforce the principles from the other theological traditions. Womanist principles that provide the undergirding structure for the NeoSHSU framework include: commitment to family and community with an emphasis on wholeness, freedom, dignity, and racial solidity; commitment to ensuring the survival of all persons, women and men, as whole, unified, and liberated moral agents; emphasis on the primacy of relationships with the Divine/Spirit, with one another, and with the environment; appropriation of a messiah who emphasizes wholeness and allows a holistic approach to black life and salvation (which includes economic, social, political salvation in the here and now), addressing matters beyond race; concern with inequality in access to resources for sustenance and human flourishing and power dynamics that perpetuate the inequitable distribution of wealth and resources—necessitating redistribution; commitment to addressing oppression in all its forms; attention to the historical material reality of deprivation, exploitation, and sedimented inequalities, thus offering a vision of a commonweal existence which entails an anti-imperialist, anti-capitalist, anti-sexist and anti-racist economic democracy in which the poor receive a just share of the benefits of social cooperation. Also, the end of faith is wholeness. Lastly, the form that modern racism has taken is given particular force because of the capitalistic structure that historically undergirds labor exploitation in the U.S. Therefore, because of the historical exploitation of African Americans, not only

does the womanist tradition critique capitalistic economic rationality adopted by the black church, it also criticizes the dominant notion of a work ethic which operates in black theological traditions which has embedded in it romanticized notions of work and vocation.

From the BLT and SHSU traditions, the following principles undergird a framework for a NeoSHSU heritage: upward mobility from poverty, collective and individual economic independence, self determination, and dignity. These principles, in conjunction with those noted above are essential to prophetic theological and ethical discourse within marginalized populations such as those within my study area.

This dissertation addresses the gap in theological and ethical discourses regarding marginalized populations of rural Americans, especially in the Black Belt⁷, which is largely African American and Christian. Focusing on the link between identity and economic justice in the rural South, I explore the theological and normative foundations of the post-Civil Rights black rural southern Church's commitment to enhancing the well being of its community specifically through its involvement with economic justice. As a case study, I examine the connection between black Christian identity, formed largely within the black church⁸, and economic justice. The outcome of this study is the beginning of an outline of a black Christian ethic relevant to the black rural experience.

⁷ The Black Belt, initially named for its rich dark productive soils that buttressed the old slave economy in the South, spans Texas to Virginia. It includes portions of Texas, Louisiana, Arkansas, Mississippi, West Virginia, Tennessee, Alabama, Kentucky, North Carolina, South Carolina, Georgia and North Florida. The Black Belt contains over one-third of the nation's poor, over 40 percent of the rural poor, and 90 percent of poor rural African Americans. See Rosalind P. Harris and Dreamal Worthen, "African Americans in Rural America," in Brown and Swanson, eds., *Challenges for Rural America in the Twenty-first Century*. A survey of the unique history of this region of the United States yields a clear picture of how social mores and institutions within the region perpetuated a system of *de facto* "economic apartheid" that has through the years evolved into "sedimented" social and economic inequalities between Blacks and Whites.

⁸ For this analysis, I will use Lincoln and Mamiya's definition of the black church, adding non-denominational churches. This definition refers to churches within the seven major black denominations,

The significance of an economic ethic for the black church is twofold. First, the discussion about what religious values do and how they ought to inform our economic behavior as individuals and communities is particularly significant given our widening economic inequalities. An individual and community's understanding of who they are—their identity—influences their moral consciousness and, in turn, the way they act in the world.⁹ Second, although the black church has been a prophetic witness on issues of racial discrimination, and although it was a forerunner in the initial phase of the civil rights movement, the second phase of the movement—the phase that is unfinished—is the matter of economic justice. Under its current leadership, the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC), which launched the Poor People's Campaign under Martin Luther King in 1968, has therefore picked up where King left off and is reinstituting the poor people's campaign in the twenty-first century. For this campaign, discourse about economic ethics is imperative. For instance, many African American communities within the rural Black Belt have suffered from the structural changes brought about by the global economy. Christians within this region, like Christians throughout our nation, are poorly equipped to act prophetically and engage in the public discourse regarding local and national repercussions of the global economy because

small black sects, and predominantly black congregations within white mainline Protestant denominations and the Catholic Church. See C. Eric Lincoln and Lawrence Mamiya, *The Black Church in the African American Experience*, (Durham: Duke University Press, 1990), xii. This definition has limitations, it does not include non-denominational churches and has a Christian bias which does not enable one to capture the diversity of the black religious tradition which includes marginalized sects, Jewish, Islamic, Buddhist and other religious traditions. This definition is used because of the largely Christian population within the Black Belt. However, a more inclusive definition of the black church is used by Alton B. Pollard, III, who defines the black church broadly as 'all black sacred institutions' See Alton B. Pollard, III, "The Civic Impact of black church in Atlanta" in *The Status of Black Atlanta*, (Atlanta: The Southern Center for Studies in Public Policy, Clark Atlanta University, 2002).

⁹ See Peter Paris, *Social Teachings of Black Churches*, (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1985); Stephen C. Razor and Christine D. Chapman, *Black Power from the Pew: Laity Connecting Congregations and Communities*, (Cleveland: The Pilgrim Press, 2007); Evelyn B. Higginbotham, *Righteous Discontent*; Michael Battle, *The Black Church in America*.

knowledge about what economic and religious values should and do inform predominant economic and business models is often lacking.

The purpose of this sketch of a black Christian economic ethic is to promote critical ethical reflection in religious communities using social theoretical analysis and theological traditions. Ethical reflections of religious communities have the potential to prompt a re-evaluation of shared economic life and ethics with the hope of bringing communities, public policy, and ultimately broader society more in line with the demands of justice. Care for the “least of these” among us is considered part of the distinctive Christian identity. Likewise, working toward substantive justice in society is also considered part of the unique mission of the Christian community. Thus, as responsible moral agents within a nation marred by pockets of persistent poverty and sedimented inequalities, the answer to the question of what is the fitting response to what is going on around us is to do justice, love mercy, and walk humbly with our God.¹⁰ Yet in order to do those things, we first need to correct our flawed understandings of rural and urban poverty.

1.1.a Literature Review

The prevailing stereotype is that rural life is slower, simpler, and safer than city life and that rural people are less educated and more religious than their urban counterparts. However, it is not often acknowledged that rural America has long had a

¹⁰ Micah 6:8.

disproportionate share of the nation's poor population,¹¹ and more of the persistently poor than urban places.¹² Social scientists, policy makers, and the broader public historically have been preoccupied with *urban* poverty in the United States.¹³ Furthermore, with the general inattention to rural poverty, the rural, southern, African American face of poverty is especially overlooked.

This neglect of rural poverty by many social scientists and lack of recognition of important work done by rural sociologists¹⁴ leaves us with a deficient understanding of poverty in our advanced, industrialized society, because poverty is not confined to urban centers but 'hidden' in pockets of our nation that have continued to comprise America's forgotten hinterlands.¹⁵ Rural southern African Americas in particular have been largely ignored by academics and policy makers in their discussions of poverty and social justice in the United States.¹⁶

¹¹ Ann R. Tickamyer and Cynthia M. Duncan, "Poverty and Opportunity Structure in Rural America," in *Annual Review of Sociology* 16 (1990), 68.

¹² Edward J. Blakeley and Ted K. Bradshaw, *Planning Local Economic Development: Theory and Practice*, (Thousand Oaks, California: Sage Publications, Inc., 2002), 20-21.

¹³ Ibid. See also W. J. Wilson and R. Aponte, "Urban Poverty," in *Annual Review of Sociology* 11 (1985): 231-58, and W. J. Wilson, *Truly Disadvantaged*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, (1987).

¹⁴ See Leif Jensen, "At Razor's Edge: Building Hope for America's Rural Poor," in *Rural Realities* vol. 1, 1, (Columbia, Missouri: Rural Sociological Society), 2006; Ronald C. Wimberley and Libby V. Morris, "The Regionalization of Poverty: Assistance for the Black Belt South?" in *Southern Rural Sociology* 18 no. 1 (2002): 294-306; Joyce E. Allen-Smith, Ronald C. Wimberley, et al., "America's Forgotten People and Places: Ending the Legacy of Poverty in the Rural South," in *Journal of Agricultural and Applied Economics* 32 no. 2 (August 2000): 319-329; "The Impact of Welfare Reform on Rural Alabamians", *Southern Rural Sociology* 18, no. 1 (2002): 186-203.

¹⁵ See Tickamyer and Duncan, "Poverty and Opportunity Structure in Rural America"; See also David L. Brown and Louis E. Swanson, *Challenges for Rural America in the Twenty-First Century*, (University Park: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2003).

¹⁶ Castle argues that, "Rural people and places in America are poorly understood and largely neglected by the people who write, speak, and thereby influence attitudes about social problems and public policy. Misunderstanding and neglect are prevalent in much of academia as well, and it is academics who typically provide the literature and the base of knowledge on which public opinion ultimately depends. The result is paucity of literature and an absence of informed people to advise public discussion and debate when rural issues arise." See Emery N. Castle, ed., "The Forgotten Hinterlands", in *The Changing American Countryside: Rural People and Places*, (Lawrence, Kansas: University of Kansas, 1995).

A similar omission by religious scholars has limited Christian theology and ethics. Contemporary work in black Christian economic ethics and poverty similarly has largely been formed in response to the black urban experience rather than the rural. Yet Lincoln and Mamiya demonstrate that throughout U.S. history, the majority of black churches were rural institutions,¹⁷ and over half of all black churches in the U.S. are located in the South.¹⁸

This omission is particularly puzzling because in his study on urbanization and urban churches in the South, Said Sewell argues that African American faith institutions are important contemporary agents for ameliorating problems in the black community. He observes that,

The high level of community activism by some black churches in the South has a historical background: acting as a cultural womb for the enslaved, promoting liberation thoughts and slave rebellions, establishing educational institutions and as community businesses, and advancing civil rights for minorities. These major benchmarks continue to promote an activist orientation for black faith institutions in the South.¹⁹

—and, I contend, this holds true for many churches in the rural South also.

A good deal of the literature on religion in this region deals largely with single denominations or single issues. The categories under which these single issue studies fall are, for example, economics and the Church in the South. Such studies usually have a historical focus, for example, the antebellum period and slavery. The studies that do address the church and rural poverty are usually denominationally focused, for example, The United Methodist Church's, "The Churches' Response to the Rural Crisis". On the

¹⁷ Lincoln and Mamiya, "In the Receding Shadow of the Plantation: a Profile of Rural Clergy and Churches in the Black Belt. *In Review of Religious Research* 29, no. 4, (1988), 349.

¹⁸ Stephen C. Rasor, "The Members Voice Project", in the *Journal of the Interdenominational Theological Center* 33 no. 1-2 (Fall/Spring 2005-2006), 2.

¹⁹ Said Sewell, "African American Religion: The Struggle for Community Development in a Southern City", in *Journal of Southern Religion* 4 (2001), 17.

other hand, there is the category of more general studies from various disciplines such as sociology, history, and religion. These studies include Samuel S. Hill's *Southern Churches in Crisis*, published in the mid-twentieth century in which he describes the distinctiveness of southern religious experience, and its shaping forces. He describes what was known as the "Solid South", or the historical "white" South: the crisis of the southern churches, he says, is a result of the changes brought about with the Civil Rights gains of African Americans and the influx of white liberals and their values into the Old South, thus altering white people's culture and political and economic structures which were deeply embedded in a culture of white supremacy. He also provides theological themes and classifications of southern Protestantism.

Donald G. Matthews gives a historical account of the development of religion in the South. He deals with southern church life, faith, and its spiritual impact. He contends that, "Almost any conjuring of southern images is bound to include religion near the center."²⁰ To some, he argues, the South is viewed as the "Bible Belt" of ignorance, emotionalism, and prejudice. To the nostalgic it is chiefly southern spirituality that is thought of as 'that Old-Time Religion'. Indeed, two of the most potent forces in late twentieth-century American religion, the Evangelicalism associated with Billy Graham and the black religion that inspired much of the movement for justice and equality in society, have their deepest roots in the southern past.²¹

The anthropology and sociology literature likewise contributes greatly to our understanding of religion in the South, particularly the rural South. For example, Carol Stack's *Call to Home: African Americans Reclaim the South*, focuses on reverse

²⁰ Donald G. Matthews, *Religion in the Old South*, (Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1977), ix.

²¹ Ibid.

migration of African Americans into the rural South, and her edited volume with Robert L. Hall, *Holding on to the Land and the Lord: Kinship, Ritual, Land Tenure, and Social Policy in the Rural South* is a compilation of articles by anthropologists who did ethnographic work within southern rural black religious communities. These particular studies focused on ritual experience and the expressive forms that are usually neglected in anthropological studies that tend to focus on community or social organization. Stack and Hall claim that individuals perceive rural communities to be isolated and relatively self-contained entities in which cooperative and communal values are preserved intact, and indeed many rural communities do have traditional values to protect.²²

Enormous value is placed on land and landownership, kin loyalty and cooperation, and on church membership. ... Yet... these values are all caught in a turbulence emanating from the external world. The divided and competitive industrial economy has found its way into the daily lives of these rural southern communities, however isolated they were or sought to be.²³

Rooted in Place: Family and Belonging in a Southern Black Community is sociologist William W. Falk's ethnographic study in a rural southern black community which asks why didn't all African Americans leave the South? "The problem in studying the black migration is that few scholars have examined why many of the blacks best equipped to leave the South often did not..."²⁴ William Falk demonstrates the centrality of religion to rural community life. He claims that, "In rural communities, religion in general and local churches in particular take on greater significance than in most urban and suburban areas. In rural areas, religion is often easily infused into everyday life..."²⁵ He further claims

²² Robert L. Hall and Carol Stack, eds., *Holding on to the Land and the Lord: Kinship, Ritual, Land Tenure, and Social Policy in the Rural South* , (Athens: The University of Georgia Press, 1982), 3.

²³ *Ibid.*

²⁴ William W. Falk, *Rooted in Place: Family and Belonging in a Southern Black Community* , (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2004), 5.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 100.

that in the rural South especially, religion is likely to have a greater carryover effect in everyday life.²⁶ Through the lives of his study participants, he illustrates how church is crucially important in their lives, not just as a place in its own right but as a prism, a lens, through which they interpret the world.²⁷

The few studies done specifically on the black church in the rural context, particularly the rural South, are notable for their contribution to the field of religious studies. W.E.B. DuBois' classic sociological study of African American religion in the early twentieth century, *The Negro Church*, is the first in-depth analysis of black religious life.²⁸ The book is based on primary data collected in religious communities; interviews, participant observation, and surveys that offer insight into the social, historical, political, and economic aspects of African American religious life. Published over twenty years later, Benjamin E. Mays and Joseph Nicholson argue that their study is the first comprehensive contemporary study of the Negro church,²⁹ offering sociological data on both urban and rural churches. However, Carter G. Woodson's study, *History of the Negro Church*, was in fact published earlier, in 1921. William E. Montgomery's contemporary work on the African American Church in the South (published in 1993), *Under Their Own Vine and Fig Tree: The African American Church in the South: 1865-1900*, is limited to the post-emancipation era. The book yields a historical account of the Southern black church's expansion and activism during Reconstruction.

Fifty years after DuBois' classic work on the black church, Lincoln and Mamiya undertook an empirical study of rural churches as part of their study of the black church

²⁶ Ibid., 103.

²⁷ Ibid., 105

²⁸ DuBois, *The Negro Church*, (Walnut Creek, California: AltaMira Press, 2003), vii.

²⁹ Benjamin E. Mays and Joseph W. Nicholson, *The Negro's Church*, (New York: Institute of Social and Religious Research, 1933),v.

in the African American experience since their experience proved that the distinctions of the rural South necessitated a separate questionnaire. Their study presents sociological data on a sample of over 600 rural churches in the southern Black Belt. Like Mays and Nicholson's earlier work, they present demographic profiles of rural clergy and data on membership, finances, and community outreach programs of the church.

Over ten years later, the Member's Voice Project³⁰, undertook a study of black rural and urban churches, with a view to capturing the voice of the laity as opposed to clergy as traditional studies had done. Purported to be 'the nation's most comprehensive survey of African-American congregational life from the perspective of the people in the pews, the study claims that over half of the black churches in the United States are located in the South and that the majority of black religious communities have memberships of approximately 100 active members. Some of the findings that reveal important realities of black congregational life include that over 80 percent of the congregations provide cash assistance to families in need, and over 70 percent have food pantries or soup kitchens and voter registration activities.³¹

³⁰ Under the leadership of Stephen Rasor, professor at the Interdenominational Theological Center (ITC), and Christine D. Chapman, Research Director for the Institute for Black Religious Life at the ITC, a comprehensive survey was conducted called the Member's Voice Project (MVP) which collected data on African American congregational life from the perspective of people from the pews. This project was intended to serve as a corrective to the U.S. Congregational Life Survey in 2002 in which Black congregations were underrepresented. During 2003-2004, over 13,000 parishioners of Protestant congregations participated in the MVP survey. The MVP study enabled the discovery of four critical connections on how worship and faith are expressed, they are: Spiritual (how faith and worship connect), inside (worshippers' activity within faith communities), outside (congregational outreach) and identity (how worshippers understand who they are and how this self understanding allows them to map their future).

³¹ Stephen C. Rasor, "The Members Voice Project" in *Journal of the Interdenominational Theological Center*, 33 (Atlanta, Georgia: The ITC Press, 2006), 1-16.

1.1.b Black Church Commitment to Well Being

I assume that individuals' definition and advancement of social justice is strongly correlated with their theological and ethical beliefs, as we saw in the opening sermon vignettes. Theologies can and historically have served as sources to justify or condemn both the economic orders that have failed to meet the basic material needs of their members, and also such economic behavior that perpetuates economic inequality and injustice. Theological and ethical understandings, shaped by variables such as class, gender, and race, reflect and shape individuals' expectations of existing political, social, and economic structures.³²

The ethical consciousness of African Americans has of course been formed directly by their unique historical experience within a racialized society and so the historical appropriation of the Christian faith by African Americans is foundational to a black Christian economic ethic. My assumption is that there is a linked set of values and norms which provide the framework for a black Christian economic ethic of well being (BCEEWB).³³ Well being is used here in its womanist sense, which has an emphasis on wholeness, liberation, and communal unity. Such an ethic is fundamental to supporting the well being of rural southern black Christian women and their communities. As such, according to Alice Walker, it is "Committed to survival and wholeness of entire people,

³² Kenneth Boulding argues in his work, *Beyond Economics*, "...religion through its theological and ethical systems, also influences the attitude of men [sic] towards various forms of economic behavior." See Kenneth Boulding, *Beyond Economics: Essays on Society, Religion, and Ethics*, (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1968), 181.

³³ There can be several BCEEWBs, shaped by particular values and norms, individual social location, collective identity, and related factors.

male and female.”³⁴ This notion of well being is a critical one given the alienation (from outside and within the black community), deprivation, and subordination that characterizes poor and working poor black communities, and it challenges institutions and individuals that perpetuate the status quo by supporting structures of oppression. We discover the components of this ethic of well being by mining the rich ways in which the black church has engaged economic justice. We have already seen that Lincoln and Mamiya provide a good framework upon which we can develop this black Christian economic ethic. I contribute to the field by identifying ways in which the black church has engaged issues of economic justice and then use the underlying principles and values of these various forms of engagement to frame a black Christian economic ethic of well being for the post-Civil Rights era rural southern black church.

There are various factors that influence a church’s commitment to the well being of its community and how this commitment is actually played out. These include its location (for example, rural versus urban), and history (for instance, the history of economic, social, and political oppression of African Americans). Church tradition, doctrine, and denominational theological commitments, such as black liberation theology or prosperity theology, likewise affect how and to what extent a church is committed to addressing quality of life issues within their community. Such factors are evident in the churches within my study area.

³⁴ Layli Philips, *The Womanist Reader*, (New York: Routledge, 2006), 19.

1.1.c Study Area

In an effort to highlight the moral agency historically demonstrated through efforts to ameliorate the disastrous effects of poverty and oppression on the “souls of black folk”, I focus on Macon County, Alabama as my study site. Macon County, a historically politically, and socially active part of the South, is home not only to several rural southern black churches that were active during the Civil Rights struggles of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, but also to Tuskegee University established by Booker T. Washington, which held its first classes in the basement of one of the churches under study in this dissertation. Macon County is representative of other Black Belt counties in that it has high unemployment, high poverty rates, a declining economy, and a majority African American population.

Therefore, some residents of Macon County spend their time waiting—waiting for a contemporary Booker T. Washington to come and rebuild their community which is in economic ruins. Indeed, during an informal conversation with an elderly clergyman about the depressed economic situation in Macon County, he suggested that the solution to the current problem of economic deprivation lies in the birth of a modern day leader like Booker T. Washington or George Washington Carver (who both helped uplift African Americans and revolutionize southern agriculture). However, a younger, female clergywoman argued that the problems of this community are partly due to the fact that people are enamored with the county’s legacy and are actually “stuck there in the past” “looking for another Booker T,” and thus, take little action in the present to change their current and future economic situation. I understand why the residents of Macon County

are in awe of their past. For this past is a large part of what distinguishes Macon County from the rest of the Black Belt and the nation, and what makes it significant for this study. Unlike other Black Belt communities, Macon County historically has benefited from Washington's legacy. The Veterans Administration (VA) Hospital and University are both testament to the dynamism of his leadership and the political power this former slave was able to wield. Born in the soil of the SHSU heritage of the black church, Washington literally became the embodiment of this very heritage that characterizes the majority of the study churches in Macon County. However, this SHSU heritage is in need of critical reappropriation in its current postmodern context. Also, the AMEZ church which produced "salvation bearers" such as Sojourner Truth, Harriet Tubman, and Fredrick Douglas, serves as the birthplace of Tuskegee University, making its use as a proxy for the SHSU tradition within this project fitting. It is not just its past that lends significance to Macon County as a study site; its current characteristics are also representative of other Black Belt counties and this makes Macon County and places like it claim our attention. These characteristics include its continuing to reel from high poverty rates, unemployment, an inadequate tax base, little to no outside investment in economic development for more than two decades; consistent out-migration of its young, educated professional class; a predominantly black and Christian population; and mainly white outside political interests which hold sway over its local political and economic power structure. Macon County is a place where the poor and working poor long for economic justice, for control of their own destinies. It is a place where its more than one hundred African American religious institutions (mainly black mainline Protestant churches) carry out their priestly ministry to a rural marginalized population. However,

in their diligence in carrying out their priestly ministry, these black churches fall short in various aspects of their prophetic ministry. These shortcomings are highlighted by various scholars, particularly womanist scholars in their critiques of the black church which this dissertation engages.

1.1.d Methodology

In examining the nature of the relationship between African American rural southern Christian identity and the response to economic justice, I employ an interdisciplinary approach melding historical, social scientific, and theological-ethical analyses. First, I use historical analysis to contextualize the research problem. Second, I employ social scientific resources to explore the socio-historical and current context of the Black Belt and the specific role of the African American Church in this impoverished region of the rural South. Here I elucidate the historical interconnections between race, religion, and economics attending particularly to the way in which these connections continue to evolve. This includes examining their implications for the current situation of the rural southern African American church. Third, I employ theological resources in light of the realities laid bare in the socio-historical analysis. Here, I draw upon resources of black theology and the social teachings of the black church, complemented by other perspectives such as the philosophical and social scientific. At this point in the process, I propose a theological-ethical reading for the framework of the black Christian economic ethic of well being.

To help formulate and critique this black Christian economic ethic, I conduct focus groups and personal interviews with laity and clergy within the African American

Church in the southern Black Belt. I use these voices of “people from the pews” and pulpit regarding Christian behavior in the marketplace and economic justice to help shape a BCEEWB that is relevant to the rural black southern context. In addition I employ participant observation to gather data. When I approached pastors and laypersons about my interest in studying their specific church and explained my research interest, many felt honored that someone would take interest in their “small country church.” Others felt that I could somehow help them be a better congregation. To prevent any perceived improper power relations beyond that which is normal between researcher and voluntary participants, I made it clear that I could not “help” them in ways that they would like. Some people were obviously suspicious of me precisely because of my interest in their “small country church,” yet many others welcomed me and openly shared their experiences and views. There were a total of 30 participants, 12 clergy and 18 laity. I collected my data over a period of 18 months.

Even though I do not focus solely on women in my work, I am shaped by the womanist emphasis on community and wholeness. This womanist emphasis became important not only because the female pastors and laity I interviewed affirm the centrality of this emphasis, but also because it balances the largely Euro-American and Black male intelligentsia, (particularly religious scholars, ethicists, sociologists, and other social scientists). Besides, in the study area alone, poverty rates for women are as much as four times the national poverty rate. The concrete experiences of these women are wrought with challenges. For instance,

Homelessness, hunger, inadequate education, lack of gainful employment, poverty and lack of health care are facts of life for many southern rural black

women and are violations of the human rights that are guaranteed [sic] to all people.³⁵

The womanist perspective takes seriously the struggle for social justice by marginalized populations, such as persistently poor African American women, men, elderly, and children in the rural South.

Fueling this commitment to womanist critical consciousness in my scholarship is my interest in the lives of women and their stories of survival and flourishing amid struggles for social justice and multilayered experiences of oppression, struggles, and experiences to which womanists attend particularly well. Furthermore, a BCEEWB should be an inclusive ethic and therefore requires us to recognize and condemn the patriarchy, misogyny, and classism prevalent in the black church, its various theological expressions, and practices. The womanist critical consciousness that provides the foundation for this BCEEWB demands that we not only critique scholarship but that we also concern ourselves with how women in the pews are affected by a liberative economic ethic. We must attend to communal, cultural, and religious institutional practices that are sexist and perpetuate patriarchal values and practices, in the way of objectification, and subordination of poor black women.³⁶

The black Christian economic ethic of well being is intended to be a prescriptive and critical analytical tool for churches in their engagement with issues of economic justice in this post-Civil Rights era.

³⁵ The Southern Rural Black Women's Initiative for Economic and Social Justice, *The Rain Don't Fall to the Ground Down Here: The Status of Human Rights for Southern Rural Black Women*, (SRBWI, June 2007), 2.

³⁶ Cannon, *Katie's Canon: Womanism and the Soul of the Black Community*, (New York: The Continuum Publishing Company, 1995), 128; See also Delores Williams, *Sisters in the Wilderness: The Challenge of Womanist God-Talk*, (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1993); Kelly Brown Douglas, *Black Christ*; (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1994); Grant, *White Woman's Christ, Black Woman's Jesus*.

1.1.e Black Christian Identity and Economic Justice

1.1.e.i Identity

Identity means different things to different people.³⁷ For the purposes of this study, identity is understood as a collective phenomenon which “denotes a fundamental and consequential sameness among members of a group or category...”³⁸ This sameness can be understood objectively, as sameness “in itself”, or subjectively, as an experience, felt or perceived.³⁹ In their work on the theoretical use of identity by social scientists, Brubaker and Cooper argue that this sameness is expected to manifest itself in solidarity, shared dispositions or consciousness, or in collective action.⁴⁰ Viewed as an essentialist concept, identity is understood by some to be ‘no longer serviceable’, ‘no longer good to

³⁷ Identity for Womanist scholar Marcia Riggs, is shared and communal. She defines African Americans as a group that shares a common identity and has special claims on one another; whose identity originates in a common history of oppression and enslavement and a continuing present discrimination. See Marcia Riggs, *Awake, Arise, and Act: A Womanist Call for Black Liberation*, (Cleveland, Pilgrim Press, 1994), 10. Thus, for Riggs black communal identity is rooted in a common history of survival. This definition is problematic for scholars such as Victor Anderson who contend against the totalizing notion of ontological blackness. For Anderson, it is problematic to subsume black consciousness, subjectivity, and personality under the totality of race. This form of totalizing is understood as essentially binding discourse to suffering, survival, and resistance. However, for C. Eric Lincoln, identity is also communicated by the body of myths, folklore, and tradition through which a culture ordinarily projects itself. He argues that identity is the self-perceived image of who and what a people are. However, the peculiar circumstances of the black experience as a proscribed enclave within a dominant, hostile overculture made a positive identity for black people next to impossible. First of all, there was a fantastic body of myth, folklore, and conventional wisdom designed deliberately to confuse and obscure black identity, even for Blacks themselves. See C. Eric Lincoln, *Race, Religion and the Continuing American Dilemma*, (New York: Hill and Wang, 1999), 90-91. The African American religious heritage continues to play a significant role in conveying and reinforcing a counter-‘overcultural’ positive identity for African Americans despite dominant myth, folklore, and conventional wisdom to the contrary. See also Victor Anderson, *Beyond Ontological Blackness: An Essay on African American Religious and Cultural Criticism*. (New York: Continuum Publishing Company, 1995).

³⁸ Rogers Brubaker and Frederick Cooper, “Beyond ‘Identity’”, in *Theory and Society*, vol. 29, no. 1, (February, 2000), 6.

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ Brubaker and Cooper claim that, “[This use of the concept of identity] is found especially in the literature on social movements; on gender; and on race, ethnicity, and nationalism. In this usage, the line between ‘identity’ as a category of analysis and as a category of practice is often blurred.” See Brubaker and Cooper, “Beyond ‘Identity’,” 7.

think with', in its original form, the form which is 'under erasure', or not reconstructed.⁴¹ However, just as problematic as the crystallization of certain self or group understandings is the notion of fluidity. Yet, as Brubaker and Cooper argue, "Whatever its suggestiveness, whatever its indispensability in certain practical contexts, 'identity' is too ambiguous, too torn between 'hard' and 'soft' meanings, essentialist connotations and constructivist qualifiers, to serve well the demands of social analysis."⁴²

Religion adds another layer of complexity to the perceived dubious notion of identity. The connections to family, place, and religion that characterized pre-modern individuals for whom religion was presumed a shared core practice and belief, have given way to modern persons' ability to choose the place that religion will have in their lives.⁴³ Religious identity is no longer a given in contemporary society; people choose a collective core religious identity, if they have one at all, and we do not all share the same religious identity.⁴⁴ Although social theory illuminates the problem of maintaining a religious identity in the "mainstream" of culture, at the margins religious identities seem still to play a role.⁴⁵ Scholarship on religious identity demonstrates that individuals such as those within immigrant communities use religious gatherings as places to sustain old cultural ways, but also to forge new ways. Likewise, African American religious institutions within which marginalized populations of impoverished rural African Americans worship, including the majority of those within my study site, seem to understand themselves as reservoirs of African American cultural heritage and religious

⁴¹ Stuart Hall, "Who Needs Identity?", in *Questions of Cultural Identity*, eds., Stuart Hall and Paul Du Gay (Thousand Oaks, California: Sage Publications, 1996) 1.

⁴² Brubaker and Cooper, "Beyond Identity", 2.

⁴³ Ammerman, "Religious Identities and Religious Institutions", in *Handbook of the Sociology of Religion*, Michele Dillon, ed., (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 207.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

values. They thus actively integrate historical cultural understandings of black religious experience while forging new ways of being African American Christians in a postmodern context.

In their book, *Black Power from the Pew: Laity Connecting Congregations and Communities*, which is based on the data gathered in the aforementioned Member's Voice Project, Rasor and Chapman examine "the power of God working in the lives of African American Christians in the twenty-first century."⁴⁶ They focus on the power of connectedness, the undeniable characteristic of black religious life. They claim that "Black church members have had multiple and varied life experiences but share a fairly common consciousness of America's racist institutions and systems."⁴⁷ They argue that the black church provides an environment where black people connect with God through Christ and through the power of the Holy Spirit and thus are able to transcend the limitations ascribed to them.⁴⁸ While they observe that black churches are of course not all the same, "if one looks closely, however, one can see something unique in the black congregational experience. One can see a spiritual connectedness, a connectedness grounded in a common identity, an inside connectedness, an outside connectedness."⁴⁹ Rasor and Chapman contend that the spiritual realities inside and outside the church walls spur the formation of the church's collective identity. They discuss the relationship between identity and action. "There is power in knowing who you are and acting accordingly. When a church puts its stamp on its members, their lives and their

⁴⁶ Stephen Rasor and Christine Chapman, *Power from the Pew: Laity Connecting Congregations and Communities*, (Cleveland: The Pilgrim Press, 2007), 11.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 19.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 20.

communities can be powerfully transformed."⁵⁰ The authors claim that African American people of faith carry the collective identity of their faith communities with them into all aspects of everyday life, including work, family life, service, and recreation.

They posit that,

The connectedness that underlies black spiritual power, both within and beyond gatherings of the faithful, draws from individual's understanding of that collective identity. Identity is crucial to the effectiveness of ministry and mission in the world.⁵¹

In this dissertation, one of the fundamental foci is collective identity. Identity, as a socially constructed mechanism of situating people within cultures and groups, is instrumental in drawing boundaries for social exclusion and inclusion. Religious identity is particularly contested ground, since it is an avenue used to assert ethical convictions within the public sphere. Also, religious identity is part of the complex of an individual's or group's multiple identities, expressed through social agency. Peter Paris argues that basic communal values are legitimated and preserved by a community's religious institutions,⁵² and that religion is often critical to the way persons and groups understand their identity and the ways they act in the world. This is evident in an examination of the historical relationship between black Christian identity and economic justice in the rural South. The discussion of this relationship is couched within a broader discussion of the interconnections between race, religion, and economics at the heart of black, rural, southern, Christian identity. The various expressions of this identity are linked to diverse understandings of and multiple responses to issues of economic justice by black churches in the rural South.

⁵⁰ Ibid., 45.

⁵¹ Ibid.

⁵² Peter Paris, *Social Teaching of Black Churches*, xii.

In my exploration of this connection, I am cautious not to essentialize black, rural southern, Christian identity with its complexities of ethnicity, gender, class, culture, and theological expression, among others. I explore correlations between particular aspects of religious social ethics and theology with the intersection of historical experiences, individual social location, and collective identity of African Americans. My aim is to draw out central connections associated with the complexity of the relationship between black economic activity and black religious experience in the United States.

Within this project I acknowledge that no single narrative or context yields an adequate account of a collective identity,⁵³ particularly black Christian identity, which is fluid. I acknowledge its multiplicity as I observe how African Americans construct and remake this collective identity which in turn shapes the morass of individual identities. To resist totalizing, the commonality invoked here allows for fluidity within this notion of identity. Victor Anderson for example argues against totalizing notions of identity because the solidarities that result from collective identity can also constrain future revision and improvisation.⁵⁴ He refers to the tendency toward racial reification of identity as ontological blackness, preferring the concept of postmodern blackness, which captures the fluidity and individuality that ontological blackness does not. He argues that postmodern blackness recognizes the permanency of race as an effective category in identity formation and yet does so acknowledging that black identities are continually being reinvented as African Americans inhabit widely differentiated social spaces and communities of moral discourse. “Under ontological blackness, the conscious lives of blacks are experienced as bound by unresolved binary dialectics of slavery and freedom,

⁵³ Ibid., 216.

⁵⁴ Ammerman, “Religious Identity and Religious Institutions,” 212.

negro and citizen, insider and outsider, black and white, struggle and survival. ...such binary polarities admit no possibility of transcendence or mediation.”⁵⁵

To be clear, I do not intend to define moral agency by any single category of experience or identity (such as, race, class, or gender). I merely presuppose a *correlation* between a particular complex identity (black, rural southern, and Christian) and moral agency for economic justice given the historical and economic facts.

In summary, the black church has provided the arena for producing and reproducing a positive and humanizing identity of blacks within a dehumanizing and economically exploitative socio-historical context. The work of producing such a collective identity had the aim of making negative racial identities obsolete. This positive, humanizing collective identity helped shape the moral conscience of African Americans and spurred action toward transformation of an economic reality of deprivation and exploitation. What is most important for collective conceptions of identity is that they leave space for fluidity, individuality, and multiplicity of individual identities (though the reality is that religious institutions may have difficulty providing this space). The significance of identity for moral action is central to this study, particularly the link between identity and economic justice.

1.1.e.ii Economic Justice

At the heart of my concept of economic justice are understandings of poverty, inequality, economic well being, and the right to full participation in the economic system without discrimination. The significant factors that affect economic well being

⁵⁵ Victor Anderson, *Beyond Ontological Blackness*, 14.

and full participation include equality, rights, and markets, for economic justice includes many aspects, such as, the right to basic necessities of food, clothing, shelter, healthcare, and so forth. I derive my understanding of economic justice from theological pronouncements by religious bodies, theological ethicists, and social scientists. I assume that economic justice indicates a social order in which the economy is subordinated to democratically defined social goals, where the concern for human community is primary and ecological limits to expansion are acknowledged.⁵⁶ Martin Luther King, Jr. pictures an economically just society as one in which,

There is a caring community where the spirit of agape directs individual and social/collective relationships (where there is a persistent willingness to sacrifice for the good of the community and for one's own spiritual and temporal good); each person is regarded as the image of God and the dignity and worth of each individual is recognized; there is 'total interrelatedness' and people are treated as ends; discrimination is absent; there is 'brotherhood of humanity and fatherhood of God'; and government shares political power with its citizens.⁵⁷

In such a caring community, one of the ways in which one recognizes dignity and worth is through ensuring provision of and equal access to the economic goods necessary for human survival. Thus one of the ways we can judge the moral status and basic values of a society is by the distribution of economic goods.⁵⁸ Christian ethics therefore engages economics, as a scientific occupation and practice, on the issue of poverty and the related issues of equality and social justice.

⁵⁶ John B. Cobb and Herman E. Daly, *For the Common Good: Redirecting the Economy Toward Community, the Environment, and a Sustainable Future*, (Boston, Beacon Press, 1989), 15. The National Conference of Catholic Bishops expand the reach of this conception of economic justice by noting also that there should be a commitment to full employment, concerted efforts to eradicate poverty; where the fulfillment of the basic needs of the poor is the highest priority; and measures are taken to relieve the plight of poor nations and assist in their development. See National Conference of Catholic Bishops, *Economic Justice for All: Pastoral Letter on Catholic Social Teaching and the U.S. Economy*, (Washington, D.C.: United States Catholic Conference, Inc., 1986), 19.

⁵⁷ Martin L. King, Jr., *Strength to Love*, (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1981).

⁵⁸ Alan Gewirth, "Economic Justice: Concepts and Criteria," in *Economic Justice: Private Rights and Public Responsibilities*, eds., Kenneth Kipnis and Diana T. Meyers, (Totowa, New Jersey: Rowman & Allanheld, 1985), 7. See also, Walzer, *Spheres of Justice: A Defense of Pluralism and Equality*, (Basic Books, 1993).

Economic justice, a controversial issue and concept wrought with complexity, is intricately tied to the broader conception of social justice. Social justice has to do with individual and group rights to a full and fair share of the benefits of social cooperation. The controversy comes in the various interpretations of what constitutes fair treatment and just shares within society. Given our existence within a free market economy, some argue that concern about income inequality and just rewards for participation in the market is unnecessary, particularly because some degree of inequality is thought not only desirable but unavoidable in a well-functioning economic system based on free market principles.⁵⁹ However, some of the most conspicuous inequalities that exist within society are not merely the result of unequal initial endowments of personal talents and capacities, but have been determined by the social order. So how do we evaluate which transactions or arrangements are just?⁶⁰ The criteria include: to each according to her needs, virtue, desert, effort, contribution, agreements made/contracts entered into, and society's rules.⁶¹ So for example, in his work on the economic rights debate, Darryl Trimiew uses the criteria, 'to each according to her right,' which is a contentious stance because he is advocating that economic rights be equated with civil and political rights.⁶² His position is controversial in part because there is no acknowledged consensus on what constitutes economic rights or if they are valid at all.

Trimiew's study is in part an exploration of Michael Walzer's observation that modern governments have 'positive' economic duties of provision for the welfare of its

⁵⁹ See Julio H. Cole, "Milton Friedman on Income Inequality" in *Journal of Markets and Morality* vol. 11, no. 2 (Fall 2008), 240.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 9.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 12.

⁶² Darryl Trimiew, *God Bless the Child That's God It's Own: The Economics Rights Debate*, (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1997), 3.

members. Walzer argues that every political community has duties and obligations to provide for the security and welfare of its members and are, in principle, ‘welfare states’. Thus, “There has never been a political community that did not provide, or try to provide, or claim to provide for the needs of its members as its members understood those needs.”⁶³ Walzer’s argument is that if individuals are considered members of a political community, then it has a duty to those members; just by virtue of their membership, they should have their needs recognized and, “goods must be provided to needy members...in such a way to sustain their membership.”⁶⁴ Walzer provides one perspective of distributive justice, claimants’ rights, and institutional responsibility within communities to ensure just arrangements within society.⁶⁵

Black church and community leaders recognized that even after the struggle for basic civil and political rights in this country, without economic rights the African American population would continue to fall severely behind their white counterparts in various socio-economic indicators of well-being. Political rights were merely the first goal of the Civil Rights Movement. Its second unrealized goal was economic rights, for which Martin Luther King Jr. strove most successfully in his later years.⁶⁶ King’s

⁶³ Walzer, *Spheres of Justice*, 68.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 78.

⁶⁵ However, there are various approaches to social justice, for example, liberalism and Christian theology are ‘lens’ through which one can view these different approaches to justice; each with its own assumptions about the moral worth and agency of individuals and society, and assumptions regarding the grounds for its approach to justice. Through the lens of Christian theology, one encounters a view of various approaches to justice, among them are Catholic, Protestant and liberation. Many approaches to social justice have evolved within both Catholic and Protestant traditions. For example, in addition to papal encyclicals regarding labor, peace, and other social issues, there is the pastoral letter on Catholic Social Teachings and the U.S. Economy. Also, there is Latin American liberation theology, which challenges both the catholic and Protestant traditions regarding who does theological reflection. Additionally, there is Black liberation theology where questions regarding the oppression of individuals based on race are privileged in theological reflection, which shapes how justice is defined and conceptualized.

⁶⁶ Indeed, current leadership of the SCLC (co-founded by King in 1957) are picking up where King left off with his Poor People’s Campaign. The new leadership has made continuing King’s mission a priority for the SCLC.

broader appeal in the 1963 March on Washington coalition included reaching beyond barriers of race and class, which is why he included white middle-class individuals as well as African Americans from various socio-economic levels, and why he appealed for a complex alliance across race and class lines between organized laborers, unorganized workers, and those who were unemployed.⁶⁷ King understood that civil rights should also entail assurance of economic equality, alleviation of concentrations of poverty and empowerment of the poor, as citizens of a nation whose ideal was not just a political but an economic democracy. The poor were due economic rights that reinforced their dignity and status as full citizens. In short, political rights were not enough, unless inherent in them were basic economic rights such as medical care, food, shelter, and clothing.⁶⁸ As Trimiew puts it, “Economic rights are necessary and crucial moral constructs for the maintenance of equality, justice, freedom and security in a modern society that recognizes rights claims.”⁶⁹

For King, economic rights were as essential to human rights as civil and political rights. Trimiew argues that economic rights are interdependent and inherently connected to civil and political rights and therefore deserve the same recognition accorded civil and political rights.⁷⁰ However, skeptics consider economic rights not as legitimate human rights but as ideals or goals to which societies may aspire.⁷¹ They are no more than “conceptual errors, suspect human rights, novelties or incomprehensible ideological

⁶⁷ Thomas F. Jackson, *From Civil Rights to Human Rights: Martin Luther King, Jr., and the Struggle for Economic Justice*, (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2007), 329.

⁶⁸ Darryl Trimiew, *God Bless the Child*, 3.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 4.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 169.

⁷¹ See Trimiew, *God Bless the Child*.

attempts by the poor to coerce the provisions of basic goods from the wealthy through the distortion of traditional human rights discourse.”⁷²

Trimiew observes that the theological contribution to the economic rights debate grounds economic rights theories within meaningful communities and contexts in a social rather than atomistic fashion. It accounts for a common life together within society that recognizes rights and for a thick conception of human nature that does not depend on human capacities such as reason to identify rights claimants and why they deserve to be accorded rights.⁷³ Trimiew also notes the important role that religious organizations have played and continue to play in the economic rights debate. As will become clear in this study, the many-layered black religious tradition, out of which Martin Luther King, Richard Allen, Henry McNeal Turner, Albert Cleage, Marcus Garvey, and other advocates for economic justice emerged has historically offered prophetic visions both within and on the margins of this debate. This black religious tradition provides rich resources for a black Christian economic ethic of well being. In order to set the frame to discuss a BCEEWB, the next section provides a historical overview of Christian economic ethics which serves as the background for the discussion of the particular challenges of economic questions in the black Christian tradition.

As explained previously, dialogue regarding economic justice is essential as our civil and political freedoms wane in meaning when individuals have to beg, cadge, and scrap day to day for basic necessities. Furthermore, the inescapable economic dimension to human existence and the preoccupation with the use and consumption of material goods for human flourishing that marks societal cooperative efforts make economic

⁷² Ibid.

⁷³ Ibid., 232.

justice an unavoidable topic in dialogue about social cooperation. This reality has made the material aspects of life a historical concern of religious communities. Indeed, the relationship between economics and religion is not a new phenomenon. There is a long history between faith and wealth recounted in scripture and in the words of early church fathers such as Wesley, Calvin, Aquinas, etc.⁷⁴ This relationship is demonstrated in the following overview of the concerns of Christian economic ethics, the background for our discussion of economics in African American religious experience.

1.1.f Historical Overview of Christian Economic Ethics

Christian economic ethics has historically concerned itself with the material aspect of life—with the ‘economic life’ or ‘economic order’, that is, with money, property, wealth, work, vocation, stewardship, and material possessions. Economic ethics concerns how money is made and used; for example, whether it is earned honestly and without undue harm to others, whether it is used to procure social power or political domination; whether it is loaned justly; and how wealth and possessions are accumulated and to what end. Historical concerns of this field also include the nature of work and the role of stewardship and charity in the life of the believer.

The roots of Christian economic ethics are of course biblical and these along with theological traditions provide the basis for a rightly ordered economic life. For instance,

⁷⁴ See John Wesley, “The Good Steward”, “The Use of Money”, “On the Danger of Increasing Riches”, “The More Excellent Way”, in *The Works of John Wesley*, Albert C. Outler, ed., (Nashville, Tennessee: Abingdon Press, 1985); Catholic Bishops, *Economic Justice For All*; Lutheran Church of America, *A Social Statement on Sufficient, Sustainable Livelihood for All (August 1999)*; Thomas Aquinas, “Fraud in Buying and Selling”, “Usury”, in *Summa Theologiae* (New York: Blackfriars in conjunction with McGraw-Hill Book Company, 1975) vol. 38; John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, translated by John Allen (Philadelphia: Presbyterian Board of Christian Education, 1936).

the Hebrew biblical tradition regarding economic ethics is shaped by the prophetic pronouncements admonishing the members of the “covenant community” of Israel to uphold their obligations of justice and righteousness which include caring for the most vulnerable members of society (such as widows, orphans, and “strangers”) and providing for the economically deprived.⁷⁵ These pronouncements were often regarding wealth, possessions, property, and stewardship. The New Testament continues some of these same themes, but with a radically new approach. For following in the line of the Hebrew prophets, Christ announces the Kingdom of God, and with it demands justice, righteousness, stewardship, while admonishing against the perils of greed, excessive accumulation of wealth and possessions, and wrongly ordered attachment to such.

Mainline Protestant understandings of stewardship of resources came to include charity toward and caring for the poor in imitation of Christ’s ministry on earth.⁷⁶ Indeed, such an understanding of poverty and responsibility to the poor is buttressed by the notion that God is on the side of the poor⁷⁷ given that the poor person is deprived of the rights and justice due them as members of a religio-political community. This moral conception of poverty has held for modern believers as well. Thus, the early church understood the need to steward resources so that no one would lack life’s necessities.

Patristic and medieval teachings on the economic life also attempted to articulate the Christian vision for property, work, vocation, stewardship and charity. Early church fathers echoed Christ’s admonition against excessive accumulation of wealth and

⁷⁵ See Leviticus 19:33-34; Deuteronomy 8:17-18, 15:1-11; Isaiah 3:13-15, 10:1-2; Amos 5:21-24; Micah 6:6-8.

⁷⁶ See Luke 4:16-21; 7:18-23.

⁷⁷ See Luke 1:46-53; 6:20-21.

possessions and to care for the poor.⁷⁸ They developed rules to protect property owners and also to protect the poor from exploitation by wealthy members of society. The groundwork of patristic economic ethics was further developed by medieval Christian theologians such as Thomas Aquinas., who taught in his writings about lending money⁷⁹, along with the issues of just price, just exchange⁸⁰, possessions⁸¹, meeting the needs of the poor, and the rights of the poor to the property of those with an abundance of riches who hold back on giving to meet the needs of the impoverished.⁸²

Christian economic ethics has always been concerned with society's obligation to the poor and their just claims on society. With the Protestant Reformation and the commercial revolution during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, Christian economic ethics were re-interpreted for the new challenges of a society in flux. The decline of medieval civilization gave way to the beginnings of modernization in the West, just as the Protestant Reformation transformed Christendom. Thus, Luther and Calvin's attempts to relate biblical economic ethics to the commercial revolution had a profound

⁷⁸ See the Didache, IV. 8 "Thou shalt not turn away the needy, but shalt share everything with thy brother and shalt not say that it is thine own, for if you are sharers in the imperishable, how much more in the things which perish?"; I. 5 "Give to everyone, that asks thee and do not refuse, for the Father's will is that we give to all from the gifts we have received."; IV. 5 "Be not one who stretches out his hands to receive, but shuts them when it comes to giving."; IV. 7 "Thou shalt not hesitate to give, nor shalt thou grumble when thou givest, for thou shalt know who is the good Paymaster of the reward." Kirsopp Lake, *The Apostolic Fathers: I Clement, II Clement, Ignatius, Polycarp, Didache, Barnabas*, (New York: Macmillan Co., 1912).

⁷⁹ Aquinas dealt with whether it is a sin to charge for lending money, usury. Question 78, article 1 "Is it a sin to make a charge for lending money?" He argues that usury is unjust, "...for one party sells the other something non-existent, and this obviously sets up an inequality which is contrary to justice...Jews were forbidden to lend upon interest to their brothers,... what we are meant to understand by this is that lending upon interest to any man is wrong in itself, in so far as we ought to treat every man as our brother and neighbor...." Aquinas, "Usury", in *Summa Theologiae* (New York: Blackfriars in conjunction with McGraw-Hill Book Company, 1975) vol. 38.

⁸⁰ See *Summa Theologiae* 38, Question 77, article 1 "Can selling be unjust by reason of the price, or in other words is one entitled to sell something for more than it is worth?"

⁸¹ See *Summa Theologiae* 16, Question 66 "The Conditions of Happiness", article 7 "Does happiness require external goods?" Included in his notion of possessions is "food, drink, riches and a kingdom."

⁸² See *Summa Theologiae* 38, Question 66 "Theft and Robbery".

influence on the shape of Christian economic ethics, particularly in how people began to understand their work as vocation.

Religious meaning has been imputed to work throughout Christian history, particularly through this notion of vocation⁸³ that in turn is connected to understandings of neighbor love and the common good. The belief is that Christians serve as stewards and their work is service to neighbor and contribution to the common good. Before the reformation, there existed a division between those who performed what was regarded as a higher calling, and those who performed work in what was regarded as the “secular” realm. Clergy, church leaders, and those who served in formal ministry within the institutional church were those with a more ‘noble’ calling whereas laypersons who carried out quotidian duties within the working or servant class were believed to engage in “worldly” work.

The theological understandings that evolved during the reformation resulted in ‘worldly’ work being imbued with sanctity. Thus, the idea of a vocation was prominent and infused daily labor with new significance. The purpose of work developed into something that was not only in service to neighbor and the common good but was also praise and obedience to God. Beach observes that,

...Martin Luther’s doctrines of justification by grace through faith alone and the priesthood of all believers means that all persons, in whatever line of work, are equally called to serve their neighbors in love, out of glad response to God’s forgiving grace in Christ. The work of a shepherd, a tradesman, a housewife—even that of a soldier—is as sacred as the work of the priest.⁸⁴

⁸³ Martin defines vocation as “a vehicle through which one is obedient to God, who is the Christian’s master.” See Joan Martin, *More Than Chains and Toil: A Christian Work Ethic of Enslaved Women*, (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2000), 114.

⁸⁴ Waldo Beach, *Christian Ethics in the Protestant Tradition*, (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1988), 90.

Work becomes dignified, “the menial becomes holy.”⁸⁵ The Protestant work ethic which developed within this pre-industrial context played out in interesting ways within American culture. “The fruit of the labor of the diligent Protestant farmer, merchant, craftsperson followed inevitably: prosperity.”⁸⁶ This prosperity was construed as evidence of God’s favor. Thus, the virtue of poverty began to lose its place of reverence (as is the case in traditions such as the prosperity gospel).

The connection between work and calling—serving God and neighbor through work—gave rise to the notion of the Protestant work ethic which shaped life for many during the sixteenth century, and in the seventeenth century, was transported to the American colonies. The eighteenth century witnessed further development of modern capitalism and pervasiveness of the bourgeois spirit. Christian economic ethics was, therefore, shaped by the likes of John Wesley who railed against the dangers of riches and excessive accumulation of possessions and extolled the virtues of stewardship, use of one’s money, not as one would like, but for God’s purposes. Wesley concerned himself with “Christ’s poor”, the masses of individuals on the margins of a developing capitalist system. Out of step with the bourgeois spirit of his age, he emphasized the connection between economic discipline and benevolence broadly through his teachings and specifically by his dictum, “Earn all you can, Save all you can, Give all you can”.⁸⁷

Since it is in the nineteenth century that we begin to see Christian economic ethics concern itself more with the link between social structures and the ability of individuals to alter their political and economic environment, it is also only at this point that we find

⁸⁵ Ibid., 91.

⁸⁶ Ibid.

⁸⁷ Albert C. Outler and Richard P. Heitzenrater, eds., *John Wesley’s Sermons: An Anthology*, (Nashville, Tennessee: Abingdon Press, 1991), 347.

a regular critique of social systems with a focus on transformation of economic and political institutional structures within society. Within this socio-historical context, we also witness the continuing conflict between economic liberalism, which favors economic rights and freedoms of property owners, and political democracy, which emphasizes direct equality and participation. Thus, in the late nineteenth and into the twentieth centuries, Christian economic ethics concerned itself with economic justice, which entailed theological and normative commitments to social welfare concerns, the “labor question”, support of labor unions, educational institutions to benefit laborers, and social solidarity. These concerns were all in response to the industrialization and urbanization of America which resulted in marked changes in its religious, economic, and social landscape. Moving from farming to manufacturing, there were considerable increases in the urban population, concomitant problems associated with mass urban migration, and a rise in movements such as the social gospel, which itself helped to shape and was concomitantly shaped by Christian economic ethics at the time.⁸⁸

Later in the twentieth century, John C. Bennett’s appeal to Christian ethicists and theologians to renew their focus on issues of economic justice spurred interest in ethical reflection on economic life,⁸⁹ –as it has again in the twenty-first century.⁹⁰ This

⁸⁸ See Walter Rauschenbusch, *A Theology for the Social Gospel*, (New York: Abingdon Press, 1917); Richard T. Ely, *Social Aspects of Christianity*, (New York: Thomas Y. Crowell & Co., 1889); Reinhold Niebuhr, “The Idolatry of America”, “How Philanthropic is Henry Ford?”, “Ford’s Five-Day Week Shrinks”, “Religion and Class War in Kentucky,” in D. B. Robertson, ed., *Love and Justice: Selections from the Shorter Writings of Reinhold Niebuhr*, (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1957).

⁸⁹ John C. Bennett, *The Radical Imperative: From Theology to Social Ethics*, (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1975).

⁹⁰ See Gustavo Gutierrez, *A Theology of Liberation*, (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1988); Dwight N. Hopkins, “More Than Ever: The Preferential Option for the Poor,” in *Opting for the Margins: Postmodernity and Liberation in Christian Theology*, ed. Joerg Rieger, (Oxford: Oxford University Press: 2003): 127-142; Beverly Wildung Harrison, “The Role of Social Theory in Religious Social Ethics: Reconsidering the Case for Marxian Political Economy,” in *Making the Connections: Essays in Feminist Social Ethics*, ed. Carol S. Robb. (Boston: Beacon Press, 1985); James Cone, “Black Theology: It’s Origin, Method and Relation

reflection allows radical social theory (for example, Marxist social theory) to inform Christian economic ethics, including in the conversation issues such as class; economic inequality; power and economic disparities along class, race and gender lines; and disparities resulting from global capitalism. The diverse voices that express the concerns of Christian economic ethics in our contemporary context can be unified in their call for human dignity and humane social existence, especially for disempowered and impoverished global citizens.

However, the social conscience of Christians in the U.S. as a whole, let alone within the black church in the U.S., cannot be expressed in a single unified voice. Given their connection with a faith at whose center is maintaining human dignity and ensuring reasonable standards for a humane economic and social existence, the issues of poverty and wealth and a wise response to each receives much attention. In his book, *Until Justice and Peace Embrace*, on how Christians can act responsibly in this world's social order, Nicholas Wolterstorff reminds us that:

Many are the ills perpetrated upon us by our economic arrangements and practices: work for millions of people is boring rather than fulfilling, the physical context within which we live is at many places corrupted to the point of being injurious to health, the benefits of our world economy are distributed with gross unevenness, and so on. But one great issue supersedes all others in importance: the issue of poverty. ...Poverty amidst plenty with the gap becoming greater: this is the scandal.⁹¹

The 'scandal' of poverty amid plenty and other such 'ills' that characterize our current economic arrangements and praxis are decried as evidence of the incompatibility of

to Third World Theologies," in *Churches in Struggle: Liberation Theologies and Social Change in North America*, ed. William K. Tabb. (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1986.): 32-45; Jacquelyn Grant, "Womanist Theology: Black Women's Experience as a Source for Doing Theology, With Special Reference to Christology," In *Black Theology: A Documentary History*, vol. 2, eds. James H. Cone and Gayraud S. Wilmore, (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1993).

⁹¹ Nicholas Wolterstorff, *Until Justice and Peace Embrace*, (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1983), 74.

Christianity and capitalistic economic structure. This economic structure is marked by struggles of interest between different agents in the market. In the processes of production, distribution and consumption human values are at stake. What is produced, for whom, how it is to be distributed, and who is allowed to consume it (for example, only those with the wealth to purchase it?) are important questions. How do we care for the most vulnerable citizens in society who cannot contribute to production and are limited in terms of consumption? Who owns the means of production, and what is the nature of the working conditions under which goods are produced? All these and more are important questions tied to the historical themes of Christian economic ethics, such as poverty, wealth, possessions, work, stewardship, and charity. Having provided the background for our broader discussion of the particular challenges of the economic question within black religious tradition, we now move to the discussion of the framework for a black Christian economic ethic.

1.2 Framework for a Black Christian Economic Ethic of Well Being

For centuries, Christians have used scripture to derive normative proscriptions for social, political and economic behavior.⁹² They have understood biblical texts to contain wisdom and directives regarding issues of modern social ethics. Various Christian traditions have related particular scriptures to particular normative behavior in the marketplace. Examples include the Catholic Bishops' pastoral letter on Catholic social teaching and the U.S. economy (*Economic Justice for All*), the Lutheran Church of America's *Social Statement on Sufficient Sustainable Livelihood for All*, the

⁹² See Albert C. Outler, ed., "The Use of Money" and "The Good Steward", in *John Wesley's Sermons*; Catholic Bishops, *Economic Justice For All*; Lutheran Church of America, *Social Statement on Sufficient and Sustainable Livelihood*; Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*.

Presbyterians' *Christian Faith and Economic Justice*, The United Methodists' *Call to Churches in Domestic Hunger and Malnutrition*, and the United Church of Christ's *Christian Faith and the Economic Life*.

As noted above, various thinkers⁹³ have shaped Christian ideas pertaining to work, money, and the economic order—and thus how the marketplace is understood—as embodying justice or as a mechanism of domination and alienation; how the market should be evaluated; the church's role in constituting a more just economic order; and how Christians should approach questions regarding economics and justice.

Likewise, Christians have long been involved in charitable acts, caring for the vulnerable, impoverished, and oppressed; faithfully devoting time and energy to vocations; and serving as responsible moral agents in matters of ecological stewardship and social justice. However, there is no consensus and indeed a good bit of debate on the theological or practical form these actions should and do take. Reinhold Niebuhr argues that social injustice hides behind the cloak of charity without regard for the task of achieving justice.⁹⁴ He contends that charity is an avenue merely to feeling virtuous, and stewardship is a notion used by the church to moralize power and privilege.⁹⁵ This historical tension between charity and justice has marked religious engagement broadly, a tension from which African American religion has not escaped in its relationship to black economic reality.

⁹³ See John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*; Aquinas, "Fraud in Buying and Selling", "Usury", in *Summa Theologiae* vol. 38; John Wesley, "The Use of Money", "The Good Steward", "Self-denial" in *The Works of John Wesley: Sermons*, vol. 2; Reinhold Niebuhr, "Is Stewardship Ethical?", "The Idolatry of America", "How Philanthropic is Henry Ford", "Ford's Five-Day Week Shrinks", "Religion and the Class War in Kentucky", "Ideology in the Social Struggle", and "Inflation and Group Selfishness" in *Love and Justice*; Kirsopp Lake, *The Apostolic Fathers*.

⁹⁴ Niebuhr, "Religion and Class War in Kentucky," in *Love and Justice*, 112.

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, 90-91.

1.2.a Black Religious Experience and Black Economic Reality

In their landmark study, Lincoln and Mamiya provide a sketch of an economic ethic of the black church. They use a ‘dialectical model’ of the black church to explain the series of constant tensions found throughout its history.⁹⁶ This dialectical model is intended to assist one in coming to terms with the ambiguities found within the history of the black church tradition and to obtain a holistic picture of black churches.⁹⁷ The authors note that an economic ethic of the black church involves a dialectical tension between the two poles of survival and liberation.⁹⁸ They argue that the simplistic social scientific categorization of black churches into single categories such as accommodationist or conservative obscures the historical dynamism of religious institutions which move back and forth between polar tensions in response to certain issues or social conditions.⁹⁹ They state that, “The dialectical model of the black church is helpful in explaining the pluralism and the plurality of views that exist in black churches and black communities.”¹⁰⁰

Such pluralism and plurality exist because of the complexity of black Christian identity noted earlier. The multiple and sometimes conflicting identities that African Americans are able to hold in tension include factors of ethnicity, gender, sexuality, class, culture, and theological expression, among others. Lincoln and Mamiya argue that most studies of the black community ignore the contributions of their religious background to black economic mobility and development. Consequently, they examine several

⁹⁶ Lincoln & Mamiya, *Black Church in the African American Experience*, 11.

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, 11-12.

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, 15.

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, 15.

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, 16.

dimensions of the black church's contribution to economic development, past and present, and highlight various contradictions that exist between economics, race, and religion in the United States. They begin their analysis of these contradictions and interconnections by tracing the historical origins of the black economic experience in America, beginning with slavery, and followed by unofficial shutting off (terrorism by white supremacist groups such as the KKK through lynching, castration, rape, and other brutal behavior) as well as official shutting off (such as by Jim Crow laws) of African Americans from mainstream social, political, and economic relations in the United States. Further contradictions between race, religion, and economics include the link between physiological characteristics and economics.

The physiological characteristics of Africans in America became the "basis for the intertwining of race and economics and development of a racial caste system in the U.S."¹⁰¹ This association of physiological characteristics with socioeconomic status was merely the beginning of the historical legacy of the close association of color and economic well being in the United States. From the beginnings of the racial caste system instituted under the slavocracy in the South to the current situation in which most African Americans find themselves, they continue to lag behind their white counterparts in key socioeconomic indicators of well being.¹⁰²

Stephanie Mitchem, author of *Name It Claim It? Prosperity Preaching in the Black Church*, argues unsurprisingly that the experience of African Americans in a racialized society in which color and economic well being historically have been

¹⁰¹ Ibid., 238.

¹⁰² Marcellus Andrews, *The Political Economy of Hope and Fear: Capitalism and the Black Condition in America*, (New York: New York University Press, 1999), 26; See also: Melvin L. Oliver and Thomas M. Shapiro, *White Wealth, Black Wealth: A New Perspective on Racial Inequality*, (New York: Routledge, 2006); Baer and Jones, *African Americans in the South*.

intertwined has shaped a spirituality of longing.¹⁰³ She posits that African Americans have experienced longing since being brought as slaves to the New World. This longing is expressed in various ways, and though it is not limited to economic participation and success,¹⁰⁴ these nonetheless loom large because of the way financial realities have dominated and shaped the relationships that African Americans have experienced with the dominant culture.¹⁰⁵ “Black people do not just long for work, but for meaningful work for which they are justly compensated.”¹⁰⁶

During slavery African Americans longed for freedom; once freed, they longed for full inclusion and acceptance in mainstream society. Since social exclusion continues to be normative particularly for the black working and ‘underclass’, Mitchem contends that African Americans continue to long for success and social acceptance:

Control and autonomy are missing from most black Americans’ lives. ...Black lives that are enrolled in a regular regimen of confusion and pain need a spirituality that imbues hope in the promises [covenantal promise of the loving God of Christianity] and make sense of the inconsistencies.¹⁰⁷

Hence, the black preacher has historically taken up the responsibility of “re-visioning the cognitive dissonances that occur between lived realities and the promise of American society.”¹⁰⁸

¹⁰³ Mitchem states that, “Spirituality is a way of being in the world. ...[It] is not controlled by any denomination or religious tradition, although each organized religion can identify its own unique flavor of encountering and defining the spiritual. ...Spirituality may be tied to a Divine Being or to the earth...[it] is experienced and recognized in different ways over a person’s lifetime. Because humans experience it spirituality will necessarily reflect cultures and nationalities and gender and class.” See Stephanie Mitchem, *Name It and Claim It? Prosperity Preaching in the Black Church*, (Cleveland: Pilgrim Press, 2007), 30.

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, 32.

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, 33.

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid.* Mitchem makes a scathing critique that “theologies of glitz and publicized piety that capitalize on the fear and pain of people too long denied.” However, there is something these prosperity theologies are offering to African Americans who subscribe to them that seems to satisfy some longing(s). This doctrine thus deserves further examination.

Lincoln and Mamiya contend that, “Since economic values are both primary and predominant in American society, and are commonly used to determine social relations and social status, the most severe forms of racial discrimination against black people have been economic in character.”¹⁰⁹ The authors trace the labor history of Blacks in America to provide support for such a claim. They trace African Americans’ movement from free slave labor into an exploitative system of sharecropping post-slavery, and into an industrial economy where Blacks, trapped in the ‘lowest occupational strata,’ experienced further exploitation. DuBois captures this historical reality in a narrative.

‘We give you people work and if we didn’t, how would you live?’ The speaker was a southern white man. We give you people work, and if we didn’t, how would you live?’

And then the old and rather ragged black man arose in the back of the church and came slowly forward and as he came, he said: ‘And we gives you home; and we gives you cotton; and we makes your land worth money; and we waits on you and gets your meals and cleans up your dirt. If we didn’t do all those things for you, how would you live?’

‘I think we ought to give you fair wages,’ stammered the white man, ‘And that ain’t all,’ continued the old black man, ‘we ought to have something to say about your wages. Because if what *you* gives us gives you a right to say what we ought to get, then what *we* gives you gives *us* a right to say what *you* ought to get; and we’re going to take that right *some day*.’

The white man blustered: ‘That’s Bolshevism!’ he shouted. And then church broke up.¹¹⁰

With a legacy of slavery, the descendents of these individuals who were considered to be mere chattel have historically held the position of exploited laborers in the Americas, performing tasks historically performed by slaves, as DuBois notes, a despised race fulfilling duties of a despised calling.¹¹¹ The employment status of African Americans has been significant for various reasons, particularly because of the

¹⁰⁹ Lincoln and Mamiya, *The Black Church in the African American Experience*, 238.

¹¹⁰ Zuckerman, ed. *The Social Theory of W. E. B. DuBois*, (Thousand Oaks, California: Pine Forge Press, 2004), 125.

¹¹¹ *Ibid.*, 113.

relationship between labor, economics, and politics and the fundamental role of labor in social life.¹¹²

In the twentieth century, economic mobility and therefore the labor of African Americans began to change. Whereas in 1890 90% of the black population lived in the South, particularly the rural Black Belt, by the latter part of the twentieth century, one third of the African American population had attained middle-class status and over 80 percent lived in urban areas.¹¹³ However, despite the socio-economic gains, economic inequality has persisted, even into the twenty-first century. This coincidence of race and economics in the United States is captured by Lincoln and Mamiya's assertion that,

High rates of poverty, unemployment and underemployment [is] found among black people in both urban and rural areas. Economic discrimination based on race [is] also accompanied by the subtle institutional violence of residential segregation, poor housing, deficient schools, hunger, malnutrition, and higher rates of infant mortality.¹¹⁴

As well as race, labor, and politics, gender oppression also assaulted black personhood. Marla Fredrick argues that the fact that black women have done “the hardest, most demeaning work and receive the least credit or compensation, figures increasingly in criticisms of divisions of labor in the United States.”¹¹⁵ She notes how high-risk, high-production industries have grown most in areas of semi- to low-skilled workers.¹¹⁶ One can therefore trace the pattern of movement of these types of industries from inner cities to rural and small towns in the Midwest and South and currently, to underdeveloped countries. Thus, poor women of color have few options besides dangerous work with

¹¹² Ibid.

¹¹³ Ibid., 9.

¹¹⁴ Ibid., 239.

¹¹⁵ Marla Frederick, *Between Sundays: Black Women and Everyday Struggles of Faith*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003), 51.

¹¹⁶ Ibid., 52.

few opportunities for upward mobility and wages to sustain themselves and their families above poverty level. The values of these women—the way they have perceived and have valued their work and how this work has been (de)valued by society—is also an important component of our discussion.

The matrix of race, religion, and economics is therefore complicated by class. Lincoln and Mamiya argue that the growing class bifurcation within the black community has led to the existence of two black Americas, or ‘two nations within a nation’. Black churches have increasingly become middle-class institutions. Like middle-class black individuals, these churches are finding themselves increasingly estranged from their poor and working-poor counterparts. This class stratification has implications for the ethos, social cohesion, and the economic, political, and social future of the black community. Another dynamic within the rural South that complicates this matrix of race, religion, and economics is the migration of African Americans back into these rural communities after having lived in the North or other regions of the U.S. for several decades. Even though many of these adults are originally from the rural South, they inevitably return to the South with new perspectives, new ideas, and often very different experiences than those who have remained in these areas all the while.¹¹⁷ In their report, *The State of the South*, MDC, Inc.¹¹⁸ notes the population change that has occurred in the South, especially among African Americans. “By the millions, people now move to the South, instead of away from it. ...Especially notable, from the standpoint of history, is the complete reversal of the ‘Great Migration’ of Blacks out of the South: more black Americans now

¹¹⁷ See Carol Stack, *A Call to Home*.

¹¹⁸ MDC, Inc. is a nonprofit organization that works to address systematic causes of poverty, issues of economic exclusion, discrimination and increase economic opportunity in the South.

move to the South than any other region.”¹¹⁹ What is significant about this migration is that those moving back are more educated and come back with skills and resources that may contribute to community development.

Studies on rural community development note that the influx of individuals back into areas with stagnant economies can have a positive influence on the community in terms of community development. During my field research, I met several African American women and men who had moved away to pursue educational or career goals and now return upon retirement or to help take care of an ailing or elderly relative. These individuals were typically professionals or entrepreneurs. Upon return, they encounter great challenges as there are few employment opportunities and a small customer base for their businesses. These individuals quickly begin to see the need for addressing issues of economic justice, and they realize that in many rural Black Belt counties the black church is one of few institutions that has the interest or wherewithal to do so.

In my analysis of the relationship between identity and response to economic justice in the rural southern Black Belt, I will build on Lincoln and Mamiya’s sketch of an economic ethic of the black church with its dialectical tension between the survivalist and liberationist poles. I intend to go beyond an eagle eye’s view of this dialectical tension and put into dialogue with one another several ways in which the black church has engaged issues of economic justice. I will put the self help/social uplift tradition in conversation with black liberation theology, and prosperity gospel within the post-Civil Rights era black church. Of these various models within the current conversation about economic justice and the black church, none give adequate attention to the rural

¹¹⁹ MDC Inc., *The State of the South*, 2007. See also, Carol Stack, *Call to Home*; William Falk, et al., “Return Migrations of African Americans to the South: Reclaiming a Land of Promise, Going Home or Both?” in *Rural Sociology*, 69, no.4 (December 2004): 490-509.

experience. I will explore the different ways rural southern African Americans in the post-Civil Rights era are thinking in terms of this link between economic justice (to which poverty is central) and black Christian identity.

1.2.b Response to Issues of Economic Justice: Accommodation and Liberation

Baer and Singer argue that “African American religion often exhibited an accommodative dimension by attempting to create an acquiescent space for Blacks in a racist society...,”¹²⁰ However, it also acted as a form of self-expression and resistance to white-dominated society.¹²¹ Much of the impetus behind the accommodationist tradition within black religion is survival. The survivalist stream within the black religious tradition is the historical predecessor to liberation and Self-help/Social uplift traditions. Wilmore acknowledges the significance of survival in arguing that social uplift and liberation arise only after successful survival. He states that,

The people could not concern themselves with [elevation] until they first learned how to stay alive. Of course, elevationism was grounded in the will to live, but it rose above the constraining and pessimistic attitudes of slavery and established itself on the higher ground of individual and group improvement, the search for moral rectitude, and disinterested benevolence.¹²²

Lincoln and Mamiya state that black people got by through “survivin’ one day at a time”. Survival meant eking out a living by whatever means possible. It meant staying alive “until my chance comes” Studies of extremely poor black people have shown that,

¹²⁰ Baer and Singer, *African American Religion: Varieties of Accommodation and Resistance*, (Knoxville: The University of Tennessee Press, 2002), x.

¹²¹ Ibid.

¹²² Wilmore, Gayraud S., *Black Religion and Black Radicalism: An Interpretation of the Religious History of African Americans*, (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1998), 270.

[Many of them] relied upon an extended kinship network, of real and fictive kin. Kin relations frequently provided the only real safety net that they knew, from borrowing and lending money, moving in with kinfolk during times of crises, and relying upon kin for surrogate child-care while parents worked. Nevertheless, as important as the stage of survival economics was for poor people, it was inevitably marked by extreme dependency, uncertainty, and insecurity.¹²³

Henry H. Mitchell notes in his work, *Black Church Beginnings*, the origins of these fictive kinship networks within the black community. He claims that early displays of social responsibility by slaves and freed persons of African descent were rooted in an ethic of social responsibility for the needy. He argues that the African American belief system which supported this reception of responsibility for the needy was traceable to ethnic and religious roots, as opposed to popular social theories.¹²⁴ Mitchell states that, “The call to which they responded was from the church as extended family. The common pattern of using familial titles such as brother and sister came from the ethnic roots in those same extended family communities in Africa.”¹²⁵ He not only traces back to African and Christian roots this ethic of social responsibility to the needy evident within the survival tradition of African Americans; he also traces back to those same roots other liberating activities such as anti-slavery campaigns, educational crusades for masses of freed slaves throughout the South, and the deep-seated belief in social justice.

Gayraud Wilmore notes that while black Christianity has its roots in White Christianity, many of the African Americans were forced, by the ‘hardness of life’ to invent a religion of their own, a religion of survival.¹²⁶ He argues that the liberation and social elevation or uplift traditions, “began with the determination to survive, but they go

¹²³ Lincoln and Mamiya, *Black Church in the African American Experience*, 241.

¹²⁴ Henry H. Mitchell, *Black Church Beginnings: The Long-Hidden Realities of the First Years*, (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2004), 137.

¹²⁵ Ibid

¹²⁶ Wilmore, *Black Religion and Black Radicalism*, 270.

beyond ‘make do’ to ‘do more’, and from ‘do more’ to ‘freedom now’ and ‘black power’. This survivalist tradition was extremely important for individuals; moving from the survivalist to the liberation tradition meant moving from “just makin’ it” to a broader vision of life, human agency, and social structures. These are phenomena with which the liberation tradition is concerned, particularly regarding economic activity.

While the binary poles of accommodation and resistance or liberation are viewed mainly in terms of racism, they can also be viewed in terms of economic activity. For instance, the nature of the black church’s engagement with economic justice is mirrored in its functioning as an institution that has historically remained the most economically independent institutional sector in the black community.¹²⁷ It has “...taken part in the financial and economic transactions of the larger society and has largely accepted capitalism as an economic system.”¹²⁸

It is understandable then that the black church has historically played a significant role in shaping the economic thinking of its members. In Lincoln and Mamiya’s discussion of the historically multifaceted economic role of black churches and clergy,¹²⁹ they refer to the black church as the “cultural broker for the ethic of economic rationality” within the black community.¹³⁰ The authors note that, “Rather than challenging the basis of American capitalism, most black people and their churches wanted to be a part of it.”¹³¹ They observe that,

The final and most crucial challenge facing the black church is to decide what kind of economic system would best serve the needs of everyone, with justice,

¹²⁷ Lincoln and Mamiya, *Black Church in the African American Experience*, 241.

¹²⁸ *Ibid.*

¹²⁹ *Ibid.*, 247.

¹³⁰ *Ibid.*, 244.

¹³¹ *Ibid.*, 247.

equity, and fairness in the twenty-first century. Thus far, black churches have accepted the American political economy of capitalism ‘as is’...¹³²

This acceptance has been viewed as problematic, given: 1) the historical link between color and well being that exists in society,¹³³ and 2) the problems cited by various social scientists with the basic assumptions of neoclassical economics which underlie the ethic of economic rationality buttressing modern post-industrial capitalism.¹³⁴

Although I have here reduced economic engagement to simplistic categorizations, an examination of these binary tensions of accommodation and liberation/resistance can yield insight into the church’s role in the economic life of African Americans. I follow in the vein of Lincoln and Mamiya who argue that the economic ethic of the black church involves a dialectical tension between the two poles of survival and liberation traditions.

¹³² Ibid., 271.

¹³³ See Patricia Hill Collins, “African-American Women and Economic Justice: A Preliminary Analysis of Wealth, Family and African-American Social Class,” in *University of Cincinnati Law Review* 65 (1997): 825-852; Oliver and Shapiro, *Black Wealth/White Wealth*; Marcellus Andrews, *Political Economy of Hope and Fear*; and Cornel West, *Race Matters*, (New York: Vintage Books, 2001).

¹³⁴ See Michael Zweig, ed., *Religion and Economic Justice*, (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1991); Allen Buchanan, *Ethics, Efficiency and the Market*, (Totowa, New Jersey: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 1988); Cobb and Daly, *For the Common Good*; Marcus Braybrooke & Kamran Mofid, *Promoting the Common Good: Bringing Economics and Theology Together Again*, (London: Shephard-Walwyn Ltd., 2005); Amartya Sen, *On Ethics and Economics*, (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1987). Zweig cites several factors that he claims prevents mainstream economics from capturing and illuminating important economic realities and by doing so keep it from contributing to the project of economic justice and social change. These factors include: 1) The static nature of mainstream economics. The world is dynamic, however, economic models upon which forecasts and policies are based are held constant. In reality, things are in constant flux. Thus the method of comparing the outcome of static states is incapable of analyzing structural change (22); 2) The ahistoric nature of mainstream neoclassical economics. Economic structures are taken as given, a characteristic, according to Zweig that renders it ineffective in social analysis; 3) The assumption of rationality of the economic agent, as if this is the only factor that is used in economic choice. Also related to the moral anthropology of the ‘*homo economicus*’, Cobb and Daly highlight the problem with the assumption of individualism that is inherent in this notion of the ‘economic man’. It assumes self-interested behavior, leaving little room for fairness, benevolence, or any other moral concern. Cobb and Daly argue that in actuality, ‘economic man’ is actually a person-in-community, socially embedded in interdependent social networks. They contend that, “The fundamental individualism of economics is evident in its insistence on reducing all value to individual’s willingness to pay, rather than to any organic notion of commonwealth or public interest.” (52) See Herman E. Daly and John B. Cobb, Jr., *For the Common Good: Redirecting the Economy toward Community, the Environment, and a Sustainable Future*, (Boston: Beacon Press, 1989).

The liberationist strand within the black church has resulted in a change away from the perception of the black church as providing an avenue for escape through otherworldly theology, to an appreciation of its power to resist social, political, and economic structures of oppression. This liberation stream in black religious experience, according to Lincoln and Mamiya,

...emphasizes self-determination, dignity and a pride in the African and African American heritage and institutions. This liberation perspective tends to be critical of those economic aspects of the capitalist system that tends to dehumanize and oppress people.”¹³⁵

The survival and liberation traditions within the black church therefore connect with differing forms of black political activism and communal responses to economic injustice as we see in the work of black religious scholars such as Wilmore, Lincoln and Mamiya, Billingsley, Harris, Paris, and others¹³⁶.

The third tradition within black religious experience, Self-help/Social Uplift, grows out of the survivalist tradition. Wilmore argues that, “The centrality of the idea of self-improvement, uplift, the ‘advancement of colored people’, or elevation, is evident in much of the literature of the slave and free African Americans in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.”¹³⁷ The idea of uplift and elevation is closely connected to the vocation of the African American church. While African American masses were reeling from Jim Crow and America’s retraction of the promises of Reconstruction, the women

¹³⁵ Ibid.

¹³⁶ See Peter J. Paris, *The Social Teaching of Black Churches*; R. Drew Smith, ed., *New Day Begun: African American Churches and Civic Culture in Post-Civil Rights America*, (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003); Frederick C. Harris, *Something Within: Religion in African American Political Activism*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999); Andrew Billingsley, *Mighty Like a River: The Black Church and Social Reform*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999); C. Eric Lincoln and Lawrence H. Mamiya, *The Black Church in the African American Experience*; Wilmore, *Black Religion and Black Radicalism*; Samuel K. Roberts, *African American Christian Ethics*, (Cleveland, Ohio: The Pilgrim Press, 2001).

¹³⁷ Gayraud S. Wilmore, *Black Religion and Black Radicalism*, 262.

of the black church were working for self determination and social uplift. However, the historical figure who is most associated with the tradition of self help and social uplift, particularly in the rural South, is Booker T. Washington. He is a most significant figure in my study area, Macon County, where he and George Washington Carver are credited for revolutionizing agriculture and instilling the ideals of moral elevation, self help and self determination in the black populace. Elevation believed Washington, came through industrial education. The “great accommodationist,” Booker T. Washington,

[e]nunciated what almost all black religious leaders believed in both the South and the North: that rather than depend upon the political process to redress their grievances, blacks needed to get off their knees and elevate themselves morally, spiritually, and especially economically. Only then would God help them to help themselves and white America would relieve them of the onus of second-class citizenship.¹³⁸

Washington, considered a national leader of African Americans, with his accommodationist economic and social views and conservative political views, advocated racial solidarity and essentially, black capitalism (group economic unity and “Negro support of Negro business”) as a means to achieving economic progress and uplift for poor rural blacks.¹³⁹ He extolled the values of the Protestant work ethic in his gospel of wealth and he understood economic prosperity, land ownership, and morality to be the ways that African Americans would come to be accepted by white society. For Washington, wealth and possessions were evidence of certain virtuous characteristics. In

¹³⁸ Ibid., 266; See also, Booker T. Washington, *Working With the Hands*, (New York: Doubleday, Page & Company, 1904).

¹³⁹ Lincoln and Mamiya, *Black Church in African American Experience*, 247; See also Booker T. Washington, *The Negro in Business*, (New York, AMS Press, 1971); W. Fitzhugh Brundage, ed., *Booker T. Washington and Black Progress: Up From Slavery 100 Years Later*, (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2003); Cary D. Wintz, ed., *African American Political Thought 1890-1930: Washington, DuBois, Garvey, and Randolph*, (Armonk, New York: M. E. Sharpe, Inc., 1996); Booker T. Washington, *Character Building*, (New York: Doubleday, Page & Company, 1902).

an article in the *Tuskegee Student* in 1901, Washington extols the virtues that wealth and material possessions signify,

There are visible signs of civilization and strength which the world demands that each individual or race exhibit before it is taken seriously into consideration in the affairs of the world. Unless these visible evidences of ability and strength are forthcoming, mere abstract talking and mere claiming of 'rights' amount to little. ...Let us see what is back of material possession. ...possession of property is an evidence of mental discipline, mental grasp and control. It is evidence of self-sacrifice,...economy...thrift and industry. It is evidence of fixedness of character and purpose...of interest in pure and intelligent government. ...there is but one way for the Negro to get up and that is for him to pay the cost, and when he has paid the cost—when he has paid the price of his freedom—it will appear in the beautiful, well-kept home, in the increasing bank account, in the farm, and crops that are free from debt, in ownership of railroad and municipal stocks and bonds (and he who owns the majority of stock in a railroad will not have to ride in a 'Jim Crow car'), ...in the absence of superficial display. ...These are a few of the universal and indisputable signs of the highest civilization, and the Negro must possess them or be debarred. All mere abstract talk about the possibility of possessing them...counts for little.¹⁴⁰

Indeed, for Washington, economic independence was the way to social equality and attainment of political rights, not agitation. In a speech to the National Afro-American Council in 1903, he argues against political protest and for economic development. He says,

Let us not forget to lay the greatest stress upon the [economic] opportunities open to us, especially here in the South, for constructive growth in labor, in business and education. Back of all complaint, all denunciation, must be evidences of character and economic foundation. An inch of progress is worth more than a yard of complaint.¹⁴¹

Washington not only extolled the virtues of economic progress for its obvious reasons of helping to lift masses of African Americans out of economic deprivation, he also knew that this gradualist approach to social change was a safer option than political protest.

¹⁴⁰ Cary D. Wintz, ed., *African American Political Thought*, 42.

¹⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 50.

The political strategy of agitation was dangerous during the time that Washington lived, a time marred by the proliferation of racial violence and widespread fear throughout the white community in the South. The fears of whites were fueled by stereotypes of African Americans as inferior, savages, sensual fiends who intensely hated the white race and could attack them “with wild demoniacal fury at any moment”¹⁴². Whites also feared competition of Negroes, enforced social equality, political domination, and losing black labor. “Washington saw that white fears were a threat constantly on the verge of explosion, and they had to be abated or at least controlled if blacks were to make progress.”¹⁴³ He believed that aggressive black action would only exacerbate these fears. He therefore portrayed blacks not as a menacing burden to society but as allies. He often linked the economic success of the Negro to the economic success of the South. He argues,

The Negro...constitutes the most compact, reliable, and peaceful element of labor; one which is almost the sole dependence for production in certain directions; ...if for no other reason than the economic one, people will see that it is worth while to keep so large an element of labor happy, contented, and prosperous, by surrounding and guarding it with every protection and encouragement of the laws. In the long run, nothing is more costly and unsatisfactory than discontented, unhappy, and restless labor. Few people are wise enough to learn the economic value of justice.¹⁴⁴

Countless comparisons are made between Washington and DuBois, who represent two dominant strands within black economic and political thought. DuBois was actually not very different from Washington regarding economic thinking early on in his career. He,

¹⁴² Robert J. Norrell, “Another Look at the Age of Booker T. Washington” in , *Booker T. Washington and Black Progress: Up From Slavery 100 Years Later*, ed. W. Fitzhugh Brundage, (Gainesville, Florida: University Press of Florida, 2003), 60.

¹⁴³ Robert J. Norrell, *Up From History: The Life of Booker T. Washington*, (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2009), 424.

¹⁴⁴ Norrell, “Another Look at the Age of Booker T. Washington,” 50

like Washington advocated and looked to economic development, economic independence and self help/social uplift as the means to black progress, however, with increasing racial violence and the recalcitrance of Southern white supremacy in the late nineteenth century, he lost hope in Washington's gradualist strategy. He increasingly began to advocate socialism as an economic and political strategy for black progress, later embracing more radical Marxist theory. DuBois also stood in opposition to Washington's industrial education. He believed that Washington's commitment to this type of education was failing to prepare African Americans for the economic and political realities they would face in the twentieth century. The Northern born, Harvard educated DuBois was an intellectual who believed that a cadre of black leaders would lead the way to racial uplift. He employed a wide range of social, economic, political and psychological theories in strategies to address the African American experience in a hostile America.¹⁴⁵ DuBois brought not only Marxist theory but pan-Africanism and nationalism to bear on the racial debate in the late nineteenth century. Scholars often refer to DuBois as a man before his time; Washington, by contrast, was very much a man of his time, his Victorian sensibilities and "conservative" political views were very much a product of his socio-historical and cultural context. As a son of the South and former slave, unlike DuBois, Washington spoke to the "90 percent" that DuBois' theory of the talented tenth would leave behind. In a speech at the Washington, D.C. Conference on the Race Problem in the United States, Washington argues that,

...the great body of our people live in the South. There are eight millions and more of us down there, and the problem is there. [There are] those who are striving for better conditions right there in the South. There are some who, at all hazards, mean to remain there. If they suffer, they mean to remain there—right there in the heart of the South—as long as the bulk of our people are there....I

¹⁴⁵ Wintz, *African American Political Thought*, xii.

“speak as one who was born in the South, who loves it, and expects to abide there permanently...”¹⁴⁶

That is what Washington did, in the South, he lived a life dedicated to addressing the challenges of the black masses—the 90 percent. He advocated for social justice, enfranchisement, and against lynching, but he is remembered more for his embodiment of the SHSU heritage of the black church, as the one who encouraged the masses of poor black southerners to cast down their buckets where they were and gain economic independence. Washington is representative of the accommodationist stream within the black religious economic ethic, while DuBois is more representative of the liberationist/resistant stream. These historical figures have been highlighted in this section because they serve somewhat as representatives of the tension within the black church’s historical engagement with economic justice.

1.2.b.i Summary: Response to Issues of Economic Justice

This next section suggests a continuum along which to understand the black church’s engagement with economic justice. The traditions of survival, self-help/social uplift, prosperity gospel, and black liberation all deal with economic justice issues, yet each defines and approaches these issues differently. For example, the way poverty is understood in the prosperity gospel tradition in relation to black liberation has implications for how economic justice is engaged. Because poverty is understood to be a “curse”, or a result of wrong thinking and “confessing” and therefore having supernatural or individualistic origins, engagement with economic justice will be virtually nonexistent,

¹⁴⁶ Wintz, *African American Political Thought*, 46-47.

one must contend with spiritual forces or with one's own thinking and confessing. Whereas in the black liberation tradition poverty is understood to have origins in structural phenomena, power relations, and the type of engagement stressed is redistribution of resources and power and push for economic democracy.

At one extreme of the continuum is the survival tradition and the opposite end is liberation. The self help/social uplift tradition falls between the two extremes. These traditions, which are dominant modes of engagement with economic justice, are also represented within various congregations whose modes of engagement or current ethical framings for black economic activity fall at different points on the continuum.

This applies also to the churches I studied in Macon County. What is determinative of where they fall on the continuum is the churches' underlying understandings of: 1) the role of justice within their theological understanding; 2) the relationship between individual and community; 3) the relationship between church and community; and 4) poverty and the Church's responsibility to the poor. At one end of the continuum is the liberationist stream in the black church tradition; at the opposite end the survivalist tradition. The poles of survival and liberation are also parallel to the poles of charity and justice which characterize the churches' actions with respect to economic justice.

These liberationist and survivalist traditions shape the black church as both a social and religious institution, as having to attend to both the material and spiritual needs of a socially, economically, and politically marginalized community. Paris characterizes

this dual loyalty to serving the needs of the race and to serving God as a moral conflict within the black church.¹⁴⁷

On the one hand, black churches have been race institutions, always working in the interest of the race by preaching freedom, civil rights, temperance, and industry. On the other hand, however the churches have been religious institutions with a strong sense of obligation to be faithful to the Redeemer, whom they worshiped as the source of ultimate truth and whose eschatological vision they employed as their criterion for social criticism.¹⁴⁸

According to Paris, aggressive action for justice has always been tantamount to serving the needs of the race. "...Zealous action on behalf of truth has traditionally characterized the nature of their preaching and worship, the substance of which has been for them the source of social justice."¹⁴⁹ Therefore, justice has been viewed as the will of the Redeemer.¹⁵⁰

The ethical imperative of social justice has justified the historical activity of black churches on behalf of its oppressed constituency. Although black churches adopted the theology of white churches, the liberationist streams within black theological and ethical thought shifted theological and ethical reflection from the experience of the abstract human subject to a reflection on the experience of oppressed groups. There was also a shift from the emphasis upon the interior process of the spiritual redemption of the soul and eschatological salvation to the exterior process of concrete emancipation of oppressed people from earthly suffering and unjust structures of oppression.¹⁵¹

Liberationist strands of theological and ethical thought characterize various religious

¹⁴⁷ Paris, *Social Teachings*, 74.

¹⁴⁸ Ibid.

¹⁴⁹ Ibid.

¹⁵⁰ Ibid.

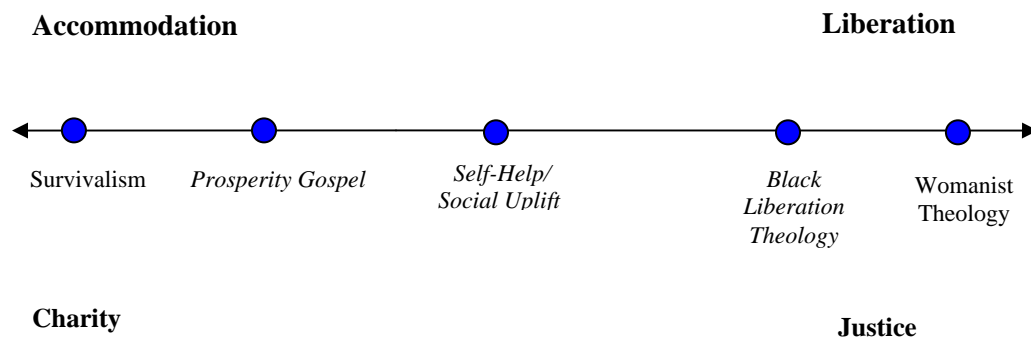
¹⁵¹ See Dwight N. Hopkins, *Heart and Head: Black Theology Past, Present and Future*, (New York: Palgrave, 2002); Zweig, "Economics and Liberation Theology"; Cone, *A Black Theology of Liberation*; Wilmore, *Black Religion and Black Radicalism*.

expressions that emerged within the black religious experience in America. Other religious expressions that emerged as an outgrowth of liberationist and self-help/social uplift streams within the black church tradition include movements such as Marcus Garvey's United Negro Improvement Association (UNIA), the Nation of Islam, Hebrew Israelites, and other pan-Africanist expressions of the black religious tradition in America. These movements are rooted in the Social Uplift Self-Help tradition within the black church. The SHSU, as the bedrock tradition, is represented at the center of the continuum.

Black religious institutions' engagement with economic justice are theological traditions within the black Church that overlap and represent the tensions between survival and liberation. Also corresponding to these extremes of the continuum are charity and justice which also characterize the ethical and theological tradition of the black church. All three traditions have to do with 'making and keeping life human'. They are basic to African American life and culture and intertwined in complex ways throughout the history of the diaspora.¹⁵² What follows is a brief overview of each predominant form of engagement on the continuum.

¹⁵² Ibid.

Figure 1: Continuum of Engagement with Economic Justice



1.2.b.ii Self Help and Social Uplift

Among the first black independent economic institutions in the United States were black churches. Within black religious institutions, the cultural values of freedom, self help, and self determination were espoused. The day-to-day survival of individuals was the impetus for a majority of the economic activity in the early black church. African American religious institutions during slavery, both formal and informal, not only met spiritual needs of individuals but served as an important function of organization and mobilization for mutual aid, social activism, and civil impact on behalf of economically, socially, and politically oppressed African Americans. The leaders or members of churches were active in abolitionist and civil rights movements, fighting for

freedom, particularly for political and economic rights. They also organized and provided leadership for voluntary associations of mutual aid.

From post-emancipation until today, black churches have continued to spawn many black owned enterprises, entrepreneurial activity which has been at the heart of the longstanding Community and Economic Development Movement (CEDM) within the black religious experience. Upon individuals' emancipation, black communities within the South usually grew up around these religious centers, and thus black churches were the first communal institutions within black communities.¹⁵³ Lincoln and Mamiya state that these churches, some of which were mutual aid-benefit societies, were attempts at creating moral communities that would spread the ethos of economic uplift and self-help.¹⁵⁴ The virtues and moral values espoused through the ethos of social uplift of the race and self help include: industry, thrift, discipline, sobriety, and long-term sublimation rather than immediate gratification¹⁵⁵; some underlying assumptions were: the privileging of work over leisure and idleness; work as a positive moral good; and the belief that the opportunity to work and achieve through work creates personal well-being.¹⁵⁶

One fundamental component of the Self help/social uplift tradition within the black church is the community economic development movement.¹⁵⁷ This movement has been a part of the self help/social uplift tradition of the black church for decades, dating

¹⁵³ See Lincoln and Mamiya, *The Black Church in the African American Experience*; Wilmore, *Black Religion and Black Radicalism*; Woodson, *The History of the Negro Church*; Mitchell, *The Black Church Beginnings*.

¹⁵⁴ Lincoln and Mamiya, *Black Church in the African American Experience*, 249.

¹⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 243.

¹⁵⁶ Joan Martin, *More than Chains and Toil*, 133.

¹⁵⁷ For the purposes of this research, community economic development will be defined as the outgrowth of the social action agenda of black churches aimed at alleviation of capability deprivations and promoting social cohesion (social cohesion in this context is understood as the active countering of the forces of social exclusion).

back to the mutual aid societies, some of which even predated the black church independence movement, and some of which became black churches themselves (for example, the Free African Society).

There have been multiple approaches to community economic development within the black church. Traditional approaches include entrepreneurial endeavors; and coordinating or facilitating development activities in a community (such as advocacy and educational roles of the church to improve the community's understanding of the development and planning process).¹⁵⁸ More contemporary approaches include specific action to confront or collaborate with governmental or private institutions to improve the physical, economic, and social conditions of a community.¹⁵⁹ During the initial phases of this movement in the Reconstruction era, the black community relied heavily on itself due to segregation and racial discrimination which placed responsibility for the 'Negro Problem' at the black church's doorstep. There was not as much emphasis on government support as there has been in the post-Civil Rights era black church—a phenomenon that has been spurred by several factors, including policies such as Charitable Choice¹⁶⁰ and the integration of African Americans into the mainstream of

¹⁵⁸ See Edward Blakely, *Planning Local Economic Development*, (Thousand Oaks, California: Sage Publications, 1994); Katie Day, *Prelude to Struggle: African American Clergy and Community Organizing for Economic Development in the 1990s*, (New York: University Press of America, 2002); Robert Clemtson and Roger Coates, *Restoring Broken Places and Rebuilding Communities: Casebook on African American Church Involvement in Community Economic Development*, (Washington, D.C.: National Congress for Community Economic Development, 1992); Veronica Adams-Cooper, "A Multi-Case Analysis of Factors Explaining the Implementation of Community Economic Development by Black Churches in Dayton, Ohio" (Ph.D. diss., Jackson State University, 2001); David Fasenfest, *Community Economic Development: Policy Development in the U.S. and U.K.*, (London: MacMillan Press, 1993).

¹⁵⁹ Michael L. Owens, *God and Government in the Ghetto: The Politics of Church-State Collaboration in Black America*, (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2007).

¹⁶⁰ Andrew Walsh argues that charitable choice slipped into the American public arena in 1996. The initiative was planted as a part of the Welfare Reform Act. The legislation authorized government agencies to accept applications for social service contracts from religious groups without requiring them to suppress many of their distinctive religious characteristics. See Andrew Walsh, ed., *Can Charitable Choice Work?*

American society. This historical entrepreneurial activity (which marks the self determination, social reform movement within black religious tradition) by clergy and congregations on behalf of their communities has played out in various ways in diverse communities within the independent black religious experience.

A good example of the SHSU tradition within the independent black religious experience is the African Methodist Episcopal Zion (AMEZ) Church. The earliest beginnings of the AMEZ church are marked with emphases on freedom, education, hard work, ownership, and the prosperity of individuals. Like many of the black denominations that evolved during the independent black church movement, the doctrines and social teachings of the this denomination embodies the self determination social reform ethos so prevalent within black religion during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. This self determination and elevation ethos played itself out in various ways within black religious experience in the U.S., some more radical, some less. One of the more radical ways in which this ethos has manifested itself is the black liberation tradition.

1.2.b.iii Black Liberation Theology

Cornel West refers to the black liberation theological tradition within black religious experience as the prophetic Christian tradition.¹⁶¹ He argues that this tradition evolved through four stages. The first stage he names black theology of liberation as a

Covering Religion's Impact on Urban Affairs and Social Services, (Hartford, Connecticut: Trinity College, 2001).

¹⁶¹ West outlines the evolution of this prophetic tradition—black liberation theology in his work, *Prophesy Deliverance! An Afro-American Revolutionary Christianity*, (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1982).

critique of slavery¹⁶² (1650-1863). The prophetic Christian view is that the gospel is unequivocally opposed to slavery, a view which led to various slave revolts.¹⁶³ The second stage, black theology of liberation as critique of institutional racism (1865-1969), focused attention on racist institutional structures in the United States that rendered African Americans politically powerless by denying them the right to vote or participate in government; it exploited them economically, leaving them in a dependent position as sharecroppers and unskilled laborers; it degraded them socially by segregating them in unequal facilities.¹⁶⁴ The third stage, black theology as a critique of white North American theology, is credited with the emergence of the first full-fledged academic expression of black liberation theology. However, its focus has been narrow, mainly on the failings of white North American theologians, West argues.¹⁶⁵ The fourth stage, which is the most significant for our analysis, is black theology of liberation as a critique of U.S. capitalism. This is a most pertinent stage in that it highlights one of the major deficiencies of the black church in reference to the characterization of the relationship between race, economics, and religion in America.

West suggests that the prevailing conception of a black theology of liberation is inadequate because there is little in the theological expression and in church practice that rejects American capitalism or recognizes its oppressive character in developing nations.¹⁶⁶ He thus argues that a new conception of black theology of liberation is

¹⁶² Ibid., 101.

¹⁶³ Ibid., 102.

¹⁶⁴ Ibid., 103.

¹⁶⁵ Ibid., 104.

¹⁶⁶ Ibid., 105.

needed, one that preserves the positive content of its earlier historical stages, overcomes its blindness, and elucidates its present challenges.¹⁶⁷

There has been a general neglect within the theological tradition and on the part of black leadership and clergy to deal specifically with the way in which the existing system of production and society was built upon and has perpetuated black oppression and exploitation.¹⁶⁸ Manning Marable echoes this sentiment, claiming that there have been no social programs developed by black politicians, leaders, or clergy which have effectively called for the structural or radical transformation of the inherently racist/capitalist state.¹⁶⁹ He further claims that the majority of black religious leaders from the mid-nineteenth to late twentieth centuries have been “pragmatic or accommodationist in their politics, integrationists, and at times, profoundly conservative.”¹⁷⁰

The problem within the black church is that the political and socioeconomic components of black liberation have seemed to have largely associated liberation with American middle class status. Therefore, “...black liberation amount[s] to racial equality before the law, equal opportunities in employment, education, and business, and economic parity with whites in median income.”¹⁷¹ The historical trend has been to equate liberation roughly with American middle-class status, leaving the unequal distribution of wealth relatively untouched and the capitalist system of production and its imperialist ventures intact.¹⁷² In this instance, liberation would consist of including black

¹⁶⁷ Ibid.

¹⁶⁸ Ibid., 111.

¹⁶⁹ Manning Marable, *How Capitalism Underdeveloped Black America: Problems in Race, Political Economy and Society*, (Boston: South End Press, 1983), 180.

¹⁷⁰ Ibid., 182.

¹⁷¹ West, *Prophesy Deliverance*, 112.

¹⁷² Ibid.

people within the mainstream of liberal capitalist America. Therefore West claims that if this is the social vision of black theologians, the term 'liberation' should be dropped and they should adopt the more accurate and sober word, 'inclusion'.¹⁷³

The deficiency of black religious and ethical thought has been the overemphasis on the phenomenon of racism, with all the validity it carries, to the exclusion of a critical analysis of the capitalist system that would allow transcendence of the notion of liberation as mere inclusion in the current exploitative political economy. West claims that theologians need to use social theory that relates the oppression of black people to the overall makeup of America's system of production, foreign policy, political arrangements, and cultural practices to correct for this deficiency. He also notes that,

Black theologians hardly mention wealth, power and influence of multinational corporations that monopolize production in the marketplace and prosper partially because of their dependence on public support in the form of government subsidies, free technological equipment, lucrative contracts, and sometimes even direct transfer payments. [They] do not stress the way in which corporate interests and government intermesh, usually resulting in policies favorable to the former. ...[Black theologians] often fall into the trap of assuming power in American society to be synonymous with receiving high wages. Marxist social criticism can be quite helpful at this point.¹⁷⁴

Black liberation theology serves as a resistant stream within the black religious tradition's economic ethics, faulting the black church for lack of criticism of the capitalistic economic rationality and its wholesale adoption of it. Whereas at the opposite end of the spectrum, there is the prosperity gospel tradition which is more representative of the accommodationist stream, and at first glance seems to have uncritically adopted capitalistic economic rationality. However, a closer look at it reveals that it is critical of the economic ethic of the black church. The criticism that this tradition has, though is not

¹⁷³ Ibid.

¹⁷⁴ Ibid., 113-114.

based on social scientific and theoretical analyses, which the liberation tradition advocates; its criticism of this ethic is based on what is perceived as its lack of “kingdom” principles of love, charity, honesty, integrity, etc.

1.2.b.iv Prosperity Gospel

The prosperity gospel itself takes various forms. The most popular forms of prosperity gospel found in the black church are thought to have their origins in the Word-Faith movement espoused and promoted by individuals such as Kenneth Hagin, Kenneth Copeland, and Fred Price. This movement is understood to have its origins in Neo-Pentecostalism¹⁷⁵ and nineteenth century New Thought cults.¹⁷⁶

It can be argued that some of the values of self help and social uplift have slowly given way to individualistic consumerism and materialism which pervade American culture and even churches themselves. As many African Americans moved further away from the black religious theological and ethical ideals grounded in the survival and liberation ethic in hope of a Christianity expressive of the existential situation of contemporary African American diversity, some have embraced doctrines such as those rooted in the prosperity gospel. Various forms of prosperity gospel have gained popularity among masses of African Americans in the U.S. This doctrine is broadly characterized by the promise of many material as well as spiritual benefits of being saved

¹⁷⁵ See Shayne Lee, *America's New Preacher: T.D. Jakes*, (New York: New York University Press, 2005). See also, Jonathan Walton, *Watch This! The Ethics and Aesthetics of Black Televangelism*, (New York: New York University Press, 2009).

¹⁷⁶ See D. R. McConnell, *A Different Gospel*, (Peabody, Massachusetts: Hendrickson Publishers, Inc., 1988).

and faith in God's desire to bestow financial prosperity upon Christians.¹⁷⁷ This perception, therefore, precludes the notion that poverty within communities and nations is systemic or structural. The phenomenon of the prosperity gospel also contributes to the alleged ambiguous politics of the black church, in the sense that this ambiguity is partly attributable to the diversity of theological commitments that are espoused by its various leaders and members. The various predominant theological commitments under study in this dissertation have one thing in common: they are all characterized by sexism. Their failure to be inclusive of the populace that comprises the majority of the black church membership should not go unheeded. The inattention to women and their indispensability to the functioning and existence of the black church, and the Euro-American and black male bias in the various theological commitments of the black church, are attended to through incorporation of a womanist critical consciousness.

1.2.c Gender: The Significance of Womanist Critical Consciousness

“If it wasn't for the women, you wouldn't have a church!”¹⁷⁸

The SHSU, prosperity gospel, and liberationist strands of theological and ethical thought that have characterized the various expressions of the black religious tradition in America have a significant limitation. Implicit in the notion of liberation and elevationism within the SHSU tradition is that it applies primarily to black men. While

¹⁷⁷ Milmon F. Harrison, *Righteous Riches: The Word of Faith Movement in Contemporary African American Religion*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 3.

¹⁷⁸ Cheryl Townsend Gilkes, *If It Wasn't for the Women: Black Women's Experience and Womanist Culture in Church and Community*, (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 2001), 1.

the prosperity gospel tradition within the black church does give a “place” to women, it is usually a supportive role, or if a leadership role is assumed it is under the ‘covering’ of an authority figure (such as “the man of God”). Women’s roles in the private sphere are valued, and if she is in the public sphere it is usually beside her man (who is considered to be the “head”) in a supportive role. In the struggle for liberation within the black church and community, women, a significant segment of the general population and the majority of the adherents within religious institutions, have historically been ignored. Likewise, the voices of womanist scholars remind us that black liberation and the gains of economic mobility and political progress from the liberation struggle are limited in scope. Liberation has been primarily for black men.¹⁷⁹ The voices of African American women have been muted due to the patriarchal social structure that the black church and community has mimicked from whites since its earliest inception in America.

Indeed, gender roles within the black community were shaped under slavery in the United States.¹⁸⁰ According to black feminist scholar, Patricia H. Collins, “...the convergence of race, class, and gender oppression characteristic of U.S slavery shaped all subsequent relationships that women of African descent had within black American families and communities, with employers, and among one another.”¹⁸¹ The tri-dimensional oppression of black women by racism, classism, and sexism was largely ignored and the plight of black women who face the multi-faceted dimensions of oppression of racism, sexism, classism, and heterosexism has been acknowledged by

¹⁷⁹ See Marable, *How Capitalism Underdeveloped Black America*; Jacquelyn Grant, “Womanist Theology: Black Women’s Experience as a Source”; and Kelly Brown-Douglass, “Womanist Theology: What Is Its Relationship To Black Theology?” in *Black Theology: A Documentary History*, vol. 2, eds., James H. Cone and Gayraud S. Wilmore, (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1993)

¹⁸⁰ Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment*, (New York: Routledge, 2000), 50.

¹⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 4.

black feminists and womanists who give voice to this silenced segment of the black community.

As various economic and social institutions with their significant civic impact developed within black community, this segment of the population that found itself continually marginalized due to its gender found themselves fighting intransigent structures of patriarchy within these black institutions. For instance, Lincoln and Mamiya note the paradox of the predominant female membership of church congregations and the exclusively male leadership. Along with womanist scholars, they illustrate the paradox of woman's work within the church; all of the programs of mutual aid, social uplift, and self determination which began in the church were supported by and succeeded because of women's work, which the women themselves perceived to be for the betterment of the race.¹⁸² Gilkes argues that, "Black women community activists and church women have a deep sense of their indispensability to the organizations and institutions in which they participate."¹⁸³ However, their indispensability has often been overlooked by leaders and men within social institutions. Furthermore, the issue of sexism in the black community is often overshadowed by the race problem.¹⁸⁴ "Racism in American society is so pervasive and controlling in the lives of African Americans that the problems of sexual discrimination often get considerably less attention."¹⁸⁵ The solution that black women sought to the problem of their marginalization was to form their own parallel organizations within black civil society, such as women's conventions within mainline black denominations and Negro women's clubs. An analysis that

¹⁸² Lincoln and Mamiya, *The Black Church in the African American Experience*, 275.

¹⁸³ Gilkes, *If It Wasn't*, 4.

¹⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, 307.

¹⁸⁵ *Ibid.*

includes a womanist critical consciousness is imperative in any work that is considering the issue of economic justice. Therefore, I perform a womanist critique of the predominant traditions.

1.2.d Summary: Black Ethical and Theological Tradition

The most basic theological and ethical underpinnings that have buttressed the historical responses of the black church to sustained racial discrimination and economic and political injustice were the survival and liberationist strands. However, the actual theological commitments and therefore responses to economic and social injustice of African Americans are diverse, falling along a continuum that ranges from the black theology of liberation tradition which relates the gospel of Jesus to the economic and social conditions of the people, to evangelicalism with an insular focus of personal salvation, personal piety, and individualism that pervades religiously conservative churches; to prosperity theology with its focus on anthropocentric prosperity that emphasizes health and wealth outweighing an emphasis on theocentric providence.¹⁸⁶

These are dominant paradigms of the church's engagement with economic justice that grow out of the broader black church tradition, none of which have analyzed the rural context rigorously. A responsible Black Christian Ethic of Economic Well Being would draw on these dominant models which have some competing values.¹⁸⁷ I am interested in what a Black Christian Ethic of Economic Well Being will look like in a rural setting,

¹⁸⁶ Ken L. Sarles, "A Theological Evaluation of the Prosperity Gospel," in *Bibliotheca Sacra* 143, no. 572, (1986): 329-352.

¹⁸⁷ For example, the liberation theology tradition has an emphasis on justice and community wherein prosperity gospel does not necessarily emphasize justice in the same way.

and so I am bringing together this review of dominant paradigms of a responsible black Christian economic ethic (self help/social uplift, under which the community and economic development movement in the post-Civil Rights era church falls; black liberation theology and prosperity theology/gospel) with a socio-historical analysis of the rural southern African American Christian experience and on the ground interviews of clergy and laity. My goal is to understand the challenges of a black Christian economic ethic that takes into account this rural southern context. I am interested in exploring how we can think about an appropriate Christian economic ethic in the reality of the southern rural African American context and whether the current ethical framings for black economic activity can explain this reality.

I understand the connection between the black church and economic justice activity as playing itself out on a continuum which relates individual and community responses to the issue of economic justice. As I critically engage how the three predominant traditions in the black religious experience engage issues of economic justice, the continuum serves as a heuristic device that allows one to see how these traditions respond in an actual social context. It demonstrates the prevailing values of historical and contemporary black religious experience, such as survival and liberation that exist within the traditions. The bedrock tradition of the black church—self help/social uplift—is at the center of continuum. At the end of this dissertation, I will flesh out this continuum, placing along it the churches under study according to their prevailing values regarding economic justice, for instance, their relationship to their community, and their understanding of their responsibility to the poor, etc. For this continuum can be adapted to fit actual congregations in any context. I will also articulate

a NeoSHSU framework, a construction based on the categorical and comparative theological-ethical analyses of the predominant forms of engagement with economic justice within the black religious experience, womanist criticism, and field data.

1.3 Outline of Dissertation

This introductory chapter explained important concepts for this study and outlined the framework for serious consideration of an economic ethic relevant to the rural African American experience. Chapter 2 begins a discussion of the American rural landscape, broadly, and the rural South in particular. This chapter provides an overview of the socio-historical context of the dissertation. I briefly discuss factors such as policies, migration patterns, and demographics that shape rural regions and describe the connection between race, religion, and economics in the rural South. Using the continuum as a frame for the discussion, Chapter 3 examines the predominant forms of the black church's engagement with economic justice, primarily through black liberation theology, prosperity gospel, and self help/social uplift traditions, laying the groundwork for Chapter 4 which puts in conversation the various forms of theological engagement of economic justice within the African American religious tradition. The significance of this chapter is not only its womanist critique, but also its mapping of the theological traditions on the continuum of engagement with economic justice. The traditions are mapped on the continuum according to their prevailing values regarding economic justice issues (for example, their understanding of poverty and their responsibility to the poor, or of the relationship between the church, community and individual, and the like). Chapter

5 discusses the results of my field research and begins to develop the framework for a Black Christian Ethic of Economic Well Being in the rural southern context. Included in this chapter is a description of the four case study churches which are then mapped onto the continuum. Chapter 6 is the concluding chapter of the dissertation where I develop in greater detail the sources, assumptions, and development of the BCEEWB from the intellectual tradition and read them in light of field data. This chapter concludes with a discussion of the limitations that become clear from the theological-ethical analysis and analysis of the mapping of churches on the continuum, and the construction of the NeoSHSU heritage framework as a revised approach to the SHSU heritage that pervades churches within my study site.

1.4 Conclusion

This chapter has provided the background to the challenge posed by the connection between race, religion, and economics in the rural southern Black Belt where there continues to be persistent poverty, declining economies, high unemployment, and high concentrations of African Americans. I have outlined the foundation for a black Christian economic ethic which builds upon the predominant forms of black church engagement of economic justice. I have highlighted the guiding principles of each of these predominant forms of engagement (black liberation, self help/social uplift, and prosperity gospel), providing the necessary background for the next chapter which examines the black church within the rural southern context, giving a broader historical account of this social institution's role in the region and the nation.

Chapter 2: Race, Religion, Economics and Region

We do have a great inheritance, but it can only be preserved and enhanced if the black church accepts its vocation to be the custodian and interpreter of what God has taught us ‘from the days when hope unborn had died.’ Because that lesson has to do with both spirituality and social transformation, it is a wider task than the institutional church can perform. Actually, what we have to preserve belongs not to the church but to black people as a whole.¹⁸⁸

This chapter explores the socio-historical framework of the black church in the rural southern context. It examines the place of the rural South in the broader context of rural America, beginning with a general discussion of rural poverty and its socio-economic causes and correlated factors, focusing on a particular correlated factor, racial inequality. This chapter also provides a brief explanation of factors such as policy and migration that influence the landscape of rural regions, along with a description of how poverty, race, religion, and region play out within this arena. Sketching the socio-historical context of rural black Christian economic ethics in this dissertation, the chapter moves from a general discussion of rural poverty to a discussion of poverty in the South. Next, it examines in broad strokes the interconnections between race, religion, and economics in the rural South. It concludes with a socio-historical description of the study area and a sociological description of the black church in the rural South generally and Macon County in particular.

¹⁸⁸ Gayraud S. Wilmore, “Spirituality and Social Transformation as the Vocation of the Black Church” in *Churches in Struggle: Liberation Theologies and Social change in North America*, ed., William K. Tabb, (New York: monthly Review Press, 1986), 252.

2.1 Overview of Poverty in Rural America

Poverty in rural places has historically gone largely unnoticed beyond its boundaries, outsiders preferring to think of rural areas with nostalgia as idyllic places where time seems to have stood still, where life is simpler and values and mores of a bygone era prevail. These places are perceived to have remained somehow ‘unspoiled’ by the individualism and fragmentation that characterize urban modern life. Rural places are valued for their natural amenities and their historical significance as areas from which we obtain our food supply, natural resources for fuel, water, and other raw materials needed to produce necessities of modern life. Poverty is not included in this picture of the simple life, and instead is assumed to occur only in urban industrial environments particularly those with large immigrant populations.¹⁸⁹

Regardless of the prevailing stereotypes of pristine bucolic life, rural areas are home to more of the chronically poor than are urban areas. The severity of rural poverty surpassed that of urban poverty in the 1950s, with over 33% rural residents in poverty compared to 18% in central cities¹⁹⁰. With increased economic growth and out migration from rural depressed economies, by the 1960s rural poverty had fallen in relation to urban poverty¹⁹¹, but rose again when the economic troubles of the late 1970s and early 80s

¹⁸⁹ Ann R. Tickamyer and Cynthia M. Duncan, “Poverty and Opportunity Structure,” in *Annual Review of Sociology*, 16 (1990), 69. See also David L. Brown and Louis E. Swanson, eds., *Challenges for Rural America in the Twenty-First Century*, (University Park, Pennsylvania: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2003); Ronald C. Wimberly and Libby V. Morris, “The Regionalization of Poverty: Assistance for the Black Belt South?” in *Southern Rural Sociology*, 18 (2002): 294-306; Leif Jensen, “At the Razor’s Edge: Building Hope for America’s Rural Poor”, in *Rural Realities*, 1 (Rural Sociological Society, 2006)

¹⁹⁰ See Tickamyer and Duncan, “Poverty and Opportunity Structure in Rural America”.

¹⁹¹ For example, the mass migration of African Americans from the South between 1910 and 1960 reached nearly 10 million.

brought new increases in rural poverty. Tickamyer and Duncan note that in the latter part of the twentieth century nonmetropolitan¹⁹² populations had proportionately more of the nation's poor,¹⁹³ and blacks and Hispanics are especially likely to be chronically poor.¹⁹⁴ There was, however, an improvement in nonmetro poverty rates at the cusp of the twenty-first century, following the period of economic expansion of the 1990s. During this period there were record rates of job creation and low unemployment; economic growth was recorded to have increased by 4 percent per year.¹⁹⁵ However, economic growth alone was not enough to reduce poverty long term,¹⁹⁶ and non-metro poverty continued to outpace poverty in metro areas,¹⁹⁷ and according to Jolliffe was much more acute in the South and the West.¹⁹⁸

¹⁹² For the purposes of this study, nonmetropolitan, nonmetro and rural will be used interchangeably. It should be noted however, that within many social scientific studies of rural and nonmetropolitan areas, there is an actual distinction in the census definition of these terms. Nonmetropolitan is often the terminology used to define rural America broadly in social scientific studies. However, the Census Bureau defines rural as areas of open country and settlements with a population of fewer than 2,500. Nonmetropolitan, on the other hand, is defined by the urban-rural continuum codes (see Appendix C). The continuum codes give greater detail that attests to the diversity of rural America. The definition of nonmetro according to these codes is based on a measurement of population and adjacency to a metropolitan area to help determine rurality. Using the most recent statistics, nonmetropolitan America is comprised of 2,052 counties, 75 percent of the nation's land and almost 20 percent of its population. (USDA, Economic Research Service, <http://www.ers.usda.gov/briefing/Rurality/RuralUrbCon/>)

¹⁹³ Tickamyer and Duncan state that, "communities located outside metropolitan areas had one fifth of the nation's population but one third of the poor." See Tickamyer and Duncan, "Poverty and Opportunity Structure in Rural America", 68.

¹⁹⁴ Edward Blakely and Ted K. Bradshaw, *Planning Local Economic Development*, (Thousand Oaks, California: Sage Publications, 1994), 20-21.

¹⁹⁵ Dean Jolliffe, "Rural Poverty at Record Low in 2000" in *Rural America*, 17, no. 4 (Winter 2002), 74.

¹⁹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁹⁷ Jolliffe, "Rural Poverty at Record Low", 74. Jensen, McLaughlin and Slack note that while the nonmetropolitan poverty rates exceed those of metro areas, the metropolitan aggregation masks the disparity in circumstances between central cities and suburbs. For example, in 2001, the poverty rates for nonmetro and metro areas was 13.6 and 11 percent respectively, however, the rate in central cities was 15.9% and for suburbs 7.7% (See Leif Jensen, Diane K. McLaughlin and Tim Slack, "Rural Poverty: the Persistent Challenge" in *Challenges for Rural America in the Twenty-First Century*, David L Brown and Louis E. Swanson, eds., 120). However, the authors stress that when racial and ethnic groups are examined separately, nonmetropolitan residents are shown to be at the greatest risk of poverty. Likewise, the working poor are more prevalent in rural areas.

¹⁹⁸ Jolliffe, "Rural Poverty at Record Low in 2000", 74.

Although in the last decade of the twentieth century this country experienced economic growth and a reduction in the poverty rate,¹⁹⁹ the dawn of the twenty-first century brought an economic slowdown and an increase in the poverty rate. In 2002, over 12 % of the American population was poor, up from 11.3% in 2000. Poverty rates have been steadily increasing since the dawn of the twenty-first century. Furthermore, with the economic crisis beginning in 2008, there is a continuing influx of individuals into the ranks of the impoverished, the “new poor”.

Yet this poverty is unequally distributed, along not only racial and ethnic but also regional lines. Over 25% of nonmetro Blacks, Native Americans, and Hispanics live in poverty. The nonmetro poverty rate for these populations was more than twice to three times the rate for whites.²⁰⁰ For example, the nonmetro poverty rate for Blacks in 2002 was 33%, 35% for Native Americans, and 27% for Hispanics. The variation of poverty rates by region within these groups is also striking. “Poverty rates for Blacks and Native Americans are more than 10 percentage points higher in nonmetro areas than in metro areas, the largest gap among minority population groups.”²⁰¹ In addition to regional differences, poverty rates by race and gender reveal further inequalities, with African Americans having the highest incidence of non-metro poverty, more than double the poverty rates for white non-metro residents; and rates among female headed families in non-metro areas at 34.9 percent.²⁰² Why is this so?

¹⁹⁹ Between 1993 and 2000 the national poverty rate declined from 17.2% to 11.3%. See Dean Jolliffe, *Rural Poverty at a Glance*, Rural Development Research Report, no. RDRR-100, USDA ERS, (July 2004): 1-6.

²⁰⁰ Ibid.

²⁰¹ Ibid.

²⁰² Ibid., 75-76.

Limited opportunity structure, social and economic development policies, and changes in the local, national, and global economy are the root of this persistent and severe poverty in rural America²⁰³. Institutional and infrastructural factors disadvantage rural areas leaving many without stable employment, opportunities for mobility, investment in the community, and diversity in the economy and other social institutions.²⁰⁴ Coupled with rural America's increasing social and spatial isolation and vulnerability to adverse effects from structural economic change, these challenging factors must be addressed in establishing any sound development policy for rural areas such as those of Macon County under scrutiny in this dissertation.

Rural America is not only home to millions of Americans but is also becoming a contested area in the triad with the urban and the suburban²⁰⁵, seen as potential sources to support urban growth but by the rural population, often as a place to be protected from such infringement and further depletion of resources. It is largely factors such as rural policy, globalization, migration, and the increased diversity of rural places that contribute

²⁰³ These same factors are cited for persistent poverty in urban areas as well.

²⁰⁴ See Tickamyer and Duncan, "Poverty and Opportunity Structure"; See also Edward J. Blakely and Ted K. Bradshaw, *Planning Local Economic Development*; U.S. National Advisory Commission on Rural Poverty, *The People Left Behind*, (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1967); Monica Fisher, "Why is U.S. Poverty Higher in Nonmetropolitan than in Metropolitan Areas?" In *Growth and Change* 38, 1(March 2007), 56-76.

²⁰⁵ Cromartie and Bucholtz note that since rural, urban and suburban are multi-dimensional concepts, precise distinctions between the terms can prove difficult. In their work, "Defining the 'Rural' in Rural America", the authors argue that depending on whether the definition is based on administrative, land-use, or economic conceptions, the share of the U.S. population that comprises each geographic category can have significant variation. They note how complicated matters become when researchers and policymakers have to choose from over two dozen rural definitions currently used by Federal agencies. In defining rural and urban, the authors contend that any simple dichotomy hides a complex rural-urban continuum, with gentle gradations between levels. They posit that multiple measures of rural, urban, and suburban serve multiple purposes. For example, suburban persons can be counted as either rural or urban depending on the conception—administrative or land-use. However, even when altering the definition of rural under various conceptions, the authors observe that rural populations consistently have lower education and income levels than the overall U.S. population, regardless of how they are defined. See John Cromartie and Shawn Bucholtz, "Defining the 'Rural' in Rural America", in *AmberWaves*, Economic Research Service, USDA, (June 2008).

to the current economic and social circumstances of these areas, and it is to these that I now turn.

2.1.a Rural Policy

In the Economic Opportunity Act of 1964, Congress set the obliteration of poverty as the policy agenda of the United States.²⁰⁶ Since then, various antipoverty programs and policies aimed at rural areas have been developed by federal, state and local governments. These policies and programs have rarely been coordinated with the result that they are largely a patchwork of disparate policies. Moreover, the widely varying rural economy, an economy no longer predominantly based on agriculture and natural resources, has made the traditional focus on agricultural policies ineffective. In their survey, Hamilton, *et al.* use four categories to describe rural America: “declining-resource dependent”,²⁰⁷; amenity rich²⁰⁸; chronically poor²⁰⁹; and amenity decline²¹⁰. My

²⁰⁶ See *The People Left Behind: A Report by the President’s National Advisory Commission on Rural Poverty*; see also Leslie A. Whitener, “Policy Options for a Changing Rural America,” in *Amber Waves*, 5, (May 2007), 58-65; F. Dale Parent and Bonnie L. Lewis, “The Concept of Social Exclusion and Rural Development Policy” in *Southern Rural Sociology*, 19, no. 2, (2003), 153-175; Anicca C. Jansen and Thomas D. Rowley, “Rural Development Policy: Responding to Change”, in *Rural Development Perspectives*, 9, no. 1 (October 1993), 2-7; Anne B.W. Effland, “Federal Rural Development Policy Since 1972”, in *Rural Development Perspectives*, 9, no. 1 (October 1993), 8-14; Ron E. Shaffer, “Building a National Rural Policy and the National Rural Development Partnership”, in the *Journal of Regional Analysis and Policy*, 31, no. 2 (2001).

²⁰⁷ Declining-resource dependent areas are dependent on agriculture, mining or some other natural resource dependent industry. In this category of rural America, persons are majority white, non-Hispanic, most are long-term residents whose parents also grew up there; there is high out-migration which explains the declining population; many old adults; poverty is low and unemployment high. The main problems encountered in these areas besides declining population and unemployment is drug manufacturing or sales. See Hamilton, et al., *Place Matters: Challenges and Opportunities in Four Rural Americas*, Reports on Rural America 1, no.4, (Durham, New Hampshire: Carsey Institute, 2008).

²⁰⁸ Amenity rich areas have new, growing populations. Demographically, these areas are older, predominantly white non-Hispanics, with a growing Hispanic population. Employment is relatively high in these areas, poverty is low and many households are upper-middle to upper class. See Hamilton, et al., *Place Matters*.

study area of Macon County fits in the chronically poor category. In general, rural development policy has tended to be geared toward the declining-resource dependent category. Thus, characteristic rural development policy, particularly in the South, has been ‘smokestack chasing’. However, given ‘jobless growth’²¹¹ within the manufacturing industry, this policy objective is proving to be unsustainable. For example, Alabama’s state and local public officials’ concerted effort to attract high tech manufacturing firms as a job-creation strategy has proved highly successful, attracting car manufacturers and other high tech industries to poor rural areas within the state. However, many of these industries’ high tech jobs are filled by folks from beyond the rural communities, for the locals typically lack the education to fill these positions. On the other hand, this job growth does bring some revenue to the community and some low skilled jobs are filled by rural residents. Once successful strategies of rural communities, such as smokestack chasing, attracting high tech firms (even though they hire few from the local low or unskilled labor pool and often rely on outside labor); turning to tourism, retirement or gaming industries; and making small towns into quaint tourist venues no longer provide long term economic viability and job growth. This is a particular problem given the sensitivity of such areas to national and global structural changes.

Changes in the national agricultural and manufacturing industries in the U.S., say Blakely and Bradshaw, mean that

²⁰⁹ Chronically poor rural areas have predominantly African American populations. The majority are long term residents whose parents grew up there. Poverty is higher here than in the other rural areas, and residents have low educational levels. See Hamilton, et al., *Place Matters*.

²¹⁰ Populations in amenity decline areas are predominantly white non-Hispanic; employment is high and poverty relatively low. Out migration is not as much of a problem but it does persist among younger working-age adults. See Hamilton, et al., *Place Matters*.

²¹¹ ‘Jobless growth,’ is characterized by improvements in productivity without corresponding increases in human resources.” (Blakeley & Bradshaw, *Planning Local Economic Development*, 9)

[s]mall towns and rural areas have suffered from the twin impacts of the manufacturing decline and the farm crisis. As branch plant economies, these communities exercise little control over the corporate decision-making process. When international commodity prices fluctuate, the actions of other suppliers of raw materials influence the base economy.²¹²

Such small towns and rural communities are particularly sensitive to structural changes in the global and national economies. Yet the effect of globalization is hardly new in nonmetropolitan America. Rural America has always had significant links to the world market—be that through importing slaves or exporting tobacco; it is the nature and impact of these linkages that has changed considerably.²¹³ Scattered throughout the rural landscape are now deserted towns, once home to industries such as textiles, until those moved further south in response to cheaper labor and less stringent labor laws.²¹⁴ These towns suffer from the lack of coordinated policies and programs that allow them to keep pace with and structurally adjust to global, national and local economic changes.

2.1.b Migration

Such relatively rapid changes in policies and programs to keep pace with global, national, and local economic changes have resulted in unevenly distributed rural population and prosperity. The rise of the ‘New South’ produced population and job

²¹² Blakely and Bradshaw, “Planning Local Economic Development,” 14.

²¹³ Cornelia B. Flora and Jan L. Flora, *Rural Communities: Legacy and Change*, Philadelphia: Westview Press, 2008, 248; See also David L. Carlton and Peter A. Coclanis, *The South, the Nation and the World: Perspectives on Southern Economic Development*, 2003.

²¹⁴ Exacerbating the patchwork policy phenomenon are sectoral and territorial policies have sometimes kept resources trapped in inefficient locales and industries, thus the future role of smokestack chasing in promoting economic growth has at times been dubious. Rural communities that are successful in attracting firms and expanding foreign trade in agricultural and mining commodities have been ensnared by this very success. (See Blakeley and Bradshaw, “Planning Local Economic Development,” 14) For example, public investment in attracting industries dependent upon low-skilled labor provide disincentives for investment in human capital and community development. See Robert Gibbs, “New South, Old Challenges,” in *Rural America* vol. 15, no. 4 (February 2001), 2.

growth changes (around 2.2% increase from 2000-05) from which many rural and urban Southern places continue to benefit. Although one can attribute a majority (three-fifths) of the population increase in rural regions, particularly in the South, to international migration, a good deal of it is from domestic migration, mainly from urban to rural areas (accounting for 40% of net migration into the South). More people have moved to rural and small town areas than from them.²¹⁵ The largest age group moving to rural America is those aged 40-59, regardless of ethnicity.²¹⁶

The most conspicuous population change in the South, particularly the rural South, is this ‘reverse migration’ of African Americans,²¹⁷ caused by the pull of factors such as “persons seeking a new ‘land of promise’ and/or heeding a ‘call to home’.”²¹⁸ The rural South was home to the majority of the enslaved black population (90% in 1910) and remained so until the early twentieth century. Consequently it was home also to those influential institutions, the black church and historically black colleges and universities (the majority of which either grew out of churches or were financially supported by black churches).

During the early decades of the twentieth century, pull factors of economic opportunity, and escape from the racially motivated violence and discrimination based on Jim Crow Laws in the South resulted in African American migration to the North.

²¹⁵ See Jolliffe, *Rural America at a Glance*, Economic Information Bulletin Number 18, (August 2006).

²¹⁶ Ibid.

²¹⁷ Not only is there a noticeable influx of African Americans back into the rural South, the ethnic diversity of rural America is steadily increasing. See C. Eric Lincoln and Lawrence H. Mamiya, “In the Receding Shadow of the Plantation: A Profile of Rural Clergy and Churches in the Black Belt”, in *Review of Religious Research* 29, 4 (June 1988); Carole Stack, *A Call to Home*; David Dodson, Ferrel Guillory, et al., *State of the South 2007: Philanthropy as the South’s Passing Gear*, (Chapel Hill, North Carolina: MDC, Inc., 2007); William Falk, Larry Hunt, et al., “Return Migrations of African Americans to the South: Reclaiming a Land of Promise, Going Home or Both?”, in *Rural Sociology* 69 (4) 2004; Jolliffe, *Rural America at a Glance*.

²¹⁸ Falk, et al., “Return Migrations of African Americans to the South”, 490-91.

Lincoln and Mamiya note that, “In the black psyche, ‘the North’ has always been historically associated with freedom, less violence and greater opportunities.”²¹⁹ However, with the growing disillusionment with life in the North because of such negative factors as crime and violence, loss of employment opportunities due to plants relocating further South, and living conditions within urban ghettos, Blacks began to return to the South searching for employment opportunities in the ‘New South’, a South with a markedly different racial climate than before the Civil Rights movement.²²⁰ But Blacks were drawn also by family ties to relatives and aging parents. Yet in this move “back home” they encountered high poverty rates, unemployment, and stagnant economies.

2.1.c Poverty and Region

Wimberly and Morris state that, “Poverty has three r’s. They are race, region and rurality, and all three are major factors in southern poverty.”²²¹ They continue, “Poverty and other poor quality of life conditions are neither evenly nor randomly distributed across the United States; they concentrate in the South.”²²² They also note that the Black Belt is the largest region of U.S. poverty.²²³ In their contemporary study of African Americans in rural America, Harris and Worthen likewise note that over half of the 500 persistently poor counties in the United States span the heart of the old plantation South. “The majority of these counties make up the ‘Black Belt’, the largest expanse of rural

²¹⁹ Lincoln and Mamiya, “In the Receding Shadow of the Plantation”, 365.

²²⁰ Ibid., 364.

²²¹ Ronald C. Wimberly and Libby V. Morris, “The Regionalization of Poverty: Assistance for the Black Belt South?” in *Southern Rural Sociology*, 18 (2002): 294.

²²² Ibid.

²²³ Ibid., 299.

poverty within the nation.”²²⁴ The Black Belt, which was initially named for its rich dark productive soils that buttressed the old slave economy in the South, (spanning from Texas to Virginia, including portions of Louisiana, Arkansas, Mississippi, West Tennessee, Alabama, North and South Carolina, Georgia, and North Florida), is now known for its high proportion of African Americans in persistent poverty.²²⁵ This region contains over one-third of the nation’s poor, over 40 % of the rural poor, and 90 % of poor rural African Americans.²²⁶

The social mores and institutions within this region perpetuated a system of *de facto* economic apartheid that has through the years evolved into ‘sedimented’ social and economic inequalities between Blacks and Whites. The economic growth experienced in the “New South” over the past three or so decades has made little impact on the widespread persistent poverty and low levels of human capital within the region, particularly in rural areas. The largely low skilled population and the economic and social conditions that depend on and reinforce conditions of impoverishment continue. The interconnection of race, religion, and economics is abundantly clear. The starting point for such an analysis is naturally the racial discrimination and economic exploitation of African Americans during slavery followed by the unofficial terrorism (by white supremacist groups such as the KKK through lynching, castration, rape, and other brutal behavior) as well as official terrorism and restrictions (such as Jim Crow laws) that shut off African Americans from mainstream social, political, and economic relations in the

²²⁴ Harris and Worthen, “African Americans in Rural America,” 35.

²²⁵ Ibid.

²²⁶ Ibid.

United States.²²⁷ No social institution was left untouched by the legacy of racial discrimination and economic exploitation which characterized the South. The unique history of slavery and racism has blighted the social, political, and economic lives of both blacks and whites within the South. Racism has left no aspect of society untouched and has been supported by the social, legal, religious, and economic institutions of society, it has had a dominant influence on the lives of all Americans.²²⁸ Having highlighted poverty in rural America and the rural South, I now focus in on our case study within this region, the socio-historical description of the Macon County.

2.2 Socio-Historical Context of Study Area

Located in east-central Alabama, Macon County shares borders with Elmore (population 65,874), Tallapoosa (41,475), Russell (49,756), Bullock (11, 714), Lee (115, 092), and Montgomery (223,510) counties. It is perplexing that Macon County sits between one of Alabama's fastest growing counties and the state capitol and yet is not thriving.²²⁹ Its history gives insight into its current state. The turbulent history of the South after the legal abolition of slavery was characterized by power struggles between the white conservatives, holding fast to treasured southern customs and ideals associated with life during slavery, and blacks in coalition with white liberals who understood these southern customs and ideals to be antiquated, unjust, and out of step with American

²²⁷ See C. Eric Lincoln and Lawrence Mamiya, *The Black Church in the African American Experience*, (Durham: Duke University Press, 1990).

²²⁸ *Ibid.*, 340-41.

²²⁹ Lee County, one of Alabama's fastest growing counties, is approximately 20 miles north of the small town of Tuskegee, which is the county seat for Macon County. Montgomery County, the state's fourth largest county and houses the state capitol, is approximately 18 miles west of Tuskegee.

democracy. During slavery, white social, economic, and political power was thought to be secure. The rich dark soils of Macon County had made it a booming agricultural production site in the early 1800s. “Planters and slaves had rushed into the rich black bottom land of southern and western Macon County after the Creek Secession of 1832 and had made it a prosperous agricultural area for the next two decades. Tuskegee, which sits on a ridge in the north-central part of the county, became an important trading center serving the eastern end of the Alabama Black Belt.”²³⁰ But all of this changed in the mid-1800s. The economic decline of Macon County began around 1850 due to the increasingly poor quality of the now overworked soil, and also due to exodus to western areas that offered better opportunity for plantation agriculture.²³¹ Robert J. Norrell states that as a result, the economy was generally stagnant in the latter half of the 1800s.²³²

Important events within Alabama history that have played a great part in shaping the attitudes and behavior of conservative whites toward blacks in Macon County include the memory of secession, defeat in the civil war, and subsequent Reconstruction. During the period of Reconstruction, conservative whites felt their social, economic, and political grip on power slip steadily as blacks gained momentum toward achieving enfranchisement. As Norrell states in the discussion of the history of civil rights in Tuskegee,

Losing the war affirmed for many white southerners the legitimacy of their earlier fears. The subsequent uncertainty about the nature of the postwar society aggravated their fear, and Radical Reconstruction only exacerbated anxieties that were firmly embedded in the minds of many.²³³

²³⁰ Robert J. Norrell, *Reaping the Whirlwind: The Civil Rights Movement in Tuskegee*, (New York: Alfred A Knopf, Inc., 1985), 11.

²³¹ *Ibid.*

²³² *Ibid.*

²³³ *Ibid.*, 7.

Whites' opposition to black enfranchisement, and economic, political, and social mobility grew even stronger with the passing of the 1875 Civil Rights Act, exacerbating their fears and insecurities.

With the rolling back of gains made during the brief period of Reconstruction, white supremacy was once again firmly established, or so it seemed. During the nineteenth and early twentieth century, under the burden of forced segregation and the violence of groups such as the KKK, blacks in Macon County stayed 'in their place' and out of fear no longer pushed for reasonable demands such as freedom, citizenship, and other rights of democratic participation. In the minds of whites, as long as blacks submitted to white authority and power structures, race relations within Macon county were harmonious and white anxiety was allayed.

Yet things began to change in the late 1800s. Both blacks and whites thought education was a viable answer to economic woes, and Tuskegee Institute was established with the help of northern white philanthropists and the blessing of southern white conservatives. The establishment of this institution for Blacks had a considerable and complex effect on the community, growing a strong black middle class in the community therefore reducing the availability of less uneducated and cheap agricultural labor.

Further changes occurred. Black veterans who served the U.S. during the First World War came home and found themselves continuing to face racial discrimination, for example, improper treatment in mixed veteran hospitals in the South. Some black veterans were disallowed admittance and if allowed, were admitted to inferior facilities. Thus, in 1923, the federal government authorized the construction of a hospital in Tuskegee for ailing and injured "colored" World War I veterans that cared for over

300,000 black war veterans. The establishment of this Veterans Administration (VA) Hospital in Tuskegee exacerbated already strained race relations by placing black staff under the jurisdiction of the federal government, a move that whites interpreted as losing ‘control’ of these blacks. This hospital now cares for veterans regardless of race, sex, creed, or socio-economic status.

As black civic institutions began to produce educated leaders, and former agricultural laborers trained in other fields, the whites’ fear that their tenuous grip on power might give way intensified. The catalyst for this fear was also both the black assertion of political rights during the civil rights movement in Macon County (which began well before the famous Rosa Parks incident in 1955), and the opportunity for economic mobility, which were afforded through institutions such as Tuskegee Institute and the VA Hospital. Therefore, ‘peaceful’ race relations again were disrupted.

Added to this, in the early twentieth century continued overuse of the land resulted in the soils in the rural South being literally depleted of nutrients and farmers experiencing poorer and poorer yields. Drought conditions only worsened matters for rural residents. In Macon County, particularly, soil conditions were so poor that farmers from that region were resettled outside of the county and the federal government turned the overused farm lands into the Tuskegee National Forest, under which a good deal of the land in Macon County remains today.

Politically weak, having little ability to draw attention to their troubles, many of the rural dispossessed living in remote areas were given almost no consideration by other Americans—until the desperate necessity of public relief in the countryside brought them into national focus.²³⁴

²³⁴ Carl T. Schmidt, *American Farmers in the World Crisis*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1941), 222.

Indeed, not only in Macon County but nationwide, the difficult conditions faced by rural Americans went largely unnoticed until the Great Depression. Many rural economies, already in jeopardy due to overuse of land and the effects of drought and disease on agriculture, were sinking further and further into decline. It was thought that New Deal legislation would provide just the relief that was needed to pull rural residents out of poverty *en masse*, especially since relief was thought to decrease black reliance on white landlords under the sharecropping system. However, misguided solutions, mismanagement, and racial discrimination dashed many people's hopes of what the legislation could do in the plantation South.

Although New Deal resettlement programs, federal loans, and production disincentives brought significant changes, the white power structure ensured its grasp on power and resources by manipulating federal relief in such a way as to sustain the socioeconomic and political advantages it already held.²³⁵ In Alabama, like many states in the South, discriminatory practices by agents administering federal programs at the county level made life difficult for black farmers and their families.²³⁶

Yet slowly black civic institutions began to produce educated leaders and laborers trained in areas beyond agriculture. Out of the Tuskegee Institute prominent civil rights leaders within Macon County began to emerge. One such leader, Charles Gomillion, a Tuskegee faculty member, spearheaded the movement for black enfranchisement during the 1930s and 40s. He led a fight against poll taxes and other unjust barriers to black political power. Gomillion,

²³⁵ See James C. Cobb, *The Most Southern Place on Earth: The Mississippi Delta and the Roots of Regional Identity*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992); Charles S. Aiken, *The Cotton Plantation South: Since the Civil War*, (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1998); and Schmidt, *American Farmers in the World Crisis*.

²³⁶ Aiken, *The Cotton Plantation South: Since the Civil War*, 232.

Realized the potential power of blacks in Tuskegee, but he was not seeking the political revolution that some whites feared. His ...primary goal was to improve public services, to get equal opportunities in public education, and heighten black awareness of all community concerns.²³⁷

These efforts were partly accomplished through his leadership in the Tuskegee Civic Association whose mission was to teach blacks how civic democracy works, and to advance efforts to improve the infrastructure of black communities. Gomillion sought to realize the ideals of a civic democracy and did not understand himself to be a revolutionary.

With black assertion of political rights during the civil rights movement in Macon County, and economic mobility made possible by the training provided through the University and Hospital, whites perceived race relations to be on a downward spiral—because of their loss of social and economic control. Furthermore, the rise to power of George C. Wallace, a native Alabamian, assisted in creating a climate which validated white racial fear and resentment towards blacks in Macon County. Wallace began his political career as a liberal, running for governor in 1958, with the stated ambition of helping the poor, a majority of whom were black. However, upon defeat, he became an ardent segregationist, fueling the already recalcitrant attitudes of opposition to black political and social equality in Alabama.

With federal mandates for integration during the mid-twentieth century, the racial composition of Macon County slowly began to change as whites moved away from cities such as Tuskegee, which is now over 80% African American. The whites were the majority of the business owners. Once they left, much of the economy was negatively affected. Lastly, global economic changes affected life in America's rural Southern

²³⁷ Norrell, *Reaping the Whirlwind*, 41.

economies. With the move of companies from the “New South” further south, agriculture and industry in the southern states took a hard hit. Many small rural towns lost their industrial base and their economies have yet to recover.

Though having pulled through a turbulent racial, economic, and political history, Macon County remains very poor with a stagnant economy that offers little economic opportunities for its inhabitants. Among the largest employers are the university in Tuskegee, the gaming industry, and the VA Hospital.

When I asked a pastor to describe the area in which he pastors, he said that the central town, like broader American society, is separated into classes—upper, middle, and “poor,”—and that they don’t associate with one another. Statistics on occupation and income in tables 1 and 2 below provide empirical insight into the type of class structures in this county. The statistics regarding occupation point to the existence of a university in the county with almost 30% of the labor force employed in management, professional, and related occupations. A little over one-fifth of the labor force is employed in the service, sales, and office sectors. The smallest percent of the labor force is employed in farming, fishing, forestry, construction, extraction, and maintenance. Fifty-four percent of households have an income below \$25,000, compared with only 27.3 % of households in Alabama and 28.6% in the U.S. Median household income for Macon County is an astonishingly low \$21,180, compared to \$34,135 for Alabama in general and \$41,994 for the U.S.

Table 1: Occupation

Occupation	Percent		
	<i>Macon County</i>	<i>Alabama</i>	<i>United States</i>
Management, Professional and Related	29.6	29.5	33.6
Service	22.9	13.5	14.9
Sales and Office	22.9	25.9	26.7
Farming Fishing, and Forestry	0.6	0.8	0.7
Construction, Extraction, and Maintenance	8.6	11.3	9.4
Production, Transportation, and Material Moving	15.3	19.0	14.6
Agriculture, Forestry, Fishing and Hunting	1.8	1.5	1.5
Manufacturing	11.5	18.4	14.1

Source: Census 2000 Summary File 3 (SF 3)

Table 2: Household Income in 1999

Household Income	Percent		
	<i>Macon County</i>	<i>Alabama</i>	<i>United States</i>
Less than \$10,000	26.5	14.4	9.5
10,000 to 14,999	11.3	8.1	6.3
15,000 to 19,999	10.4	7.4	6.3
20,000 to 24,999	5.8	7.4	6.6
25,000 to 29,999	6.7	7.0	6.4
30,000 to 34,999	7.1	6.7	6.4
35,000 to 39,999	5.0	6.1	5.9
40,000 to 44,999	4.3	5.5	5.7
45,000 to 49,999	4.3	4.8	5.0
50,000 to 59,999	5.0	8.3	9.0
60,000 to 74,999	5.4	8.9	10.4
75,000 to 99,999	4.4	7.7	10.2
100,000 to 124,999	1.7	3.4	5.2
125,000 to 149,999	0.5	1.5	2.5
150,000 to 199,999	0.5	1.3	2.2
Median Income	21,180	34,135	41,994

Source: Census 2000 (SF 3)

From this historical overview of Macon county, we move to a brief sociological examination of the black church in the rural South as background to the overview of the black church in Macon County.

2.3 *Black Church in the Rural South and Macon County*

Williams and Dill note that, “Because religion is such a pervasive force in defining and maintaining southern mores and social stratification, there is a more intimate connection between Christianity and racism, and social control in the Bible Belt than exists elsewhere in the United States.”²³⁸ The story of the black church points to the deplorable racial relations of this nation. The actual social distance which was legally and conventionally ensured by slaves’ subhuman chattel status and their subsequent status as second-class citizens was reinforced by social convention and justified by the theological and practical complicity of white churches in reinforcing myths about the accursed nature of Africans and their incapacity to receive religious instruction.²³⁹ This connection between Christianity, racism, and social control had enormous implications for the economic life of African Americans.

The majority of the churches in this study are located within the county seat, Tuskegee, about 41 percent of them are located outside of the county seat. Macon County is the historic site of the Tuskegee Airmen and the VA Medical Center, both of which were significant factors in the history of the civil rights movement as it took shape in Alabama. Yet the poverty rate for the county seat, is triple that of the national poverty rate and the median household income, \$18,889 is below that for the county (\$21,180) and half that for the nation which is \$41,994.²⁴⁰

Macon County has a population of fewer than 25,000, 85% of whom are African American. One-third of its population is below the poverty line, compared to the national

²³⁸ Ibid.

²³⁹ See C. Eric Lincoln, *Black Church in the African American Experience*; Wilmore, *Black Religion and Black Radicalism*.

²⁴⁰ U. S. Bureau of the Census, 2000.

statistic of 12%. The unemployment rate for Macon county at 12.3% is double that of the nation's and of Alabama's.²⁴¹ For the data collected among the churches studied, the average age of rural churches (how long they've been in existence) is about 60 years²⁴². Their average congregation size is between 100 and 200²⁴³. While about one-third of the churches within the study contribute to local or denominational HBCUs (historically black colleges and universities), a majority of them contribute directly to members' needs (for instance, help with paying electricity bills, buying food, etc.) or denominational obligations for local, national, and international mission work.

The majority of black churches in the South historically have been rural institutions, from their origin in the middle of the eighteenth century and through most of their history.²⁴⁴ As Lincoln and Mamiya note, what distinguished them was absentee pastors, small congregations, and lower levels of educational attainment among pastors. Although some of the negative impacts of rural location such as distance and isolation, limited opportunity, and infrastructural and institutional hindrances have been mitigated by technological advances, many communities continue to be negatively affected by rurality.

Lincoln and Mamiya note various characteristics of rural churches in the South that my data also reflects. First, they note that rural churches are lead by absentee pastors and committed laity. In their study, almost 66 percent of the rural clergy live in urban areas. They found that these rural clergy are typically older, male, and more educated

²⁴¹ Ibid.

²⁴² The low number is due to the unavailability of some data and the fact that there are several churches in the study that are fairly "young" churches which are fairly new to the community.

²⁴³ The number may be inflated due to inaccurate or no records kept by churches. Many of the numbers given were also estimates given by the pastor.

²⁴⁴ Lincoln and Mamiya, "In the Receding Shadow", 352.

than in the past due to the gains made in the Civil Rights movement and desegregation of education. They also found that the income of rural pastors and their need for secular jobs to supplement their church income reflected the general economic condition of the blacks in rural areas. Other characteristics of rural churches Lincoln and Mamiya note include: having existed for on average 84 years; an average membership of 171 and average church attendance size between 80 and 100; and that a large proportion of the total income of these churches is allocated for the pastor's salary and maintaining facilities. "If churches contribute to national causes or programs, these usually are Civil Rights programs. The 'secular' institutions which receive the most church support are educational institutions."²⁴⁵

In support of their findings, I note that in my study area of Macon County though several of the clergy are absentee pastors, there are many clergy who live if not in the same town as their parishioners, then in the same county, within a rural context. Many of the pastors are from rural areas, having grown up in the rural town of their church or in a small town nearby. The pastors who do live in urban areas distant from their congregations are usually those who are well educated and/or bi-vocational. Within the congregations that are headed by absentee pastors, there is a core network of devoted laity who oversee the functioning of church services during the week and maintain the church facilities. As Lincoln and Mamiya observed in their study, within Macon County although the clergy are typically older males, there was a substantial number of women clergy, a point made sometimes by male clergy who typically chose to be members of one minister's alliance or another because it allowed or disallowed female pastors.

²⁴⁵ Ibid., 359.

Almost all of the clergy interviewed had at least some college education; one had only a high school diploma.

Many of the clergy were bi-vocational or were receiving income from another source, for example retirement. One of the clergy I interviewed said that 75% of her congregation was unemployed and that the church ran off of the tithes of a few who could afford to give. Here I pause to note that several of the women clergy within connectional denominations (where a bishop or authority figure, usually a male, in the church appointed them to their pastoral assignment) believed women were given the “worst appointments”—these typically being churches such as those with 75% of its congregation below the poverty level or ones that were in decline or so far out in the rural areas that no one really wanted to pastor there.

Nonetheless, Lincoln and Mamiya also observe a sense of pride and ownership to be characteristic of congregants. “As one of the few institutions that is completely owned and controlled by black people, the sense of possessiveness, pride and power are unparalleled in other phases of black life.”²⁴⁶ (Yet this did not apply to the younger members in the congregations within my study area, as young people tend to make up the smallest proportion of congregations and church seems to be very much geared toward the needs and aspirations of adults.) Presumably for related reasons, their community outreach is typically limited to civil rights issues and organizations—though in the churches I studied most outreach was directed at meeting members’ needs and to educational institutions. That historical focus on civil rights issues for community outreach is also characteristic of a few of the study churches, though the outreach of

²⁴⁶ Lincoln and Mamiya, “In the Receding Shadow”, 360.

others goes beyond civil rights issues to local NGOs such as Habitat for Humanity or local nursing homes.

Another important characteristic to highlight, one not emphasized in Lincoln and Mamiya's study, is the evangelical²⁴⁷ nature of the black church in general and particularly in the more broadly evangelical context of the South. In their book, *One Nation Divisible: How Regional Religious Differences Shape American Politics*, Silk and Walsh note that within the southern region of the U.S., evangelicalism predominates:

It is hard to overstate the extent to which evangelical Protestantism sets the South²⁴⁸ apart from all other regions of the country. ...white evangelicals and the historic African American denominations represent 63 percent of all religious adherents in the region....[they represent] 54 percent in the Southern crossroads and far above all other regions... altogether, the South is just about as evangelical as Utah is Mormon.²⁴⁹

They also note that next to the Southern Crossroads, the South has the least religious diversity in the country.²⁵⁰ In spite of the all of the changes ushered in with the development of the New South, desegregation, and reverse in-migration of African Americans back into the South, "the force of evangelical Protestantism remains intact."²⁵¹ Yet Silk and Walsh also remind us that the South's "religion of sin and salvation" which promises "free grace toward redemption" for those who choose it, is not merely focused on the individual soul but that,

²⁴⁷ Evangelicals are characterized by their belief that the Bible is ultimate authority; that Christ died for the salvation of all, and acceptance of Christ as the only way to salvation leads to eternal life. They believe in conversion, defined as being "born again" which is associated with a transformed life. Also, they believe in the importance of evangelizing, of sharing their faith with others. See Christian Smith, *Divided By Faith: Evangelical Religion and the Problem of Race in America*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 3.

²⁴⁸ Silk and Walsh define the South as Alabama, Mississippi, Florida, North and South Carolina, Virginia, Tennessee, West Virginia, and Kentucky (all of which overlap with the Black Belt). They define the Southern Crossroads as Louisiana, Texas, Oklahoma, Arkansas and Missouri (all which overlap with the Black Belt, with the exception of Oklahoma and Missouri).

²⁴⁹ Mark Silk and Andrew Walsh, *One Nation Divisible: How Regional Religious Differences Shape American Politics*, (Lanham, Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2008), 5.

²⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 6.

²⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 63.

Evangelical churches orient their resources toward evangelistic and missionary work designed to further the Great Commission announced in the New Testament.... If the central theme of Southern evangelicalism has been an imperative drive toward personal conversion and the moral life afterward, it is also bound up with the hope that the faithful will be at ease not only inside the churches but also out in the community at large.²⁵²

This is played out in what Christian Smith refers to as “engaged orthodoxy” which is how evangelicals move beyond their evangelical subculture and engage society at large.²⁵³

These evangelical leanings and allegiances have been strengthened by the influence of media (print, radio, television, etc.) which has mitigated their geographical isolation. In conversations with laity and clergy while in the field, I realized that several of them were influenced in some way by popular religious books or televangelists who are evangelical. Particularly with the growth in popularity of the prosperity gospel as it has taken form in the black church, this influence of white evangelicalism is evident. This influence extends to shared political views. Realizing this commonality, some white evangelical groups have produced and shared with black congregations media resources that trace the historical connection between the black community/ leaders and the Republican party, while at the same time highlighting important religious beliefs that are reinforced by republican ideology.

Commonalities on social issues between African American Christians and evangelical whites can likewise run deep due to the historical theological and ideological ties from common religious roots. For instance, Silk and Walsh trace the historical relationship between black and white Christians since slavery and note that the biracial churches (although not integrated because African Americans were not counted as citizens and were discriminated against even in religious institutions) during slavery and

²⁵² Ibid., 64.

²⁵³ Christian Smith, *Divided By Faith*, 3.

before the Independent black church Movement represented a foundation for later spiritual commonalities among blacks and whites in the South.²⁵⁴ More important, they argue that these biracial churches are also the historic basis for moral commonalities on some contemporary social issues.²⁵⁵ Therefore, elements of conservative white ideology on social issues such as abortion and homosexuality hold credence for some African American Christians. When these issues are tied to political ideology, you find African Americans siding with conservative white Republicans, such as one of the pastors in my research site, who argued that he had to vote for the white conservative presidential candidate because the issue for him was about “righteousness”, or doing what’s right according to God’s supposed scriptural mandates.

2.4 Conclusion

The invisibility of pockets of chronically impoverished communities that characterize rural areas nationwide presents a challenge to researchers and policy makers. Historically, the South has had high rates of poverty, and has fared poorly in socio-economic indicators of well being compared to other regions. The southern rural Black Belt with its predominantly black and Christian population has persistently been plagued with severe decline. Some congregations have responded energetically, while others simply try to survive the weight of generations of poverty.

In this chapter I have become familiar with the socio-historical background that is important for the broader discussion of black Christian economic ethics in this

²⁵⁴ Silk and Walsh, *One Nation*, 68.

²⁵⁵ *Ibid.*

dissertation, taking the rural southern context, specifically the Black Belt, as a case study. My liberationist understanding is that a church's theological and ethical teachings can beckon to social activism with the aim of social and economic justice. Therefore, in the following chapter there is a theological ethical analysis of predominant theological traditions within black religious experience in America.

Chapter 3: Predominant forms of Engagement with Economic Justice

3.1 *Christians and the Marketplace*

The ethical question ‘What am I to do?’ cannot be separated from its theological source, that is, what God has done and is doing to liberate the oppressed from slavery and injustice. Thus Christian theology is the foundation of Christian ethics. Theology is the Church’s reflection upon the meaning of its faith-claim that God’s revelation is identical with the historical freedom of the weak and the helpless. Ethics derived from theology is that branch of the Church’s reflection that investigates the implication of faith in divine liberation for Christian life in the world.²⁵⁶

Given the inescapable economic dimension to human existence and the preoccupation with the use and consumption of material goods that marks societal cooperative efforts, economic justice is an unavoidable topic in dialogue regarding social cooperation. Dialogue regarding economic justice is particularly essential as our civil and political freedoms wane in meaning when individuals have to beg, cadge, and scarp day-to-day for basic necessities. As a fundamental aspect of social justice, economic justice is concerned with individuals and groups receiving a just share of the burdens and benefits of social cooperation, particularly as these pertain to allocation of resources, distribution of wealth, alleviation of poverty, and the right to participate in the economy (meaning to engage in meaningful work) without discrimination.

Recognizing the relationship between economics and religion is hardly new. Scripture and early church fathers such as Aquinas, Calvin, and Wesley point to a long

²⁵⁶ Cone, *God of the Oppressed*, (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1997), 180.

history between faith and wealth.²⁵⁷ This relationship is demonstrated in the historical overview of Christian economic ethics in chapter one, thus, there is no need to recount the history here as the aim of this chapter is specific. This chapter bridges the social history highlighted in chapter two and the theological analysis that provides the necessary foundation for chapter four where the theologies will be placed in conversation. Chapter two employed social scientific analysis to explore the socio-historical context of the Black Belt and the church's engagement with economic justice. This component of the analysis helped to lay bare the historical evolution of the interconnection between race, religion, and economics and the implications for the continued evolution of these phenomena in a particular social context. Now we are at the point in the analysis at which we can read theological resources in light of these socio-historical realities outlined in the previous chapter.

The use of scripture and theological doctrine as sources for deriving normative proscriptions for social behavior by Christians throughout history is one reason for exploring how various African American religious traditions address norms pertaining to economic behavior. Also, since religion is often critical to the way people understand their identity and, thus, the way they relate to the world, I mine the theological sources of predominant African American religious traditions (black liberation, prosperity gospel, and self help/social uplift) for insight into what buttresses Christians' perceived attitudes

²⁵⁷ See John Wesley, "The Good Steward", "The Use of Money", "On the Danger of Increasing Riches", "The More Excellent Way", in *The Works of John Wesley*, Albert C. Outler, ed., (Nashville, Tennessee: Abingdon Press, 1985); National Conference of Catholic Bishops, *Economic Justice for All: Pastoral Letter on Catholic Social Teaching and the U.S. Economy*, (Washington, D.C.: United States Catholic Conference, Inc., 1986); Lutheran Church of America, *Social Statement on Sufficient, Sustainable Livelihood for All*, (August, 1999); Thomas Aquinas, "Fraud in Buying and Selling", "Usury", in *Summa Theologiae* (New York: Blackfriars in conjunction with McGraw-Hill Book Company, 1975) vol. 38; John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, translated by John Allen (Philadelphia: Presbyterian Board of Christian Education, 1936).

toward cultural norms regarding behavior in the marketplace. By examining the theological traditions that underlie those attitudes, we will see how these traditions address cultural norms of poverty, wealth, possessions, stewardship, and work—all of which are influenced by individuals' understandings of faith, Christ, and the Church. That it is necessary to examine these theological traditions in light of their social history is evident as we move forward in our analysis.

Because this chapter focuses on the main ways in which African American religious experience engages economic justice within the African American religious experience, I begin by examining the dominant ethos of the black church—the self-help/social uplift tradition—since both black liberation and prosperity gospel theological traditions are rooted in it. There is a need for greater work with the SHSU tradition as the dominant strain in the trajectory of African-American religious life, as will be evident in the greater attention it receives within this work. Then I review each theological tradition in relation to the aforementioned categories of poverty, wealth, etc. asking: (1) How are we to thoughtfully engage issues of economic justice that have historically plagued our nation? In particular, what does black Christian tradition offer in this engagement?, and (2) How does a morally responsible agent respond to economic injustice?

One of the complications of this analysis is that each tradition draws on divergent sources. For the SHSU tradition, I examine denominational materials as it is deeply rooted in the organized black church, past and present. The prosperity gospel, as a tradition, is focused mostly on its leadership, thus I draw upon the thought of prominent pastors and leaders within the Word of Faith Movement. The Word of Faith Movement has no denominational identity and does not acknowledge any formal common polity.

Finally, my analysis of the black liberation theology tradition, a largely intellectual phenomenon, is based on material by scholars who may not be directly involved in church leadership.

The fact that one tradition draws strictly from intellectual sources, one primarily from practitioners/preachers, and another from denominational sources poses challenges in comparative analysis. I mine them for their underlying theo-ethical themes which are the focus of this work. Finally, I note that some sources address all categories explicitly and others address some of them partially or indirectly at best. For example, the AMEZ church, the proxy for the SHSU tradition, does not have a clear doctrinal statement regarding work, and BLT does not provide a clear statement regarding stewardship, but instead address these categories indirectly.

3.2 Self-Help/Social Uplift Tradition

The foundation upon which both the prosperity gospel and black liberation theology stands is the self help/social uplift tradition within the black church. Richard Allen and Absalom Jones had not initially determined to establish a competing congregation when they were forced from St. George's as they knelt to pray. But, as Gayraud Wilmore posits,

blacks...became aware of the fact that they no longer were obliged to suffer the indignity of segregation and the lack of opportunity for advancement in the white churches, even if there seemed to be no end to the denial of freedom and equality in secular society.²⁵⁸

²⁵⁸ Wilmore, *Black Religion and Black Radicalism*, 105.

This spirit of self-determination, freedom, and dignity are part of the foundation on which the SHSU tradition in the black church stands and likewise what prompted their many mutual aid efforts.

The goal of the earliest organized economic activity among African Americans was to meet financial needs for things such as burial, assistance during time of illness, and charitable aid for deprived populations such as widows and orphans. This type of aid was usually formally organized and distributed through mutual aid or beneficial societies. These mutual aid societies were “formed among the poor, landless Negroes who were thrown upon their own resources.”²⁵⁹ Some common characteristics of these African American self help groups, or voluntary associations were: some kind of formal institutionalized structure; members with common interest or purpose; exclusion of some people; and members with a discernible sense of pride and feeling of belonging.²⁶⁰ Though the majority of the earliest mutual aid societies have their origins in the black church and were inspired by the spirit of Christian charity,²⁶¹ some of them even formed into churches themselves, such as the Free African Society, established by Richard Allen and Absalom Jones in 1787 in Philadelphia as a “religious society without regard to religious tenets, provided the persons lived an orderly and sober life, in order to support one another in sickness, and for the benefit of their widows and fatherless children.”²⁶² The Society followed the patterns of early Methodist class meetings albeit with a bilateral purpose of attending to the spiritual and material condition of individuals, and soon spread from Philadelphia to other cities.

²⁵⁹ E. Franklin Frazier, *The Negro Church in America*, (New York: Schocken Books, 1974), 42.

²⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 26-33.

²⁶¹ *Ibid.* See also Wilmore, *Black Religion and Black Radicalism*.

²⁶² *Ibid.*, 106-107.

Some of these mutual aid societies became African American owned insurance companies and banks. Black churches also spawned funeral homes, business leagues, and a range of other societies designed to assist ‘the least of these’ and to respond to the crises that arose out of poverty, malnutrition, sickness, and death that plagued an economically, politically and socially marginalized community.²⁶³ Since these societies developed directly from various religious organizations within the black church, they were usually sacred in nature.

However, after Emancipation, sacred mutual aid societies began to diminish in importance for those rural African Americans who were becoming more urbanized and were soon replaced by secular organizations that served the same material and social purposes, such as insurance companies and fraternal organizations (for example: Elks, Greek fraternities, and Masons).²⁶⁴ Some of these were organized as counterparts to white fraternal organizations, but others grew directly out of the interests and needs of the African American community. For example, Reverend Moses Dickson organized the Knights of Liberty, an organization which was active in the Underground Railroad. In 1871, he organized the Temple and Tabernacle of the Knights and Daughters of Tabor in Independence, Missouri. Its membership was comprised of individuals across the United States, from the Northern to Western states, and from the Great Lakes to the Gulf of Mexico²⁶⁵. Its primary aim was “to help spread the Christian religion and education,” but

²⁶³ Lewis Baldwin, “Revisiting the ‘All-Comprehending Institution’: Historical Reflections on the Public Roles of Black Churches,” in *New Day Begun: African American Churches and Civic Culture in Post-Civil Rights America*, (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003), 24.

²⁶⁴ Charles Williams, Jr. and Hilda J. B. Williams, “Mutual Aid Societies and Economic Development: Survival Efforts,” in *African Americans in the South: Issues of Race, Class, and Gender*, eds. Hans A. Baer and Yvonne Jones. (Athens: The University of Georgia Press, 1992), 28.

²⁶⁵ E. Franklin Frazier, *The Negro Church*, 42.

it also promoted the acquisition of property, along with the avoidance of intemperance and the cultivation of ‘manhood’²⁶⁶.

Many of these fraternal lodges, the majority of which were established by preachers, played a prominent role in economic cooperation and capital accumulation. For example, in 1876, Reverend Washington Brown, born a slave, organized ‘The Great Fountain of True Reformers’, which published a weekly newspaper, from which grew various enterprises such as a real estate firm, a bank, a hotel, a building and loan association, and a grocery and merchandizing store.²⁶⁷ These mutual aid societies also played a significant part in developing and maintaining educational institutions in African American communities. The social and economic activity that was a natural outgrowth of such societies exemplifies the self help and self determination ethos of the SHSU tradition in the black church--an ethos very much in line with Euro-American Protestant values of the time, such as thrift, industry, honesty, sobriety, charity, and the privileging of work.

3.2.a Outgrowth of Self-Help/Social Uplift Tradition: Educational Development and Political Activism

Following Emancipation, the phenomena of the Great Educational Crusade emerged as the impetus to build educational institutions grew. Once Blacks were freed from slavery the black church and sympathetic white mission groups were met with the task of educating a population that had been denied access to any formal education.²⁶⁸

²⁶⁶ Ibid.

²⁶⁷ Ibid., 43.

²⁶⁸ Before emancipation, Sunday schools played a significant role in the education of African Americans.

Universal illiteracy characterized the masses of emancipated slaves. Among the first educators within the black community were white clergy men, followed by African Americans likewise interested in the propagation of the gospel among the ‘heathen’.²⁶⁹ Frazier states that, “in fact, the purpose of education was primarily to transmit to the Negro the religious ideas and practices of an alien culture.”²⁷⁰ Mitchell observes the ‘flaw’ in the way teachers became effective models of white, middle-class culture, which was believed to be superior. Thus, paternalism and hazards to African American self-esteem marked these early educational institutions. “[I]nstead of being molded into bicultural African Americans, the students were trained to be more and more alienated from their indigenous culture and, with it, from African American identity and self-esteem.”²⁷¹

As opportunities opened for African Americans to participate in the mainstream American public sphere, particularly the political realm, the demand for a more educated and better trained African American clergy was viewed as particularly essential.²⁷² African American churches began to take an active role in meeting this demand by establishing schools and partnering with northern philanthropists and white churches in the battle against illiteracy. By the turn of the century both the black Methodists and black Baptists credited themselves with having reversed the situation in less than thirty years.²⁷³

But blacks’ educational efforts did not stop there. In his historical inventory of educational institutions established by black churches, Mitchell contends that,

²⁶⁹ Frazier, 44. See also Carter G. Woodson, *The Education of the Negro Prior to 1861*, (New York, 1915).

²⁷⁰ Frazier, *Negro Church in America*, 44.
Negro Church in America, 44.

²⁷² Ibid.

²⁷³ Peter J. Paris, *Social Teachings*, 36.

The phenomenal success of the educational crusade of the African American churches during the Reconstruction Era surpasses anything before or since, including the Civil Rights campaigns of the 1960s and 1970s. The level of commitment and sacrifice was and remains, unsurpassed.²⁷⁴

In addition to white sponsored colleges, independent African American secondary and primary schools were also founded by black churches and supported by black denominations. As soon as African American teachers were trained and the money was raised, the schools were launched.²⁷⁵ These church-based schools were largely supported by the laity of the major black denominations (AME, AMEZ, CME, Baptists) who “bridged the gap that white-sponsored schools could not close until the day of public schools.”²⁷⁶

Albeit now with a more educated and trained clergy, the black church leadership took a limited and highly restricted place in the white public sphere, specifically the political sphere. Post-Emancipation African American participation in America’s public sphere was largely restricted to their role as cheap labor in an exploitative economic system. They were largely denied any significant political participation. In their comprehensive study of the Negro church, Mays and Nicholson record that, “from 1868 to 1932 only 38 Negroes served as members of Congress, and this included those who served two or more terms. Between 1925 and 1929 only 27 Negroes were members of state legislature.”²⁷⁷

²⁷⁴ Henry H. Mitchell, *Black Church Beginnings: The Long-Hidden Realities of the First Years*, (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2004), 162.

²⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 156.

²⁷⁶ *Ibid.*

²⁷⁷ Mays and Nicholson, *The Negro’s Church*, 8.

Mays and Nicholson also illustrate the significance of the black church for the freedom it offered marginalized masses to exercise leadership, creative powers, and influence denied by larger society. They state that,

the continuation in American society of artificial limits to the free functioning of the Negro in political, civic and economic life have tended to both magnify the importance of the Negro churches and to increase their number because they alone offer him [sic] a large unrestricted arena for his powers.²⁷⁸

These unrestricted arenas where blacks could exercise social, economic, and cultural power most notably played a significant role in encouraging them to express political power. Baldwin argues that, “from their origins, the churches had had ‘a political meaning’ for both preachers and the masses, for they provided opportunities that compensated for the virtual exclusion of all African Americans from full participation in political processes at the local, regional and national levels.”²⁷⁹

The SHSU tradition of the black church spawned various spiritual movements and black religious institutional expressions of the self help and self determination ethos. Some were radical expressions. Wilmore argues the black church transitioned through phases of radicalization and deradicalization, the former for example through Garvey’s UNIA movement and individuals like Paul Cuffee, who expressed the early spirit of black consciousness and anti-colonialism.²⁸⁰ Even though black nationalism in its earliest form is connected to the paternalistic zeal of African American Christians to Christianize the land of their ancestors, it was a precursor to the pan-African movement within the black religious tradition in the U.S. Wilmore states that religion plays a significant role in the rise of black nationalism and Pan-Africanism,

²⁷⁸ Ibid.

²⁷⁹ Baldwin, “Revisiting the All-Comprehending Institution,” 25.

²⁸⁰ Wilmore, *Black Religion and Black Radicalism*, 126.

A black theology of missionary emigrationism and racial destiny evolved from the aggressive thrust of black folk religion toward liberation from slavery and an African homeland. ...this ...unofficial theology gradually took the initiative from the churches and laid the groundwork for Garvey, Padmore and others of the twentieth century who were less dependent upon the institutional church.²⁸¹

Wilmore describes this black theology which developed during the nineteenth century as neither superficial nor parochial.

[Black theology] taught that the descendents of the slaves were destined to be delivered not only from bondage to sin, but from injustice, prejudice, and oppression, and would be the means by which millions of their brothers and sisters who remained in Africa would someday be liberated from European colonialism.²⁸²

Wilmore notes that African Americans who understood the bible and Christian theology to hold strong justification for racial solidarity and social change, drew cultural and political implications for colonization and self determination. He thus credits the black church with erecting the politico-theological foundation for black nationalism and Pan-Africanism. "Before the end of the nineteenth century, what began as a theology was secularized as an ideology of political and cultural separatism that reached its most explicit articulation in resolutions of the Pan-African congresses and the philosophy of negritude."²⁸³

In contrast, Wilmore suggests that deradicalization characterizes the black church and community during the postwar years. During this time there were marked changes within the black churches regionally. Since the beginning of the great migrations, black churches in the South had been losing and Northern churches gaining members as these migrants searched for economic opportunities in the Northern cities. The organizations that emerged during this time to meet the felt needs of this expanding poor, black, urban

²⁸¹ Ibid., 135.

²⁸² Ibid., 149.

²⁸³ Ibid., 161.

population were the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People and National Urban League. These organizations found their primary support in the black church and through the active participation of black clergy.²⁸⁴

Wilmore argues that by the end of the first World War the independent black churches were becoming ‘respectable institutions’ which rejected the nationalism of Turner²⁸⁵ and moved more and more toward the model of “authentic” Christian faith and life as presented by white churches. “The dominant influence of clergy in the social betterment and civil rights groups helped to keep these organizations on an accommodationist trajectory.”²⁸⁶ However, Lincoln and Mamiya argue against the deradicalization thesis based on studies by scholars such as Frazier, Mays and Nicholson, and others, claiming instead that though black churches were not exhibiting the characteristics of militant and black nationalist fervor exemplified by many sects such as Garvey’s UNIA or the Nation of Islam, they were not altogether depoliticized either.

Black political activism continued during these interwar years which Lincoln and Mamiya refer to as a relatively quietistic time for black churches.²⁸⁷ This political activism continued but took on different dynamics as the civil rights period ushered in by *Brown v. Board of Education* was marked by great turmoil and violence.²⁸⁸ Black churches were sites of mass mobilization and demonstrations and laypersons supported the civil rights workers from the various religious and secular groups that emerged. Congregations and denominations served as training grounds for black political leaders

²⁸⁴ Ibid., 208.

²⁸⁵ Bishop Henry M. Turner of the AME church preached a radical black theology of liberation. He stated that God was a Negro and protested against the notion of a white God. He believed that America would never do justice to black people and thus advocated emigration as the solution to the race problem.

²⁸⁶ Wilmore, *Black Religion and Black Radicalism*, 170.

²⁸⁷ Lincoln and Mamiya, *Black Church in the African American Experience*, 211.

²⁸⁸ Ibid.

and provided alternative ‘political spheres’ where black political participation skills were practiced by the marginalized masses. As Mays and Nicholson put it in 1933,

The Negro’s political life is still largely found in the Negro church. It is in the national, state and county Baptist conventions and associations and in the local church that Negro Baptists find political leadership. It is in the local district, state and quadrennial conferences of the Methodist churches that political leadership is displayed...The local churches, association, conventions and conferences become the Negro’s Democratic and Republican conventions, his Legislature and his Senate and House of Representatives.²⁸⁹

Lincoln and Mamiya state that, from Reconstruction until the passage of the Voting Rights Act of 1965, the black church became the main arena for black political activity.²⁹⁰

Prohibited from participating in the mainstream political process, African Americans carried out surrogate politics in the black church, which therefore became “an intensive training ground of political experience.”²⁹¹ In the South, black churches performed a variety of roles and functions that easily provided the transition to the arena of protest and electoral politics. The characteristics of social solidarity and independence enabled African American congregations to serve as powerful political bases, particularly the larger churches. They were active sites of mobilization that were needed to effectively navigate the political terrain during the civil rights era.²⁹²

The lessons of democratic polity, of political evaluation, and the exercise of the right and responsibility to vote took on meaning and provided an easier transition to mainstream political participation after the most obstructive barriers to civil rights had been removed.²⁹³

²⁸⁹ Mays and Nicholson, *The Negro’s Church*, 9.

²⁹⁰ Lincoln and Mamiya, *Black Church in African American Experience*, 205.

²⁹¹ *Ibid.*

²⁹² *Ibid.*, 206.

²⁹³ *Ibid.*, 207.

As African Americans made strides politically during the civil rights era, the significance of the black church as the sole site for political participation and exercise of political power waned. Blacks now invested time, energy, and great effort in the mainstream American political system where citizenship rights were contested and gained. The focus and nature of social/political activism within the black church shifted as African Americans began to realize that gains in civil rights and social acceptability did not naturally translate into gains in economic standing, at least not for *all* African Americans.

3.2.b Economic Development as an Expression of SHSU tradition

The persistence of both urban and rural poverty and the precarious economic position of the middle and working classes within the black community challenged church and community leaders. Marcellus Andrews, in his ‘economic audit’ of the civil rights movement, notes that the movement both succeeded and failed in transforming American life, as we can see by the existence of both a thriving black middle class and a ‘permanent’ black underclass.²⁹⁴ As black churches continue to face the reality of persistent urban poverty, the alienation of the urban black ‘under’ class, and the utter disregard for the black rural poor, it has become clear that political activism alone did not remedy the situation. In recent decades there has therefore been a reorientation of social outreach/social activism within the black church from a primary emphasis on political activism to an emphasis on ‘economic development’. The Community and Economic Development Movement (CEDM) within the black church began as a response to the

²⁹⁴ Marcellus Andrews, *Political Economy of Hope and Fear*, 1.

failure of the benefits gained from the civil rights movement to reach all segments of the black population. Its origins are in both the Community Development Movement²⁹⁵ (with its historically specific focus on housing) of the 1960s and the Civil Rights Movement.

The CEDM has never been an internally cohesive, homogenous social movement, particularly because of the diverse nature of the black church itself. With significant political gains and strides toward equality, glaring disparities in the economic life of distinct communities became a major concern. These disparities were understood as outgrowths of the historical social, economic, and political discrimination discussed above. Thus, the CEDM has its origins in what is considered the ‘social action agenda’ of most black congregations. The popular pattern for congregations involved in the CEDM has been to establish some sort of CDC (Community Development Corporation) through which it carries out its social action agenda in hopes of revitalizing their

²⁹⁵ Avis C. Vidal, director of urban planning program at Wayne State University and formerly in the department of City and Regional Planning at the Kennedy School of Government, Harvard University, records the commencement of the Community Development movement with the development of the first Community Development Corporations (CDCs) in the mid-twentieth century. These CDCs were organized as 501 c 3 corporations with a goal of community revitalization. The neighborhoods in which these CDCs arose were usually poor, at-risk communities, and predominantly communities of color. According to Vidal, in the 1960s, groups which were formed and controlled by community stakeholders such as residents, business proprietors, clergy, and service providers, with the purpose of serving a community (neighborhood or cluster of neighborhoods) defined by ethnicity, represented a new type of grassroots organization on the neighborhood scene. She records that during the 1970s, many of these newly formed CDCs were outgrowths of neighborhood based advocacy and protest activities. The movement developed further within the 1980s as federal support for affordable housing decreased and corporate and philanthropic support for community development increased. Clearly, this movement grew out of a response to various housing issues and civic improvement needs that faced poor urban residents. So, in its initial phase, CDCs were solely established to address issues regarding affordable and adequate housing. Even within the CEDM, most of the first ‘economic development’ projects of churches were affordable housing within urban centers. Within thirty years, the community development movement has adapted and expanded in response to changes within the broader political environment. It has grown into what Vidal refers to as a ‘fledgling industry’ that includes more than 2,000 community based development organizations. See Avis C. Vidal, “CDCs as Agents of Neighborhood Change: The State of the Art,” in *Revitalizing Urban Neighborhoods*, W. Dennis Keating, et. al., eds., (Lawrence, Kansas: University Press of Kansas, 1996), 149-150.

communities. Owens contends that community development corporations are often essential to successful community development.²⁹⁶

The use of CDCs by black churches reveals their understanding of the interdependence of the public sector and civil society, especially the third sector. Since the 1960s, the public sector has routinely relied on public nonprofit partnerships to address collective problems. ...by the 1990s these partnerships had both survived and prospered, with church-associated nonprofit organizations participating in and benefiting from them.²⁹⁷

As an expression of SHSU, the CEDM within the black church has been a continued illustration of the important dual function the church serves in marginalized poor communities.

In this work, the AMEZ church will be used as a proxy for the SHSU tradition within the black church. The AMEZ church was founded in New York City in 1796. Its origins are in the dissatisfaction of African Americans with the racial discrimination they faced in the Methodist Episcopal Society. The founder, James Varick, whose mother was a former slave, along with other members of John Street Church broke away and began their own denomination to worship freely without discrimination. Of these early pioneers of the AMEZ church, Walls says, "Their action proved to be a deliberate, determined and complete severance of relations with the Methodist denomination and a bold stroke for religious and race freedom."²⁹⁸ This church was born in the spirit of freedom and self-

²⁹⁶ See Michael Leo Owens, *God and Government in the Ghetto: The Politics of Church-State Collaboration in Black America*, (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2007).

²⁹⁷ Ibid.; See also Michael Leo Owens, "Doing Something in Jesus' Name: Black Churches and Community Development Corporations" in *New Day Begun: African American Churches and Civic Culture in Post-Civil Rights America*, R. Drew Smith, ed., (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003), 216.

²⁹⁸ Walls, *The African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church*, 48.

determination and produced and supported individuals and institutions that continued to perpetuate the SHSU ethos²⁹⁹.

3.2.c AMEZ Church—SHSU in Action

This SHSU tradition within the black church has spawned a great deal of economic, social, and political activism of African American congregations from abolitionism and enfranchisement efforts during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, to community and economic development efforts of churches in depressed urban and rural communities during the twenty-first century. Many local congregations have their own story to tell of the historical involvement of their members in efforts of freedom, equality, and justice; likewise, national denominations also have historical records of their struggle on behalf of marginalized disenfranchised populations of African Americans throughout the nation. For our purposes, we are focusing on the African Methodist Episcopal Zion (AMEZ) denomination to glean principles to guide us in constructing a framework for a BCEEWB. This focus is necessary because it is difficult to capture the SHSU tradition without narrowing our focus.

I draw on the history and doctrine of the AMEZ church as found in the *Book of Discipline* to examine the Self-Help/Social Uplift tradition according to the categories of Church; faith and Christ; stewardship; wealth and possessions; poverty; and work.

²⁹⁹ For example, abolitionists Fredrick Douglass and Sojourner Truth; leader of the underground railroad, Harriet Tubman; and it supported persons such as Booker T. Washington, who held the first classes of Tuskegee Institute in an AMEZ church.

3.2.d Church

The official website of the AMEZ church states that, from its inception, it has “made the salvation of the whole person—mind, body and spirit—its top priority. At the crux of its ministry lay racial justice, peace and harmony, thus earning it the title, the Freedom Church.”³⁰⁰ In keeping with the SHSU tradition from which it springs, the denomination has also had an emphasis on education. Continues the website, “ ‘In order to succeed in American society as productive citizens, we [the newly freed slaves] need to become an educated citizenry,’ an early AME Zion member once said.”³⁰¹ This vision has been upheld, as the seminaries, colleges, and universities that are maintained by this denomination attest. AMEZ schools include Livingstone College in Salisbury, North Carolina; Clinton Junior College in Rock Hill, South Carolina; Lomax-Hannon Junior College in Greenville, Alabama; A.M.E. Zion University in Monrovia, Liberia; Hood Theological Seminary in Salisbury, North Carolina; and Hood Speaks Theological Seminary in Akwa Ibom State, Nigeria.

The denomination claims as another testament to the social and political activism that grew out of its church the pursuits of individuals such as former slaves Frederick Douglass, Sojourner Truth, and Harriet Tubman, who were members of the AMEZ church, and were active in the earliest freedom struggle of African Americans.

The AMEZ Book of Discipline, the document which governs the functioning of the church and its members, states that, “The visible Church of Christ is a congregation of faithful men in which the pure Word of God is preached and the Sacraments duly

³⁰⁰ <http://amez.org/news/amezion/aboutourchurch.html>

³⁰¹ Ibid.

administered according to Christ's ordinance..."³⁰². The distinctive heritage of the Zion Methodism grows out of the legacy of slavery and subsequent racial discrimination which caused African Americans to separate from the white 'mother church' and begin their own independent fellowship where they could worship and serve in dignity and without the "cruel barriers" which confronted them in the Methodist Episcopal church out of which they came. Therefore, the book of discipline states that the mission of the AMEZ church is to,

Increase our love for God and to help meet the needs of humankind by 'Loving God with all our heart, with all our soul, with all our mind, and to love our neighbor as ourselves.' Implicit in this statement is the belief that the church should have a positive relationship to God vertically, and a positive relationship to humankind horizontally. We also share in the mission of His Son Jesus Christ, in 'healing the sick, helping the blind to receive sight, the lame to walk, the leper to be cleansed, the deaf to hear, the dead to be raised, and the poor to have the Good News preached to them.'³⁰³

Central to this mission is clearly steadfast allegiance to Christ's commands regarding the nature of believers' relationship to God and one another. The way this mission is carried out is through rituals of praise, preaching, proselytizing, and a Christian praxis centered on obedience to the "demands of the gospel" and to serving as "ministers of God's liberating and reconciling grace" in the world. Sharing in Christ's mission in Luke 4:18 to the 'least of these' is also how the denomination holds firmly to the mandates of its SHSU heritage. The bedrock of this self-help social/uplift tradition is faith and its role in the life of the community. One's faith has implications for one's actions within the world.

³⁰² *AMEZ Book of Discipline*, 17.

³⁰³ *Ibid.*, 13.

3.2.e Faith and Christ

The *Book of Discipline* states that,

Our heritage in doctrine and our present theological task demand that we renew our faith and understanding of the love of God, our Father, and the Lordship of His Son, Jesus Christ, for the purpose of analyzing the meaning of hope in Christ. We believe that all who have faith in Him will be empowered and invigorated by the Holy Spirit to risk all for the reconciling work and fulfillment of the Kingdom of God.³⁰⁴

Within an orthodox Protestant view of faith, the AMEZ church also understands faith to be the soil from which works, specifically good works, spring. Good works are understood to be the product of and evidence of faith, "...as a tree is discerned by its fruit."³⁰⁵ This faith is grounded in a belief in the Lordship of Christ.

The appropriation of the figure of Christ has held immense significance for African American Christians throughout their history in America. The Christology of the AMEZ church is synonymous with that of the Methodist church from which it grew-- hence, the Nicene/Chalcedonian formulation of Christ, emphasizing His incarnation and the equality of Christ's nature with God's. What is important to note within this particular formulation is that Christ suffered and was crucified to reconcile humankind with God. This reconciliation is extremely important, according to AMEZ doctrine, because it is this reconciling act performed by Christ that allows a right relationship not only between God and humans but among humans themselves. The emphasis in the SHSU tradition on social uplift and attending to the needs of others is made possible because of this reconciling work of Christ. The broken fellowship between God and humans is restored and a significant result of the atonement is restoration of human

³⁰⁴ Ibid.

³⁰⁵ Ibid., 17.

fellowship with one another characterized by relationships of care, nurture, and love.

Faith in this Christ enables wholehearted dedication to this reconciling work and

fulfillment of the Kingdom of God.

The orthodox Protestant interpretation of Christ is the foundation of the AMEZ Church's doctrinal statement regarding Christ. Christ is God incarnate, of one substance with God.

The Son, who is the Word of the Father, the very and eternal God, of one substance with the Father, took man's nature in the womb of the blessed Virgin; so that two whole and perfect natures, that is to say the Godhead and manhood, were joined together in one person, never to be divided, whereof is one Christ, very God and very man, who truly suffered, was crucified, dead, and buried, to reconcile His Father to us, and to be a sacrifice, not only for original guilt, but also for the actual sin of men. ...Christ did truly rise again from the dead, and took again His body....wherewith He ascended into heaven, and there sitteth until He shall return to judge all men at the last day.³⁰⁶

It is in obedience to Christ that individuals fulfill the command to love one another and follow Him as a moral exemplar in caring for the needs of the poor and vulnerable in society.

3.2.f Stewardship

The AMEZ *Book of Discipline* states that,

The African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church recognizes God to be the Sovereign Owner of all things and man/woman as His stewards. Stewardship brings into focus a deeper understanding of this relationship and the obligation of Christians to be a faithful and personal response to God's love through the commitment of our temple, time, and treasure. Every member is advised to acknowledge the principle of giving a systematic portion of all income in the form of a tithe (i.e., at least 10 percent of all income) to God through the local church.³⁰⁷

³⁰⁶ Ibid., 14.

³⁰⁷ Ibid., 26.

The understanding of stewardship is broad in that it touches on one's use of one's self in service as well as the use of one's money in service to higher means of one's local congregation through a tithe.³⁰⁸ This giving of the tithe is both an expression of love and an obligation or Christian duty. As a response to God's love, the tithe serves as a reminder for believers of their utter dependence on God and God's bounteous provision from which they subsist. The tithe also serves as a reminder of the place that wealth and material possessions should hold in the believer's life—a place that is not above God and other persons.

Stated within the general rules of the United Societies³⁰⁹ of which AMEZ Church is part, there is a clear stance on economic conduct of individuals regarding usury and relationships within the market of exchange. For example, it is expected of all who consider themselves members of such societies to do no harm,

by avoiding evil of every kind, especially that which is most generally practiced such as: ...returning evil for evil, ...the using of many words in buying and selling; the buying and selling of goods that have not paid the duty; giving or taking things on usury (that is, unlawful interest); ...doing unto others what we would not they should do unto us; doing what we know is not for the glory of God; ... laying up treasures on earth; buying of goods without the probability of paying for them.³¹⁰

In addition to providing for the general needs of those within one's broader community, there is a clear understanding that individuals within the community of faith have particular claims on one another for support. The *Book of Discipline* argues that it is also expected that individuals provide for the needs of others, "...by giving food to the hungry; by clothing the naked; by visiting or helping them that are sick or in prison."

³⁰⁸ It does not, however, seem to have an ecological dimension included under this category.

³⁰⁹ Before Methodism had become an official church and an organized denomination, the various congregations were known as societies.

³¹⁰ AMEZ, *Book of Discipline*, 23.

Members have claims on one another and are thus expected to support one another economically. The *Book of Discipline* reminds that,

It is expected of all who wish to continue in these Societies, that they should continue to evidence their salvation...by doing good especially to them that are of the household of faith, or groaning so to be; employing them preferably to others; buying one of another; helping one another in business and so much the more because the world will love its own, and them only.³¹¹

This mandate to support those of the household of faith economically is one of the aspects of the SHSU tradition that helped spawn black capitalism. From their pulpits, pastors encouraged support of black businesses. Many church newspapers ran ads for black owned businesses. For decades throughout the late nineteenth and into the twentieth century, black businessmen and women could count on a solid customer base from their own and other congregations within their communities.

3.2.g Wealth & Possessions

Within this tradition, theological and ethical reflection on wealth and poverty begins with the acknowledgement of the dignity and infinite worth (grounded in the conception of individuals as children of God, made in God's image) of persons in community. Therefore, a commitment to eradicating poverty, as a threat to human flourishing, does not encompass the whole of economic justice. In addition to this commitment, there must be mutual responsibility of all members of society (regardless of socio-economic level) to the commitment to social uplift and social reform—to the common good. The common good is threatened if members opt out of responsibility to one another, or if economic conditions are perceived as unjust, such as unjust distribution

³¹¹ Ibid., 24.

of wealth and power. Commitment to the common good also goes beyond mere charity and mutual aid which provides safeguards for the disadvantaged; it also entails a commitment to social justice more broadly.

The Church has had two prevailing approaches to wealth and material possessions. One has been to renounce excess and encourage self sacrifice, moderation, and prioritizing the use of resources for the care of the ‘least of these’ in society. On the other hand, the gospel has been used as a catalyst for individual and communal economic development on the basis of the self help self determination ethos which undergirds the SHSU tradition in the black church.

Under the heading of ‘Christian Men’s Goods’, referring to possessions and wealth, the *Book of Discipline* argues for the proper use of material possessions. It contends that, “The riches and goods of Christians are not common, as touching the right, title, and possession of the same, as some do falsely boast, notwithstanding, every man ought, of such things as he possesses, liberally to give alms to the poor according to his ability.”³¹² Thus, charity toward the poor is a significant expectation for the believer and key to one’s identity as a believer, mirroring the significance of this aspect of Christ’s ministry on earth. This denominational understanding of the centrality of charity in the notion of stewardship reveals the understanding of the entitlement of the poor and the validity of their claims on “the haves” in society.

Like John Wesley, the recognized founder of Methodism, the AMEZ church’s founder, James Varick, also encouraged giving liberally. The emphasis being on ideals of the Protestant work ethic prevail. Wesley’s famous dictum, “earn all you can, save all

³¹² *AMEZ Book of Discipline*, 21.

you can and give all you can” is an ideal that also undergirds this notion of stewardship of wealth and possessions.

The folk wisdom of the church mothers and fathers that admonishes that God helps those who help themselves is based on parables such as that of the good steward in Luke 19:11-27, where to the steward who has, more is given and to the one who has nothing, even that shall be taken away. Thus, it is imperative that those in need show initiative, show that they are trying to ‘lift’ themselves out of economic deprivation. This folk wisdom is used to encourage the disadvantaged in their efforts at self-help and self-determination. It acknowledges the agency of the individual and thus of the part of this agency in contributing to making God’s provision a reality.

3.2.h Poverty

There are two dimensions to talking about poverty. One is the perspective of the “haves” which deals with the obligation to the poor. The other is from the perspective of the “have nots” which deals with the status and nature of the poor person. For this tradition, Christian obligation is understood within the context of the paradox of poverty within a prosperous nation. This obligation takes the form of charity and constructing social and political infrastructure for enhancing human well being. The wealthy were not the only ones expected to contribute to providing for the less fortunate; all were understood to have an obligation to ensuring the needs of all were met. Foundational to the principle of social uplift is this sense of Christian duty. Indeed, all could exercise moral responsibility under the example of the moral exemplar, Christ. Therefore, even

those with little gave of that little—it was just short of malevolence for Christians to opt out of their responsibility to the welfare of the whole.

AMEZ Church historian William J. Walls argues that,

The history of the black church in America is also highlighted by the effort to achieve its objectives free of any outside assistance. The A.M.E. Zion Church has always had a consistent concern for the poor, and the orphans, for aged ministers and families. It is almost miraculous that a poor race, striving to free itself from the shackles of slavery, could plan at all in this direction. During its vigorous struggle for Emancipation, projection of its ideals for the needy never ceased. While their passion for freedom was rife, they were imbued with the realization that serving the needy was the first mission of the church of Jesus Christ.³¹³

Indeed, much was done to serve the needy from the inception of this church. Home Mission societies, the social activist arm of the church which was lead and run by women, were instrumental in founding and maintaining educational institutions for training both lay and clergy post-Emancipation. They also established domestic and international missions on behalf of impoverished populations. This ethos of self help and self determination, racial uplift and solidarity is what enabled the church to carry out its “first mission” of serving the needy. In addition to the Home Missions Society in the AME Zion Church, the so-called classes have also historically been avenues through which the church ensures provision for the poor. The classes are subdivisions of members into smaller groups for the purpose of establishing a “subpastoral oversight that shall effectively reach every member of the church. ...to aid in carrying out the system adopted for the support of the pastor and the poor of the church.”³¹⁴ Walls states that, “The ministers themselves had spent years before and after Emancipation sacrificing and

³¹³ William J. Walls, *The African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church: Reality of the Black Church*, (Charlotte, NC: A.M.E. Zion Publishing House, 1974), 425

³¹⁴ *AMEZ Book of Discipline*, 36.

building up a church to serve the needs of its oppressed race,...”³¹⁵ From the beginning, the denomination made efforts on behalf of impoverished African Americans. They appropriated funds for the education of poor blacks whose families were unable to educate them and for material necessities such as clothing, and funds were made available for care of the sick within communities.³¹⁶

3.2.i Work and Class

Protestants understand work to be imbued with dignity, and it is key to the self-help, self-determination ethos. Though the AMEZ church does not have an official statement regarding this category, nonetheless, the tradition indirectly deals with notions related to work understanding every person’s work as worthy of respect and dignity. Additionally, the socio-economic position of an individual was not something that was supposed to determine their treatment, according to AME Zion tradition. Thus, the division that existed between classes was considered unrepresentative of the Christian spirit of love. In his account of the AMEZ spirit regarding work, class relations, and poverty, Walls contends that,

Intelligent concern for the extension of the kingdom of heaven on earth calls for attention to social agitation. The Bible clearly teaches that rich and poor should dwell together in peace, for the Lord is the maker of them all. The arraying of capital against labor and the division of society into conflicting classes are to be deplored, and as far as possible, prevented. The Church should emphasize the duty of mutual forbearance and charity. It should be her aim to exalt the dignity of labor and to sanctify wealth and culture. The ministers of the Lord’s house ought to be of such a nature that lines of social distinction should disappear, and the wholesome truth be universally accepted that God is no respecter of persons.³¹⁷

³¹⁵ Walls, *African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church*, 428.

³¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 426.

³¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 539.

Consequently, the stratification of African Americans along class lines has been a historical challenge within the black church. The bifurcation of the black community is something that the church battled with, particularly in the earlier years of its establishment. Most notable in the history of the church is the tension between the urban blacks within the established black religious institutions in the Northern cities and the poor rural African American southerners who joined these congregations during the Great Migration of the early twentieth century. Evelyn Higginbotham describes the growing class disparity that characterized the black church and was evident in the Women's Convention discourse of respectability in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century,

At one extreme emerged a black middle class of lawyers, educators, physicians, ministers, and entrepreneurs—a new male and female elite that was conscious of its higher class position and was in many respects, culturally and psychologically alienated from the less 'assimilated', unskilled masses of the working poor. At the other extreme was unproductive lower class [underclass] of vagrants, criminals, prostitutes—men and women whose lifestyles blatantly transgressed American social norms. Between these two extremes stood the great mass of the black working poor.³¹⁸

This class stratification that Higginbotham has captured is a challenge that the SHSU tradition has constantly faced in the black church. Under segregation, it was an institution in which all classes interfaced regularly. However, the contemporary black church does not seem to be engaged in an internal class struggle. Instead, it is perceived as a middle class institution over and against its poor community neighbors.

³¹⁸ Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham, *Righteous Discontent: The Women's Movement in the Black Baptist Church, 1880-1920*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993), 205.

3.2.j Conclusion

This then is how the AMEZ church as an example of the SHSU tradition responded to cultural norms regarding the categories of poverty, wealth, work, possessions, stewardship—all of which are influenced by individuals’ understandings of faith, Christ and the Church. Understanding its primary mission to be to serve the needy, The AMEZ Church became known as the Freedom Church. From its establishment, it “made the salvation of the whole person—mind, body and spirit—its top priority.” The SHSU tradition of social uplift emphasized that attending to the needs of others is possible for us only because of this reconciling work of Christ. Faith in this Christ enables wholehearted dedication to this reconciling work and labor toward fulfillment of the Kingdom of God on earth. It has provided the foundation upon which both the black liberation and prosperity gospel theological traditions are built.

Exemplified within the AMEZ church is the SHSU tradition’s emphasis on freedom and dignity; self determination; education; racial solidarity; economic independence; emphasis on ownership and prosperity (not simply individualistic prosperity, but with an emphasis on wider societal uplift); thrift; and hard work. These principles provide the framework for a Black Christian Ethic of Economic Well Being.

3.3 Prosperity Gospel

The prosperity gospel movement has its origins in the white evangelical charismatic movement. However, the shape that the popularized prosperity theology has

taken within the African American religious experience stands on the foundation of the self help/self determination ethos of the black church.

Prosperity theology, pejoratively known as ‘name it, claim it’ theology and more popularly as ‘positive confession’ theology or ‘faith teaching,’³¹⁹ is at the heart of what is known as the Word-Faith, Word of Faith, or Faith Movement. The Word-Faith Movement is characterized by a belief in God’s willingness to bless the faithful with prosperity/material wealth and divine health.³²⁰ Positive confession is one of the central practices of the Word of Faith movement. Thematic and doctrinal unity within the Word-faith movement center around: positive confession; knowing who you are in Christ; belief in divine health, healing, and material prosperity as the Christian’s divine right.³²¹

With sources in both Pentecostalism and charismatic Christianity³²², the Word-Faith movement is purported to have its origins in New Thought and metaphysical philosophy. Kenneth Hagin, Sr., known as the ‘father’ of the movement, popularized its

³¹⁹ Randall Balmer, *Encyclopedia of Evangelicalism*, (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2002), 263.

³²⁰ Randall Balmer, *Encyclopedia of Evangelicalism*, 471. See also Milmon F. Harrison, *Righteous Riches: The Word of Faith Movement in Contemporary African American Religion*, (Oxford University Press, 2005); and D. R. McConnell, *A Different Gospel*, (Hendrickson Publishers, 1988).

³²¹ Harrison, *Righteous Riches*, 8. See also Kenneth Hagin, *How God Taught me about Prosperity*, (Tulsa, Oklahoma: Faith Library Publications, 1985); Hagin, *Right and Wrong Thinking*, (Tulsa, Oklahoma: Faith Library Publications, 1966); Price, *Three Keys to Positive Confession*, (Los Angeles, California: Faith One Publishing, 1994); Price, *The Purpose of Prosperity*, (Los Angeles, California: Faith One Publishing, 2001).

³²² The greek word, *charism* is used in evangelical circles in reference to God’s direct grace—apart from any earthly mediation of an institutional hierarchy of the church. This grace is understood to be the operation of the Holy Spirit upon the church and is manifested variously, through “gifts” of the Spirit. They include the gift of prophecy, preaching, healing, and speaking in tongues. The groundwork for the Charismatic movement was laid in the mid-twentieth century by the likes of ecumenical Pentecostal preachers such as Oral Roberts and David Du Plessis. By 1960, the movement also known as charismatic renewal or neo-Pentecostalism took root in many mainline Protestant and some Catholic circles (known as the Catholic Charismatic Renewal). It is believed to have it origins in the news of an Episcopal rector (Dennis Bennett) receiving the baptism of the Holy Spirit. Other mainline Protestant denominations to which it spread include the Lutheran, Presbyterian, United Methodist and American Baptist churches. See Balmer, *Encyclopedia of Evangelicalism*, 123-124.

tenets.³²³ However, the actual founding of the movement is attributed to E. W. Kenyon.³²⁴ Kenyon, who was “the historical root from which the Faith Movement grew”, synthesized teachings from the Holiness Movement, Pentecostalism, and New Thought metaphysics³²⁵. “Kenyon’s synthesis of New Thought metaphysical philosophy, teaching that reality is actually created in the minds and affirmed in the speech of believers, gives today’s Faith Message some of its most distinctive doctrinal and ritual characteristics.”³²⁶

Andrew Perriman ascribes the origins of the Word of Faith Movement to disadvantaged social and economic contexts of Word preachers who propelled it to popularity. He notes the marginal contexts of poverty and deprivation from which the faith preachers came.³²⁷ “A gospel of economic and physical well-being was appealing to such persons and continues to provide hope for the thousands of followers who seek release from a life of socio-cultural disenfranchisement.”³²⁸ He argues that the popularity of this gospel also lies in the fact that, “...the pursuit of physical well-being and material prosperity had become a dominant theme in American culture.”³²⁹

One of the most influential and earliest African American proponents of prosperity theology within the Word-Faith movement is Fredrick K. C. Price, a disciple of Kenneth Hagin. He is recognized as the first African American Word Faith teacher in

³²³ Harrison, *Righteous Riches*, 5. Bowman states that “...Hagin [is] the undisputed living patriarch, if not original father, of the Word-Faith Movement.” See Robert M. Bowman, *The Word-Faith Controversy: Understanding the Health and Wealth Gospel*, (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Books, 2001), 94; See also McConnell, *A Different Gospel*.

³²⁴ E. W. Kenyon was an early twentieth century radio preacher. See Balmer, *Encyclopedia of Evangelicalism*; Harrison, *Righteous Riches*; and McConnell, *A Different Gospel*.

³²⁵ New Thought metaphysics is also referred to as Mind Cure, Mental Healing Mind Science or Harmonialism. See Harrison, *Righteous Riches*, 6.

³²⁶ *Ibid.*

³²⁷ Andrew Perriman, *Faith, Health and Prosperity: A Report on ‘Word of Faith’ and ‘Positive Confession’ Theology* by ACUTE, (Waynesboro, Georgia: Paternoster Press, 2003), 64.

³²⁸ *Ibid.*

³²⁹ *Ibid.*

Charismatic circles.³³⁰ Price is a native of Santa Monica, California and grew up within the Jehovah's Witness faith tradition.³³¹ He became an evangelical Christian in 1953 and entered the ministry in 1955. He has been affiliated with several denominations: Baptist, African Methodist Episcopal, Presbyterian, and Christian and Missionary Alliance. He is currently on a denominationally independent course, as the founder of Crenshaw Christian Center, established in 1973.³³² At the time of its establishment, he was *the* African American voice of the growing faith formula theology and was instrumental in bringing Hagin's popularized Word of Faith into African American homes.³³³ His congregation (which has a large proportion of African Americans) is multiracial and is over twenty thousand strong. He is a televangelist with a broadcast that has been running since 1978.

Price is among those televangelists who support the self-help, "bootstrap" mentality espoused by this popular form of prosperity gospel. However, unlike many of his cohorts, he has attended to the issue of race and racism in religion. This attention to race, however, was spurred by a conflict with Hagin, as opposed to being born from a critical assessment of structural racism in America.³³⁴ Given their broad influence in relation to individuals' understanding of prosperity theology, I will focus on the work of both Price and Hagin in drawing out the main facets of this theology.

³³⁰ Jonathan L. Walton, *Watch This! The Ethics and Aesthetics of Black Televangelism*, (New York: New York University Press, 2009), 98.

³³¹ Randall Balmer, *Encyclopedia of Evangelicalism*, 467.

³³² *Ibid.*

³³³ Walton, *Watch This!*, 99.

³³⁴ In his book, *Race, Religion and Racism: A Bold Encounter with Division in the Church*, Price argues, "I don't need a black Jesus, and I don't need a white Jesus; I need a real Jesus." The catalyst for his "bold" confrontation of racism within the church was a sermon by a white Word of Faith preacher (it is believed to be Hagin, Sr.) that implied that he was against interracial dating and marriage. Hagin is alleged to have said during this sermon that he told his daughter when she was in kindergarten, "Hey look, we're friends, we play, we go together as groups but we don't date one another..." He then went on to tell the congregation, "...we enjoy fellowship with one another, ...we can live and work together—we just don't go with one another, and we just don't mix our races." 32-33.

Prosperity theology is characterized by a particular interpretation of biblical teachings that emphasize divine health and material prosperity. In his book explaining the purpose of prosperity, Price explains why God “prosper” Christians. The sole objective for God making Christians wealthy is not for their pleasure...but to “seek and save the lost.” Price states that, “According to scripture, God’s will is that everyone come into a knowledge of His [sic] Son Jesus Christ and receive Him so they can be saved. That way the relationship that God had with man [sic] before the fall of Adam can be reestablished.”³³⁵

Walton’s observation applies to Price when he remarks that,

African American religious broadcasting typically displays an uncritical acceptance of the American myth of success as the defining reality of American existence. Themes of self-choice, controlling one’s own destiny, and seizing economic opportunities available in the ‘Promised Land’ of America’s capitalist economy are all homiletic staples... The time is right, according to many black televangelists, for African Americans to cast down their buckets and quench their thirsts from the plentiful rivers of America’s opportunities.³³⁶

Indeed, the approach to personal liberation, social transformation, and economic empowerment employed by such preachers is in line with the nineteenth-century economic theories of Booker T. Washington which emphasized economic prosperity, economic independence, and socio-cultural notions of success (to which economic prosperity, and property ownership are central). The popular form of prosperity theology is attractive to contemporary adherents precisely because it reinforces cultural beliefs about the American Dream and other mythologies of success; it embraces capitalist economic rationality; and advocates the religious individualism that is characteristic of many Protestant churches.

³³⁵ Price, *The Purpose of Prosperity*, 4.

³³⁶ Walton, *Watch This!*, 202.

3.3.a Church

Drawing on a Scriptural metaphor, Price claims that Christians are temples which house the Spirit of God. According to him, the church is "...the place where the temples come together to fellowship around the Word of God, and with one another, and to bring in the tithes and offerings."³³⁷ He assesses the purpose of the church thus:

Ministry now is spiritual; it is not physical. It is not wrong if the local congregation agrees to feed poor folk who do not have anything to eat. It is not wrong if the congregation agrees to clothe people who do not have clothes to wear. But that is not the purpose of the church. It is good to feed the poor and to clothe the naked, and these things could be a bait to draw some people in so that they can be ministered to ...but that is not the primary purpose of the church. The Church that Jesus set up was not to be a welfare agency. It was to be a channel through which He could pipe the wealth so that the lost could be sought and brought into the knowledge of Him.³³⁸

For Price, the purpose of the church does not lie in the traditional Christian understanding of the priority of believers' responsibility to the 'least of these.' Instead, the focus is evangelism and spiritual salvation. By privileging the spiritual, he gives less prominence to the physical in the church's mission. This dualism allows him to deemphasize attending to material needs of individuals. Instead, he considers the church's priority as being a channel of wealth—which then makes evident the centrality of tithes and of sowing financial "seeds". It also explains the urgency with which giving is stressed; after all giving money leads to the salvation of lost souls.

Christian identity for those who ascribe to the prosperity doctrine is therefore in no way significantly tied to caring for the economically less fortunate, but to saving the

³³⁷ Price, *Purpose of Prosperity*, 116.

³³⁸ *Ibid.*, 116-117.

“lost”, and on what those who know who they are in Christ are entitled to—wealth and health.

3.3.b Christ

Prosperity theology does not diverge significantly from the traditional Protestant view of Christ as being fully God and fully human. A member of the Trinity, Christ is the incarnate expression of God on earth. Through Christ’s sacrificial death on the cross believers are assured forgiveness and salvation, through faith. Christ is the good Shepherd, our advocate, high priest, and intercessor, because, as Hagin reminds us,

[Christ] had to carry His blood into the heavenly Holy of Holies and seal the document of our redemption with it. Under the old covenant, ...the high priest would enter into the Holy of Holies once a year and offer the blood of innocent animals that were slain as a sacrifice for the sins of the people. Their sins would then be covered for another year. But Christ entered in once and for all. ...His blood is the guarantee, so to speak, of our redemption.³³⁹

Christ is also understood to be the head of the Church, or, as Hagin asserts more expansively, “Christ is the Caretaker, the Lover, the Bridegroom of the Body (the Church, the body of Christ). He is the Lord and the Head of the Church.”³⁴⁰

Where this doctrine deviates from Protestant orthodoxy is in its notion of Christ as middle class, having wealth as opposed to being poor. The perception that God is rich is pervasive. Hence, prosperity theology frequently refers to scriptures such as Psalm 50:10 and Haggai 2:8³⁴¹ understood as referring to God’s wealth of possessions and

³³⁹ Hagin, *The Present Day Ministry of Jesus Christ*, (Tulsa, Oklahoma, Kenneth Hagin), 7.

³⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 28.

³⁴¹ Psalm 50:10 “For every wild animal of the forest is mine, the cattle on a thousand hills.”; Haggai 2:8 “The silver is mine, and the gold is mine, says the Lord of hosts.” (New Revised Standard Version).

riches. Likewise, God's Son, Christ (and Christ's twelve disciples who also are heirs of Abraham³⁴²), is understood not to be poor, but to have had wealth.

In light of this, how are other passages such as 2 Corinthians 8:9 that refer to Christ's poverty to be explained? "For you know the generous act of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though He was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor, so that by his poverty you might become rich." Price claims that,

The word poor and rich are relative terms. A million dollars is a lot of money, but the newspapers today talk about a man who is worth 34 billion dollars. If you have only a million dollars, you are still poor in comparison to a man with 34 billion. When it says Jesus was rich but became poor, it is talking from the standpoint of heaven. The Bible says in heaven, the city is fifteen hundred miles square, and all the streets are made of gold. The city has twelve gates and all are made out of a single pearl. So, when Jesus left heaven to come to earth, He became poor. Compared to heaven, all the wealth in this world would be like welfare.³⁴³

Price here emphasizes that Christ was still considered to be wealthy because the wealth from which he came in heaven is so vast in comparison to that here on earth that comparatively speaking, he was poor. Prosperity preachers work hard to ensure that believers have the "correct" picture of God and Christ, because a poor God is out of step with prosperity theology.

3.3.c Faith

Faith is central to this theological tradition; it is the key to what one receives and how one succeeds. Within the Word-Faith movement, faith is not merely believing in

³⁴² See Galatians 3:14, 29, the blessings of Abraham include wealth.

³⁴³ Price, *The Purpose of Prosperity*, 61.

God and on what God says, but believing that one has what whatever one speaks.³⁴⁴ Our, speaking determines our physical state, both negative and positive. Believers assert that one can actually create circumstances (of health and wealth, for instance) by one's "confession" and faith. According to Price, this act of confession or speaking "the Word" (scripture) is so significant that it is considered to be a prerequisite for prospering.³⁴⁵

Harrison states that,

It [religion as practiced within Word of Faith framework] is not primarily a religion of contemplation or meditation but is centered on understanding how God and the spiritual world 'works' in order to live in such a way as to please him [sic], and also so that one can be blessed by him [sic]."³⁴⁶

The understanding of how God "works" is extremely important. It is assumed that there are simple spiritual laws that God obeys and if one understands these laws and implements them, one will reap the rewards. Take, for example, the "law" of sowing and reaping. According to it, one believes that God must obey this universal spiritual principle, meaning that if the believer "sows", God will reward and they will receive a financial harvest.

There is a significantly practical orientation to this tradition. Harrison observes that the 'Faith Message' is about taking direct, aggressive action.

It is very much about the acquisition and manipulation of power—supernatural power in the natural realm of human existence. ...Christians who know who they are become channels for the working out of God's supernatural power in the natural realm.³⁴⁷

³⁴⁴ Bowman, *Word - Faith Controversy*, 33; See also Harrison, *Righteous Riches*; Price, *Three Keys to Positive Confession*; Price, *Name It and Claim It*.

³⁴⁵ Price, *The Purpose of Prosperity*, 13-14; see also Price's *Name It and Claim It*; and Hagin, *Right and Wrong Thinking*.

³⁴⁶ Harrison, *Righteous Riches*, 32.

³⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 33.

This form of spirituality is empowering for the believer; the feeling of being able to create or alter situations or one's circumstances leaves the individual with a sense of agency and power.

3.3.d Stewardship

Rather than seeking holy poverty, the prosperity gospel emphasizes the salvific role of money and possessions. The prosperity doctrine offers adherents something they feel is missing from other 'traditional' churches (mainline Protestant and catholic churches, basically any church that does not subscribe to prosperity theology)—a *gnosis* that is absent in these traditional congregations. This spiritual knowledge yields the Truth about Christian identity, wealth, and possessions, whereas "traditional" congregations are often portrayed as having a misguided attitude toward wealth. In his pamphlet, *How God Taught Me About Prosperity*, Hagin tells of the detrimental effect that this attitude has had in his life and the negative implications that it has for believers. He states that,

The subject of prosperity is currently so misunderstood in the church world... The Lord Himself taught me about prosperity. I never read about it in a book. I got it directly from heaven. ...
...we young preachers swallowed whatever our elders said about prosperity; we didn't take the time to examine the Word of God on the subject. We were taught that if you're really *humble*[emphasis author's], you're poor; and it's a characteristic of *holiness*[emphasis author's] to live on Barely-Get-Along Street, 'way down at the end of the block, right next to Grumble Alley. ...That's honoring God!As I look back now, I turn my face away in shame that I was so stupid. ...(I'd been indoctrinated with all that 'religious' thinking and

unconsciously I still thought that maybe it was wrong to have the things of this world).³⁴⁸

Hagin's indoctrination into 'religious' thinking with respect to wealth and possessions comes from the historical Christian struggle between rejection and accommodation of cultural norms regarding wealth. Living in a prosperous country amid domestic and global poverty causes consternation for some Christians in light of biblical injunctions to provide for those less fortunate. Other Christians deal with the tension by sharing what they have. Others still appropriate theological justifications of affluence, such as Hagin's appropriation of the prosperity message.

What is considered to be correct thinking about wealth and possessions is that God wants us to "eat the good of the land", that it is not wrong for us to have the "things of this world," and moreover that if one is not eating the good of the land, it is because one does not have faith. Hagin states that, "Faith is the same in every realm, in every sphere. Faith for finances works just like faith for healing, [like faith for] the baptism in the Holy Spirit."³⁴⁹ He claims that God said to him,

...Now if it were healing you needed...you would claim it by faith and go out and publicly announce you were healed. You've done that. Sometimes even while you were preaching any symptoms you had would disappear. Now, you see, you have to do the same thing when it comes to finances.³⁵⁰

In the prosperity gospel understanding, instead of viewing money and possessions as evil Christians are told to see money and possessions as blessings, as rewards for one's piety, obedience, and faith. God desires individuals to live in divine health and

³⁴⁸ Kenneth E. Hagin, *How God Taught Me About Prosperity* (Tulsa, Oklahoma: Faith Library Publications, 1985), 1-3,13

³⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 11.

³⁵⁰ *Ibid.*

prosperity. Believers are to be wealthy and follow this example of their prosperous, middle-class Christ. Walton observes,

Two things are important to note concerning the prosperity gospel. First, [it] asserts that everyone has the capacity to be a millionaire and never get sick. Divine health and wealth not only are the fruits of the higher life but are synonymous with the higher life. Thus one's faith in Christ can be measured by one's prosperity because faith and prosperity are directly proportional.³⁵¹

The idea that wealth can represent God's blessing is a notion that is not foreign to Protestant tradition. Indeed, Puritanism played a significant role in the justification of material ambition. The condemnation of idleness and extolling of virtues of productivity, hard work, and asceticism attributed to individuals' critical view of poverty and justified curtailing charity. This evidence quelled anxious hearts that were uncertain of their inclusion in the ranks of the predestined elect. Asceticism ensured the accumulation of wealth as the majority of profits from economic activity were invested back into economic activity as opposed to being allocated for conspicuous consumption. It is as if prosperity gospel takes the fundamentals of the Puritan ethic, devoid of its restraints and its communal orientation, and mirrors the development of capitalist America. Within the prosperity tradition, asceticism does not seem to be valued and there is very little, if any, stress on self sacrifice or self denial as virtues in this regard. Even Christ and Christ's disciples are perceived as having been not poor but actually men of means, even the equivalent of the contemporary notion of middle class. Money is understood as being necessary to carry out God's "kingdom work and purposes", and thus, says the prosperity gospel, it follows that stewardship is allocating one's financial resources to one's self and others appropriately.

³⁵¹ Jonathan L. Walton, *Watch This!*, 95.

The prosperity doctrine has a heavy emphasis on tithing and giving one's money (as a form of stewardship) because it is considered to be a fundamental impetus to one's prospering. There is a direct correlation between giving one's money, either through tithing or 'sowing a seed',³⁵² and prosperity. If one does not tithe, one is 'under the curse', and therefore in danger of having one's health, finances, and peace being taken away for having robbed God'³⁵³. Price uses the pericope in Malachi to explain how one will be affected if this important aspect of stewardship is neglected. Giving one's money is therefore often referred to as 'sowing seed'³⁵⁴; not only that, there is purported to be a spiritual 'law' regarding 'sowing and reaping' that is key to one receiving the blessings that God has promised to Abraham's descendents, into which those who subscribe to this theology are believed to be included. Price states that,

You have to be wise enough to be able to discern where you are supposed to sow your seed in order to get a continuous return on what you sow. It is a reciprocal transaction: You plant seed, get a return, plant seed, get a return; plant seed, get a return. And your return should continue to increase until you get to a place where you have a surplus. ...By using our faith and following God's plan for prosperity, we now have a large surplus. We learned long ago not to eat up our seed. We could go out and buy another car, but why should we? We have enough cars,... We would much rather plant seed into the spreading of the gospel so that the lost can be saved.³⁵⁵

The simple and practical faith formulas of the prosperity message are attractive to many of its adherents, and, as in the quotation above, are often validated by this reminder

³⁵² Regarding the notion of sowing seeds of money, Harrison states that, "...there is still a part of the Faith Message's teaching concerning prosperity that causes distress and great concern for those attempting to believe and practice it in their own lives. For example, the part of the teaching which emphasizes what is known as the 'seed-time and harvest' principle, that is whenever someone gives (whether in an offering at church or directly to another person) they are actually planting financial seeds from which they will later be able to reap the harvest of financial blessings in kind." See Harrison, *Righteous Riches*, 70.

³⁵³ This is in reference to Malachi 3.

³⁵⁴ See Keith A. Butler, *A Seed Will Meet Any Need*, (Tulsa, Oklahoma: Word of Faith Publishing, 1998).

³⁵⁵ Price, *Purpose of Prosperity*, 132-133.

about saving the lost. Wealth and possessions therefore hold an enormously prominent place in popular forms of the prosperity gospel.

3.3.e Wealth & Possessions

According to this theological tradition, wealth is fundamental for establishing God’s covenant on earth.³⁵⁶ Thus, wealth is understood as that to which one has a right as a child of God—if one is obedient, faithful, and pious. Wealth lacks the negative connotations that have been traditionally associated with it in the Christian tradition; its potential for pernicious effects on one’s character, such as the temptations of greed, pride, and covetousness are not really emphasized³⁵⁷.

As we saw in Price’s quotation above, one of the key teachings in prosperity theology is that wealth is viewed as a means by which one can be a ‘blessing’ to others; it is the means by which “Kingdom work,” understood as fulfilling God’s mandate to “go into all the world and preach the gospel”, is accomplished.³⁵⁸ A strong evangelical focus marks this perception of the purpose of wealth. Another important feature of wealth and divine health is that they serve as a testimony for others, particularly non-Christians, to the power of God, and thus serve as ‘evidence’ that one is a child of God.³⁵⁹

There is a strong belief in the spiritual realm of existence—a belief that Satan is actively working against God and God’s purposes of prosperity, health, righteousness,

³⁵⁶ Ibid., 71.

³⁵⁷ By earlier Euro-American Protestant tradition, I am referring to the Puritanism, Calvinism and other early traditions that emphasized ascetic behavior and influenced Christian’s beliefs regarding money and possessions.

³⁵⁸ Harrison, *Righteous Riches*, 69; See also Price, *Purpose of Prosperity*, 71.

³⁵⁹ See Price, *Purpose of Prosperity*; Bowman, *Word-Faith Controversy*, 33; and Hagin, *Biblical Keys to Financial Prosperity*.

and justice for believers. It is believed that Satan actively attacks believers with lack, poverty, illness, debt, loss of peace of mind, etc. A believer must speak in faith only for if one confesses wrongly (meaning negatively) one can ‘open the door’ to Satan with one’s words.³⁶⁰

Bowman echoes this when he writes,

The primary basis on which the Word-Faith teachers rest their views on health and wealth is their doctrine of faith and confession. If ‘faith-filled words’ can produce what they say, then it follows that a person who believes that he has healing and speaks a positive confession to that effect will experience health. The same logic applies in matters of financial or material prosperity.³⁶¹

The question is, can we really ‘confess’ our way out of poverty? Likewise, will following simple spiritual laws such as ‘sowing and reaping’ lead to wealth?

3.3.f Poverty

One of the most important features of prosperity theology is its radical break with some of the more traditional notions of poverty. Poverty is understood to be a curse, not something to be exalted nor aspired to.³⁶² On the contrary, it is an indication of disobedience, impropriety, incorrect thinking and confessing, lack of faith, insufficient giving, or some other personal fault. The source of poverty lies with the individual because of some deficiency (usually a spiritual root) on their part.

³⁶⁰ Unpublished focus study church handout. See also Price, *Three Keys to Positive Confession*; Hagin, *Right and Wrong Thinking*.

³⁶¹ Bowman, *Word-faith Controversy*, 206.

³⁶² See Bowman, Robert M. *The Word Faith Controversy*; Price, *Name It, Claim It, the Power of Positive Confession*; Price, *Purpose of Prosperity*; Harrison, *Righteous Riches*; and Hagin, *How God Taught Me*.

People are poor also because of transcendental forces which actually work to keep wealth 'in the wrong hands' and out of the hands of Children of God or those for whom the Kingdom of God is priority. Price argues that there is no shortage of wealth, but that,

[wealth] is in the wrong hands. It has to get into the hands of people who understand that seeking the Kingdom is first. It has to get into the hands of people who have a mind to do the will of God. Satan has very cleverly siphoned off the wealth of the world, and put it into the hands of people who do not care about the things of God.³⁶³

Poverty is further understood to be a curse from which we are redeemed in Christ.³⁶⁴

Price therefore claims that if one does not fulfill the prerequisite for prosperity--which is tithing-- one is 'under a curse.' Thus, the origin of poverty is with 'Satan' and the disobedience of the believer seems also to be correlated with this phenomenon.

Furthermore, according to Hagin, because Adam disobeyed God and "sold out to Satan... then Satan became the god of this world." Thus Adam forfeited his "dominion" over the world (and over the silver and gold) and dominion fell instead into Satan's hands.³⁶⁵

Therefore, Satan is the one who comes to devour the believer's wealth, health, and peace of mind.

Proponents of the prosperity gospel cite Galatians 3:13-14, 29 to support the argument that prosperity is the right of Christians. They understand Christ to have redeemed Christians from the curse of the law so that the blessing of Abraham may come on the Gentiles. This 'blessing of Abraham' is a salient feature of this theology for it refers to the material blessings of the patriarch as an example of what contemporary

³⁶³ Price, *Purpose of Prosperity*, 12-13.

³⁶⁴ Mainly taken from Deuteronomy 28, the curse of the law from which Christ redeemed humanity includes poverty, sickness and spiritual death. See Kenneth E. Hagin, *Redeemed from Poverty, Sickness, and Spiritual Death*, (Tulsa, Oklahoma, Faith Library Publications, 1995); and Hagin, *Biblical Keys to Financial Prosperity*.

³⁶⁵ Hagin, *How God Taught Me About Prosperity*.

Christians are also entitled. Hagin argues that the promise to Abraham was threefold and included a physical, spiritual, and financial blessing. “So if the Israelites under the Old Covenant could receive God’s blessings by keeping the Law, then if we under the New Covenant would walk in love, we would fulfill all the Law too. And the blessings should come on us also.”³⁶⁶

Furthermore, since language is so important given the beliefs regarding positive confession, some leaders within this tradition go as far as to redefine poverty. For example, in his scholarly study of the prosperity gospel, Harrison notes that one congregation refers to the poor as people who are “between blessings”, because,

To call someone poor implies that poverty is a permanent or intrinsic characteristic of his or her being. Redefining poverty...implies that [it] is only a temporary lack of money and not a long-term social location or identity one should accept.³⁶⁷

Poverty, when discussed outside of its historical context, can easily be reinterpreted and, therefore, depoliticized. Adherents call on 2 Corinthians 8:9 to reinforce the notion that Christians should be wealthy. Hagin claims that,

Jesus Christ was rich. Yet for our sakes, He became poor, that we through His poverty, might be rich. ‘Well,’ some people said, ‘that just means spiritually rich.’ But no. The only way Christ became poor was from the material standpoint. He didn’t become poor spiritually, because the spiritually poor couldn’t raise the dead! ...The spiritually poor could not turn water into wine. No, Jesus certainly wasn’t spiritually poor. ...The spiritually poor could not have wrought the healings and the miracles that Jesus did. Jesus became poor *materially* for us. He was our substitute. ...for your sakes he became poor, that YE through his poverty might be RICH [sic].”³⁶⁸

Hagin does note that rich in this sense does not mean that ‘God is going to make all of us millionaires’, but it means ‘full supply’, meaning that God will supply all of one’s needs,

³⁶⁶ Hagin, *Biblical Keys to Financial Prosperity*, 16.

³⁶⁷ Harrison, *Righteous Riches*, 96-97.

³⁶⁸ Hagin, *Biblical Keys to Financial Prosperity*, 18-19.

“...including financial and material needs as well as other needs.”³⁶⁹ Unfortunately, the lavish lifestyles of some leaders within this tradition and their open proclamations about God’s material blessings of extravagance often contradict Hagin’s sentiment here.

Hagin states that, “A lot of folks understand that in Christ, they’ve been redeemed from spiritual death and sickness and disease. But they don’t realize that they’ve been redeemed from poverty.”³⁷⁰ Thus, poverty is not conceptualized as having structural causes but is a concept that has become an ahistorical notion in this tradition. It is disconnected from historical material inequalities that structured relations between groups within this nation. Poverty is a spiritual matter, a perceived personal deficiency of the individual, be it “lack of knowledge” (of who one is in Christ, or of what one is entitled to as a child of God, etc.), disobedience, or lack of faith.

3.3.g Work

Prosperity theology understands that the world or ‘world system’ is dominated by Satan. Therefore, it is a system that is failing and destined to fail. Most important, it is a system in which Christians do not succeed unless they abide by ‘laws’, spiritual laws foreign to this world and the way that it works. Working in such a system therefore will not bring the wealth that one rightfully deserves as a child of God. This is particularly so because Satan is perceived as working to keep wealth from God’s children.

Within traditional Protestant theology the notions of dignity, respect, and sense of purpose are connected to the notion of work, as demonstrated in the Protestant work

³⁶⁹ Ibid., 19.

³⁷⁰ Ibid., 9.

ethic. However, within prosperity theology, work does not hold the same privileged status, but instead seems to be viewed solely in pragmatic terms, merely to provide for one's material necessities. The sense of divine purpose or vocation that is associated with work in orthodox Protestant tradition is lacking. Work is not the way one prospers, it is not to be viewed as one's *source* of wealth. Prosperity is supernatural. Material provision is understood to come from God, not from one's job. Tithing and sowing rather than working is the primary channel through which God will bring wealth to the believer.³⁷¹ This is in contrast to the long understood connection between economic discipline and benevolence that are emphasized in a more traditional Christian ethic. Instead of work being connected to having as its end supererogatory acts, or as being tied to one's purpose, to the service of God and humans, work is viewed almost as necessary drudgery. Price contends that,

God placed wealth in the earth realm. ...The question is: 'how do we, the Church, get the wealth into our hands so that we can establish God's covenant on the earth?' You cannot get it by working a 9-to-5 job. Yes, you ought to work to meet your needs, but just working will not get you ahead of the game. ...The system is not designed for the average person to get ahead to where he or she is freed up to be a financial channel through which God can work to bring forth His covenant.³⁷²

There seems to be a strange paradox in the prosperity message. At one level there is a rejection of the "world system" because of its perceived absence of 'kingdom principles' of righteousness, justice, integrity, and the like. Yet, there is also a wholesale acceptance of worldly capitalistic economic rationality. The obvious distrust of the 'world system' lies partly in its track record among poor and working-class individuals who labor with little reward. However, the theological message is that one *can* get

³⁷¹ Price, *Purpose of Prosperity*, 74.

³⁷² *Ibid.*, 71-74.

ahead—supernaturally, with God. Similar to other traditions in the black church, such as the SHSU, the economic system is accepted as is. The only efforts the prosperity gospel makes at reform is individual reform through kingdom principles being lived out by believers.

Since prosperity is here understood to be supernatural, the prosperity tradition would hardly privilege the physicality of work as it is in traditional Protestant tradition.

So the argument continues like this:

...everything in the physical world was first in the spirit world, because God, who is a Spirit, created the physical world. ...He spoke out what was in His mind and it came into physical existence. ...everything we will ever need in the physical world is already in existence in the spirit world and on deposit for us in the heavenly bank. ...Now by faith, we extract from the heavenly bank and bring those things that we need or desire into the...physical world so that we can utilize them...to seek and save the lost.³⁷³

This link of prosperity to the supernatural/spiritual realm is what makes this doctrine so attractive to masses of individuals who lack the educational attainment and skills necessary for social mobility. Prosperity is not tied to social status, educational level, or skills, they are told.³⁷⁴ Instead, one can become wealthy by supernatural means.

3.3.h Conclusion

The popularized form of the prosperity gospel that African American televangelists propagate is a result of cultural, theological, and social shifts that have developed since the Civil Rights movement and in this “post-denominational” age.

³⁷³ Ibid.

³⁷⁴ This doctrine is also attractive for individuals within the working and middle classes, who by working a 9 to 5 job, will never become millionaires.

Given the sedimented inequalities resulting from a history of discrimination and oppression that have characterized relations between African Americans and whites, prosperity theology's recasting of poverty in a depoliticized ahistorical fashion proves problematic. This theology seems to offer little ground for discourse regarding economic justice to be established.

The response of the prosperity gospel tradition within the black church to cultural norms regarding the categories of poverty, wealth, work, possessions, and stewardship were examined in this section to explore how this tradition yields a particular perspective of Christian behavior in the marketplace. This prosperity tradition emphasizes individual economic prosperity; individual success; a middle-class lifestyle as a goal/aim; and the privileging of supernatural means over the privileging of work to attain wealth.

Having outlined the origins and main tenets of prosperity theology as an outgrowth of the broader Pentecostal, white evangelical, and charismatic movements within the American context, we move to liberation theological and ethical tradition within the African American religious context.

3.4 Black Liberation Theology

The theological and ethical foundation of the black church has been shaped by its nature as a social and religious institution which attends to both the material and spiritual needs of a community of moral agents who historically have suffered from social, political, and economic marginalization. The historical activity of black churches on behalf of their oppressed constituency has been justified by the ethical imperative of

social justice. Thus, liberationist streams of theological and ethical thought characterize various religious expressions that have emerged within the black religious experience in America. Liberation is not a human possession but a divine gift of freedom to those who struggle in faith against violence and oppression.³⁷⁵ Liberation is not an object but the *project* of freedom wherein the oppressed realize that their fight for freedom is a divine right of creation.³⁷⁶ Religion has long been connected with political activism within the survivalist and liberationist tradition of the black church, evidenced in the correlation between the black theological tradition and political activism. Political activities of the black church range from reformist to radical. These political activities which are an outgrowth of the liberation ethos to which I now turn, is based on African American interpretations of Old Testament stories, prophetic pronouncements, and New Testament apocalypse.³⁷⁷

Both prosperity gospel and BLT have roots in different aspects of the African American experience, the former in integrationism/assimilationism, and the latter in nationalism and separatism. Both emerge in their current form in response to the post-Civil Rights Era circumstances of black life.³⁷⁸ The prosperity theology rose to popularity between the 1970s and 80s, an era during which the African American middle

³⁷⁵ See Michael Zweig, "Economics and Liberation Theology" in *Religion and Economic Justice*, Michael Zweig, ed., (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1991), 1-52; and Cone, *God of the Oppressed*.

³⁷⁶ Cone, *God of the Oppressed*, 148.

³⁷⁷ Lincoln and Mamiya, *Black Church in African American Experience*, 202.

³⁷⁸ However, Black liberation theology is also understood by religious scholars, to have been forged in the African American struggle for freedom and justice which began on slave plantations in the rural South. Numerous religious scholars argue that the African American understanding of Christian faith has historically committed them to the active quest for liberation. Furthermore, a fundamental source for black liberation theology is the lived experience of blacks in this country, black history and culture. Cone claims that, "Black theology focuses on black history as a source for its theological interpretation of God's work in the world because divine activity is inseparable from black history. There can be no comprehension of black theology without realizing that its existence comes from a community which looks back on its unique past, visualizes the future, and then makes decisions about possibilities in the present." See James Cone, *A Black Theology of Liberation*, (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 2001), 26-27.

class began to expand thanks to the increasing educational and professional gains they had made.

BLT by contrast rose to particular prominence and began to take shape intellectually during the black freedom struggle in the mid twentieth century.³⁷⁹ This intellectual expression, therefore, arose from the blending of Martin Luther King's gospel of racial justice; black power's message of black pride, self-determination, and racial solidarity; and a long tradition of self help, social uplift, and black nationalism.³⁸⁰ The black nationalist stream of African American religious expression dates back to slavery. In his work on messianic myths historically employed by African Americans as a basis for solidarity and as catalysts for reform, Wilson Jeremiah Moses suggests that it was Nat Turner who first captured the imagination of black nationalists.

...Turner's confession paralleled attitudes reflected by militant black nationalists. He represented the current of militant millennialism that appeared in the writings of Henry Highland Garnet and David Walker. William Lloyd Garrison compared the rebellion to nationalistic uprisings among Poles, Turks, Greeks, and Americans.³⁸¹

Indeed, in the early twentieth century, black consciousness and nationalism continued to serve as ways of lessening injustice and the frustrations of second-class citizenship.³⁸²

Thus, movements such as Garvey's Universal Negro Improvement Association (UNIA) were born. Emerging at a time when many of the mainline black congregations were preoccupied with institution building for the new black middle class, the UNIA served the political, religious, social, recreational, cultural, and economic needs of those

³⁷⁹ See Frederick L. Ware, *Methodologies of Black Theology*, (Cleveland, Ohio: The Pilgrim Press, 2002); Cone, *Risks of Faith: The Emergence of a Black Theology of Liberation, 1968-1998*, (Boston: Beacon Press, 1999).

³⁸⁰ Dwight N. Hopkins, *Introducing Black Theology of Liberation*, (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 2005), 39.

³⁸¹ Wilson Jeremiah Moses, *Black Messiahs and Uncle Toms: Social and Literary Manipulations of a Religious Myth*, (University Park, Pennsylvania: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1982), 66.

³⁸² Wilmore, *Black Religion and Black Radicalism*, 174.

Garveyites who were disillusioned with Christianity.³⁸³ “Bitter about ostracism from the rising black middle class, and looking for a new savior who could give their lives meaning and direction,”³⁸⁴ the unemployed and homeless could come to the Liberty Halls (where Garveyites met for service) to find jobs and housing. Garvey claimed that his work was to uplift African Americans and his vision for liberation went as far as emigration to Africa.

As a mainly intellectual expression, BLT emerged in the wake of the era of protest, at the height of the civil rights and black power movements. At this time, African American clergy were trying to lead masses in the Christian faith at the height of social turmoil caused by racist politics; racial violence against African Americans; white backlash against the militant radical stance of some black churches during the Civil Rights movement; and backlash particularly against the cries for black power by urban militant African Americans on the streets in the late 1960s. BLT was an attempt to make sense of being black and Christian in a society that denigrated black people and their culture, and in a Church which was rife with racism.

Broadly, liberation theologies (such as mujerista, womanist, feminist, and others) grow out of particular socio-historical contexts; they are grounded not only in the scriptural interpretation of liberation but are fundamentally grounded in the particular experience of a people in a particular socio-historical context.³⁸⁵ Liberation theologies hope for the growth of individuals into true personhood, within a just and compassionate

³⁸³ Ibid., 175.

³⁸⁴ Ibid.

³⁸⁵ See Cone, *Black Liberation Theology*; Zweig, “Economics and Liberation Theology”; Hopkins, *Shoes that Fit Our Feet*.

society where there is equality of treatment for all.³⁸⁶ Importantly, the focus of liberation theology is by its very nature on the current historical circumstance of the people, particularly, the ‘least of these’. For instance, Gustavo Gutierrez believes that it is the business of theology to reflect critically on what is actually happening in history (historical praxis). For him and other Latin American liberation theologians, liberation both offers and requires a new way of doing theology that begins in Latin America but is universal in its application. Theology starts with reflection, but goes on ‘to be part of the process through which the world is transformed.’³⁸⁷ Black liberation theology draws on the oppression of Blacks in America. Dwight Hopkins argues that, “The African American church begins in slavery; so slave religion provides the first source for a constructive statement on a black theology of liberation.”³⁸⁸

Despite the hypocrisy of the Christian planter class with whom enslaved Africans worshipped, enslaved Africans developed their own theological understandings of Christian faith. The mediated Christianity received from whites did not negate slaves’ own experience of God and their unique conception of God, Christ, or the purpose of humanity. Thus, their theological imagination and faith instincts from African Traditional Religion in conjunction with conceptions of justice in the Christian gospel comprised the foundation of a black theology expressed through politics and culture.³⁸⁹ Cone argues that white American theological thought has defined the theological task independently of black suffering and defined Christianity as compatible with white

³⁸⁶ See Michael Zweig, ed., “Economics and Liberation Theology” in *Religion and Economic Justice*, (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1991), 1-52; See also Hopkins, *Shoes that Fit Our Feet Sources for a Constructive Black Theology*, (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1993); Riggs, *Awake, Arise and Act*.

³⁸⁷ See Michael Zweig, ed., “Economics and Liberation Theology”; Townes, *In A Blaze of Glory*.

³⁸⁸ Dwight Hopkins, *Shoes that Fit our Feet*, 13.

³⁸⁹ *Ibid.*

racism. He contends that the appearance of black theology therefore is due to the failure of white religionists to relate the gospel of Jesus to the pain of being black in a white racist society.³⁹⁰

[Black theology] arises from the need of blacks to liberate themselves from white oppressors. Black theology is a theology of liberation because it is a theology which arises from an identification with the oppressed blacks of America, seeking to interpret the gospel of Jesus in light of the black condition. It believes that the liberation of the black community *is* God's liberation (emphasis author's).³⁹¹

Thus, the bible is understood as the record of God's liberation of oppressed people from victimization and injustice resulting from racial discrimination.

Likewise, for Marcia Riggs, black liberation theology focuses on the concrete historical experience of subjugation of black women and men in a racialized society. It begins with an examination of roots and ongoing dynamics of the subjugation of Blacks in America, recognizing that the past is embedded in the present social relations. Most importantly, the hermeneutic of liberation is applied to the internal history of Christianity, scrutinizing and re-engaging scripture and tradition through critical awareness of the existing situation of oppressed African American women and men.³⁹²

3.4.a Church

As the precursor of black power, protest and action were the early marks of the black church's uniqueness.³⁹³ The worship setting under bondage is the womb of the black church. Its origins shaped its task. The black church has been an institution that has

³⁹⁰ Cone, *A Black Theology of Liberation*, 4.

³⁹¹ *Ibid.*, 4-5.

³⁹² See Marcia Riggs, *Awake, Arise and Act*.

³⁹³ See Gayraud Wilmore, *Black Religion and Black Radicalism*.

fulfilled various roles within the black community in order to help meet the physical, psychological, social, economic, and political needs. As J. Deotis Roberts posits, the survival of African Americans is a miracle of grace, and the black church, both in its historical position as an ‘invisible’ and as a visible institution, has nurtured African Americans through their suffering and kept them alive.³⁹⁴ The black church, according to Roberts, must be a progressive and active instrument of black liberation in the here and now. He contends that it should conceive of salvation in holistic terms, and its responsibility is ministering to the basic needs of Blacks, which include the physical, psychological, social, economic, and political.³⁹⁵ Cone notes the importance of the themes of freedom and hope that were derived from black church tradition. He claims that the black religious tradition that has been inherited by those in the black church is one that has always interpreted its confession of faith according to the people’s commitment to the struggle for earthly freedom.³⁹⁶

In *Roots of a Black Future: Family and Church*, Roberts claims that “Traditionally the black church has been an extended family and the family has been a ‘domestic church’. Given the harsh circumstances of racial oppression which resulted in disintegration of black families and disunity within black communities,

...blacks need a cohesive institution to overcome family disorganization and social concomitants of the same. The black church, at once a religious and community organization, has real possibilities for fulfilling this primary need. ...The destruction of the black family has been deliberate during our sojourn in this country.³⁹⁷

³⁹⁴ See David Emmanuel Goatley, ed. *Black Religion, Black Theology: The Collected Essays of J. Deotis Roberts*, (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International, 2003) ; See also his other works *Liberation and Reconciliation A Black Theology*, (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1971); and *Roots of a Black Future: Family and Church*, (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1980).

³⁹⁵ J. Deotis Roberts, *Black Religion, Black Theology* , 80.

³⁹⁶ James Cone, *Risks of Faith*, 40.

³⁹⁷ Roberts, *Liberation and Reconciliation*, 60-61.

By contrast, the black church is a fellowship in which every member is ‘somebody’. It has always been a place where blacks who have been “nobodies” through the week have affirmed their dignity as persons.³⁹⁸ At the center of this affirmation is the Biblical image of the church as the family of God.”³⁹⁹ Roberts argues that, “...The recovery of a meaningful family life for blacks is one of the greatest challenges facing the black church and its ministry to black people.”⁴⁰⁰

Hence, the task of Christians, as members of this extended family, is to work with the spirit of Jesus to bring about the complete rearrangement of the human society.⁴⁰¹ This revolutionary rearrangement results in a social and spiritual transformation on earth. According to Hopkins, this rearrangement is what characterizes the Kingdom of God, the new heaven and new earth which follows the example of Jesus, who conducted his life for the majority; who served not himself and his inner circle, but the larger human family. In this new heaven and earth or this new time and space, Hopkins argues, there will be no barriers to the full humanity of each person. “[D]uring the time of the new self and new common wealth, each individual will be able to achieve the fullest potential that God has created her or him to be.”⁴⁰² This kingdom of God will require a new type of freedom, states Hopkins, where we are free to serve the collective interests.

³⁹⁸ J. Deotis Roberts, *Roots of a Black Future*, 80.

³⁹⁹ *Ibid.*

⁴⁰⁰ Roberts, *Liberation and Reconciliation*, 60-61.

⁴⁰¹ Dwight Hopkins, *Heart and Head*, 158.

⁴⁰² *Ibid.*, 72.

3.4.b Faith

In black liberation theology, faith is in a God who sides with the poor and oppressed—faith in One who “has chosen to disclose divine righteousness in the liberation of the poor.”⁴⁰³ Faith and hope lie in the apocalyptic vision of a new heaven and new earth where a will, faith, and vision are held in common with the poor.⁴⁰⁴

According to Hopkins.

This spirit calls for the majority of the world and, through them, the entire global community to act as stewards: to accept the natural resources, human potentialities, and technological knowledge as divine gifts. By growing into the ultimate goal of this spirit of liberation, the poor then will be able eventually to realize new social relationships on earth in which everyone is on an equal level.⁴⁰⁵

Faith is in the possibility of deriving the meaning of Christianity from the bottom and not the top of the socio-economic ladder, not from those who seek to maintain the status quo but from those engaged in the fight for justice.⁴⁰⁶

Viewed from the perspective of oppressed peoples’ struggle for freedom, the holy becomes a radical challenge to the legitimacy of the secular structures of power by creating eschatological images about a realm of experience that is not confined to the values of this world. ...inherent in the Christian gospel is the refusal to accept the things that are as the things that ought to be. This ‘great refusal’ is what makes Christianity what it is and thus infuses in its very nature a radicality that can never accept the world as it is.⁴⁰⁷

This understanding of faith does not leave one groping in this life, longing for a pie-in-the-sky existence in the next life. It is a faith that is grounded in a hope that liberation can be achieved in this life. It is a faith that moves individuals beyond charity to actual

⁴⁰³ Cone, *Speaking the Truth: Ecumenism, Liberation and Black Theology*, (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1986), 9.

⁴⁰⁴ Hopkins, *Heart and Head*, 179.

⁴⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, 179-180.

⁴⁰⁶ Cone, *Speaking the Truth*, 36.

⁴⁰⁷ *Ibid.*

analysis of poverty and oppression, with the aim of transforming the institutions, systems, and policies through which poverty is created and perpetuated. This faith is a form of this-worldly negation of what is and empowerment for moral agency which brings about transformation because it is informed by the understanding that the work of God is done in human history through our temporal work.⁴⁰⁸ The apocalyptic vision is for this life—extant realities must change to allow a humane existence for all based on equality, justice, and compassion.

3.4.c Christ

The claim is stark: Christ is black.⁴⁰⁹ Cone states that Christ, in his humanity and divinity, is the point of departure for a black theologian's analysis of the meaning of liberation.

There is no liberation independent of Jesus' past, present and future coming. He is the ground of our present freedom to struggle and the source of our hope that the vision disclosed in our historical fight against oppression will be fully realized in God's future.⁴¹⁰

Roberts claims that the black Christ loves the disinherited; this black Messiah identifies with black people in their blackness and can therefore bring succor and comfort to black people.⁴¹¹ This black Christ also brings meaning, redemption, and power to all who

⁴⁰⁸ Zweig, "Economics and Liberation Theology", 8.

⁴⁰⁹ Cone, *A Theology of Liberation*.

⁴¹⁰ Cone, *God of the Oppressed*, 127.

⁴¹¹ Roberts, *Black Religion, Black Theology*, 44.

receive him,⁴¹² God is revealed in Jesus as a God whose righteousness is inseparable from the weak and helpless in human society.⁴¹³ Cone claims that,

Unlike white theology, which tends to make the Jesus-event an abstract, unembodied idea, black theology believes that the black community itself is precisely where Jesus Christ is at work. The Jesus-event in twentieth-century America is a black-event—that is, an event of liberation taking place in the black community in which blacks recognize that it is incumbent upon them to throw off the chains of white oppression by whatever means they regard as suitable.⁴¹⁴

Cone states that the black Christ is derived from Jesus' past identity, present activity, and his future coming.⁴¹⁵ By the fact that God did not reveal God's self as a universal human being but as an "oppressed Jew", God thereby disclosed to us that both human and divine nature are inseparable from oppression and liberation.⁴¹⁶ For Roberts, however, this black Christ is the "universal and reconciling Messiah" whose love is personal for black Christians, entering into their life and faith.⁴¹⁷ Human liberation then is God's work of salvation in Jesus Christ.⁴¹⁸

Hopkins highlights the characteristics of this 'black' Christ as, first, one who worked to provide space in society for the silenced voices of the meek and merciful; and the essence of whose ministry expressed service toward those who suffered persecution.⁴¹⁹ He contends that,

Above all, one should see Jesus as the ultimate Servant of the poor. The revelation of Christ takes place in society's communities where the folk endure pain from not having means to determine for themselves the space to be themselves on earth. The muted cries of the meek join with the cry of the Servant; Jesus' fellowship with the persecuted amplifies their screams. And those

⁴¹² Ibid.

⁴¹³ Cone, *Black Liberation Theology*, 5.

⁴¹⁴ Ibid.

⁴¹⁵ Cone, *God of the Oppressed*, 122-123.

⁴¹⁶ Cone, *A Theology of Liberation*, 85.

⁴¹⁷ Roberts, *Black Religion, Black Theology*, 45.

⁴¹⁸ Cone, *God of the Oppressed*, 127.

⁴¹⁹ Hopkins, *Shoes that Fit Our Feet*, 153

who have ears to hear and eyes to see will discover that these sounds come from the same place and belong to the same voice.⁴²⁰

Thus, the black Christ is one who is acquainted with black suffering, unlike the white Christ of Euro-American Christianity. The black messiah reveals God's love and care for a people whose oppression would leave them feeling abandoned by God. However, God's incarnation in the black Christ is proof that they are not abandoned, not forgotten. This black messiah symbolizes the fact that God is at work in the black community and that justice can not be divorced from righteousness.

3.4.d Stewardship

BLT is shaped by the experiences of those at the bottom of the socio-economic ladder, particularly poor African American women and men who lack resources and wealth. It is, therefore, concerned with the inequality in access to resources for sustenance and human flourishing. The concern has been with how to acquire these resources; the power dynamics that perpetuate the inequitable distribution of wealth and resources; and the ways that class and gender further complicate extant inequities. Thus, stewardship in this tradition begins with the reality of inequity and suffering experienced as a result of sedimented inequalities due to historical racial, gender, and class discrimination. A focal point for stewardship then is redistribution of wealth, resources, and power, potentially through a restructuring of the economy. Hopkins projects the utopian vision of a communal politics and economics instead of monopoly capitalism.

⁴²⁰ Ibid., 154.

He claims that common ownership of major industries will empower the poor, and communal relations in the economic sphere will enhance black culture. He states,

Democratic socialism or communalism will correctly foreshadow God's coming kingdom on earth only when the seeds of the new heaven blossom with the simultaneous flowering of African American self-identity.⁴²¹

This vision is put forth as a solution because of the historical connection between white racism and capitalistic economic exploitation.

3.4.e Wealth & Possessions

Roberts argues that Christians do not give adequate attention to the economic factor in life; that our understanding of the economic dimension of life is too limited. He claims that some take for granted the identification of all life with capitalism and democracy.⁴²²

In fact, the 'Protestant ethic' attempts to sanctify rugged individualism and the profit motive. Our God of success comes in as the assurer of prosperity and earthly success for those who are blessed. Hence, religion, economics, and politics are built into our civic religion. When this outlook is supported by the religious right and embraced by the national administration, the misery of the unfortunate masses can become a matter of indifference. Thus, homelessness, unemployment, and great deprivation can be tolerated with impunity in a land of great wealth.⁴²³

Townes continues this notion by reminding us that, "The journey to freedom did not bring with it economic prosperity for African Americans"⁴²⁴ She argues that post-Emancipation, wealth accumulation was not within the range of possibilities for the

⁴²¹ Hopkins, *Shoes that Fit our Feet*, 197.

⁴²² Roberts, *Black Religion and Black Theology*, 173.

⁴²³ Ibid.

⁴²⁴ Emilie Townes, *Womanist Justice, Womanist Hope* no. 79, American Academy of Religion Academy Series, ed., Susan Thistlethwaite, (Atlanta, Georgia: Scholars Press, 1993), 42.

majority of African Americans, "...so black men and women judged their economic success through their ability to provide the essentials for their families."⁴²⁵ Within liberation theology, the focus of the dialogue about wealth and prosperity is on redistribution.

The culmination of the hope for a new existence of freedom and equality manifests itself in the new heaven and new earth— in the apocalyptic vision of a revolutionary existence that 'now is' and 'is not yet'. In this new heaven and new earth, or 'Kingdom of God', the poor will share collectively in the wealth of the land. This existence is one of an economic democracy. Hopkins claims that,

The long-term effort to actualize the full humanity of poor black folk will help replace systems and forces of habit that concretely restrict justice for all of the poor. In this dynamic, when the most oppressed start to exercise their God-given humanity, they begin to make the rich accountable to the gospel that says that everyone ought to have an equal stake at each level in society. The practice of freedom on the part of the least among us means that the structures that cause oppression will be changing.⁴²⁶

He claims that poverty among blacks and all of humanity will disappear when the poor share in the abundance of wealth and break the current global monopolization of the earth's resources, in short, when democracy in economics is brought about.⁴²⁷

3.4.f Poverty

For liberation theologies, God prefers the poor because God opposes all forms of injustice that block the full humanity of the least in society.⁴²⁸ Dwight Hopkins asserts

⁴²⁵ Ibid.

⁴²⁶ Hopkins, *Heart and Head*, 176.

⁴²⁷ Ibid., 179.

that, Jesus was anointed by God for one purpose, clearly stated in Isaiah 61, “to be with the poor of this earth and to announce good news to them.” But just who are the poor?

Hopkins defines the poor as those individuals who work everyday but have no ownership in the corporations for which they work; they suffer from neglect by the economically powerful; are marginalized; unemployed; underemployed; they are poor women who are vulnerable to male privileges; poor blacks who are attacked by a culture that continually disregards their material prosperity and their spiritual dignity; and the poor children and elderly who are discarded by their communities.⁴²⁹ Cone similarly defines the status of this neglected group in society, claiming that,

Black and other poor people in all racial groups receive much less than their fair share of everything good in the world and a disproportionate amount of the bad. . . .The poor live in the least desirable areas of our cities and rural communities. They work in the most polluted and physically dangerous workplaces.⁴³⁰

There is a clear understanding within black liberation theology that poverty is promulgated by structural and systemic forces which have racism, classism, and imperialism at their root. BLT particularly emphasizes the construct of race and racism as being at the root of poverty and oppression in America. Hopkins argues that the preferential option for the poor is needed today more than ever. He asserts that,

To prefer a specific option for working people and growing communities sinking into a system of poverty puts love of neighbor above private accumulation of things. It cuts against the grain of everything that instantaneous gratification and a commodified, consumer economy demand.⁴³¹

Indeed this type of restructuring of priorities within America’s consumer culture which gives undue priority to accumulation of possessions and wealth, at times to the point of

⁴²⁸ Ibid., 53-54.

⁴²⁹ Ibid., 178.

⁴³⁰ Cone, *Risks of Faith*, 141.

⁴³¹ Dwight Hopkins, *Heart and Head*, 53-54.

overshadowing an emphasis on love and service is necessary. Emphasis on love and service to God and humanity are found within the apocalyptic notion of a new heaven and earth.

One significant notion in black liberation theology is that of the new heaven and new earth, the revolutionary existence in which the eschatological hope of the poor and oppressed rests. Roberts argues that this eschatological hope for blacks must be both realized and unrealized. The realized eschatology for black Christians, he claims, is the manifestation of the will of God in the present as social justice and as goods and services to 'humanize' life; opposed to the evangelical-pietistic version of eschatology which is preoccupied with the future.⁴³² Black Theology must begin, he notes, with the present.⁴³³ The black church is thus understood as a socializing agent, making life more humane for blacks and poor throughout the land.⁴³⁴ Thus, in this tradition, black Christians and black churches have strong obligations to address poverty.

3.4.g Work

The male BLT tradition does not often deal explicitly with the category of work. However, Hopkins does draw on DuBois' conceptualization of work as sacred. He claims that God reveals God's plan for creation by using human exertion and sacrifice to forge a new reality of just social relations.⁴³⁵ He claims that, "Knowledge of God and divine love come when the faithful involve themselves in God's work among humanity.

⁴³² Roberts, *Liberation and Reconciliation*, 156.

⁴³³ Ibid.

⁴³⁴ Roberts, *Black Religion and Black Theology*, 86

⁴³⁵ Hopkins, *Shoes that Fit*, 166.

...Thus, to know God's love and be fully human, we must work for the poor and working people..."⁴³⁶

Womanist Joan Martin argues that the positive notion of work as calling and vocation "...as a theological belief with ethical consequences for obedience and duty without criticizing the social relations of the changing political economy," left no theological or moral recourse for challenging exploitative work.⁴³⁷ The Protestant work ethic, with its emphasis on the virtues of frugality, diligence, postponement of gratification, abstinence, sobriety, and moderation took shape particularly within the American context at a time when human labor, not just capital itself, was understood to be an important source in the creation of wealth.⁴³⁸ At this time, Martin notes, a redefinition of work emerged, implicit in which was the belief that it would "foster the disciplines of upward mobility." This positive attitude toward work was of course shaped by those positively affected during this period of mercantilism.⁴³⁹

Work for oppressed blacks has historically been exploitative, dangerous, menial, and despised work. Since Civil Rights, more blacks have had access to better work than has ever been possible in US history. However, with the class and regional bifurcation in the black community growing even greater in our contemporary context, although strides have been made by some, there is a significant majority of Blacks in America who are poor, working poor, trapped in cycles of persistent poverty, unjustly compensated, unemployed, and underemployed. Thus, we must continue to address these issues of economic injustice and inequity.

⁴³⁶ Ibid., 167.

⁴³⁷ Martin, *More than Chains and Toil*, 128.

⁴³⁸ Ibid.

⁴³⁹ Ibid., 129.

3.5 Conclusion

Religious movements and ecclesiastical traditions have historically spoken often to economic issues. This theological examination of the predominant forms of engagement with economic justice within the black church is a modest attempt to demonstrate the ways differing traditions within black religious experience can speak to economic issues. From this, it is evident that particular understandings of faith and its social implications are diverse. In this chapter, I examined each theological tradition with respect to its response to cultural norms regarding the categories of poverty, wealth, work, possessions, stewardship—all of which are influenced by individuals' understandings of faith, Christ, and the Church in order to determine how each tradition yields a particular perspective of Christian behavior in the marketplace. My examination of each tradition included a brief review of the social history of the tradition within African American religious experience as well as an accounting of the principles particular to that tradition that can provide a basis for the framework of a Black Christian Ethic of Economic Well Being. To provide a brief review of the predominant principles of each tradition, I shall list each here.

The principles gleaned from the SHSU tradition are: freedom and dignity; self determination; education; racial solidarity; economic independence; emphasis on ownership and prosperity (not simply individualistic prosperity, but with an emphasis on social uplift); thrift, industry, honesty; benevolence/charity; temperance; hard work (the privileging of work). The principles from the prosperity gospel tradition emphasize:

individual economic prosperity; individual success; middle class lifestyle as a goal/aim; and privileging of supernatural means over privileging of work to attain wealth. From the BLT tradition, we glean the principles of: freedom from oppression; equality; upward mobility from poverty; economic independence; emphasis on self-determination, dignity and pride in African and African American heritage and institutions; creation of an independent economic base; critical of those aspects of capitalistic system that tend to dehumanize and oppress.

This chapter has provided a succinct overview of the predominant paradigms of the black church's engagement with economic justice within the African American religious experience. Its significance lies in the fact that it provides principles relevant to the foundation for a responsible black Christian economic ethic. This foundation provides the basis from which the next chapter will proceed, in which the theological traditions are put in conversation with one another.

Chapter 4 Theologies in Conversation

4.1 Introduction

The previous chapter sketched each tradition (as a predominant form of engagement with economic justice) with respect to various categories of Christian behavior in the marketplace. In this chapter we put the traditions in “dialogue” with each other and analyze them with respect to their differing understandings of economic justice; the relationship between church and community, individual and community; poverty and responsibility to the poor, as these are criteria (as noted in chapter 1, these criteria are derived from the various categories of Church, faith, Christ, wealth, stewardship, etc.) used to map each tradition on the continuum. Putting these traditions in conversation will uncover ways in which they may critique one another. The central point, or grounding of the continuum is the SHSU tradition and will thus be used to ground this critique. Therefore, I examine the traditions with respect to their convergence or divergence from this grounding/central point of the continuum.

This conversation I then “interrupt” with a womanist voice that will offer a critique of all three traditions. This chapter places the theologies in conversation and views them through the lens of a womanist critical consciousness. Womanist consciousness is important because it is inclusive, emphasizes wholeness, and is not alienating. Black women, as oppressed members within an oppressed group, search for ways to gain their freedom without becoming alienated from the black community, and ways in which all members of community can live as whole, united, liberated

individuals.⁴⁴⁰ Furthermore, this interruption is necessary as the womanist tradition reinforces the principles of the predominant traditions in this work.

Katie Cannon demonstrates that white male scholarship in the discipline of ethics has almost completely neglected black women; black male scholarship has treated black women as incidental to central issues, and white feminist scholarship, by privileging gender has made necessary womanist scholarship which offers a reconceptualization of ethics with the experience of black women the central focus.⁴⁴¹ This womanist discussion is significant because the goal of this project; developing a framework for a Black Christian Ethic of Economic Well Being is informed by these predominant theological traditions, and since it is based mainly on sources from black male intelligentsia, necessitates the incorporation of a womanist critical consciousness.

The womanist critical consciousness is distinguished from BLT by the following features: faithfulness to black women's/women of color lived experience; emphasis on commitment to wholeness and survival of all persons (regardless of gender, culture, etc.); primacy of relationship (between Divine/Spirit and persons; among selves; and persons and environment); commitment to addressing and ending all forms of oppression; and a holistic approach to black life.

4.2 Church

The fundamental aspects of the purpose of the church I discuss in this section include: addressing the needs of individuals within community; the evangelical nature of

⁴⁴⁰ Kelly Brown Douglas, *The Black Christ*, (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1994) 92.

⁴⁴¹ Cannon, *Katie's Cannon: Womanism and the Soul of the Black Community*, (New York: The Continuum Publishing Company, 1995), 128.

the church; attention to social justice; liberation; and conversion and nurture of individuals. Within the category of church, a key feature is the purpose of the church in the world. The SHSU tradition addresses needs—material, political, social—which both prosperity gospel and BLT traditions have in common with the SHSU tradition. The SHSU tradition has orthodox understandings of the church regarding its mission and purpose and shares some overlapping concerns with both prosperity theology and BLT traditions—regarding the biblical injunction to care for the poor and oppressed, Christian behavior in the marketplace, and ideal components of a just society—while there are also points of contention between them as well. The traditions have specific understandings of the purpose of the church and each link spiritual and social functions in ways that do not limit the purpose of the church to its mere spiritual function. The functions within the purpose of the church include responding to needs, addressing social justice, and evangelism.

4.2.a Responding to Needs

From the SHSU perspective, the functional role of the church lies conspicuously in the economic, social, and political aspects of life. However, the form of the popularized version of prosperity theology within the black church emphasizes less directly providing the social, economic, and political needs of persons in community as the historical self help social uplift tradition has had. In contrast to the SHSU tradition which has been criticized for casting the church as a social service provider, there is an understanding within prosperity theology that the church does not and should not function as a welfare agency, but should be about bringing “the lost” to salvation. This

salvation entails freeing those who are trapped in poverty from a certain mentality that is among the main sources of a person's condition of lack.

A major reason for this reduced emphasis on directly providing for social, economic, and political needs of its adherents is that this form of prosperity theology grew in popularity in the post-Civil Rights era, after Blacks had made various social, economic, and political gains, and had obtained full legal access to mainstream America which had previously been denied them. Another reason is that the prosperity gospel tradition has origins within white evangelical Christianity. Therefore, prosperity theology has been geared more towards the desires of lower and upper middle-class Americans seeking to achieve or maintain the trappings of the American dream mythology in the here and now. The emphasis for prosperity gospel regarding the purpose of the church in the world is evangelical: to bring "lost" souls to the saving knowledge of Christ, hence the emphasis on conversion and nurture of individuals. However, social justice is a significant aspect of the purpose of the church in the SHSU and BLT traditions.

4.2.b Social Justice

The purpose of churches in the SHSU tradition is also to promote social justice. However, the prosperity gospel seems to lack the emphasis on social justice that marks both the SHSU and BLT traditions. This is not to say that prosperity theology is not concerned with issue of social justice, only that there is no conspicuous weight given it, and this distinguishes it from both the BLT and the SHSU traditions. Instead, emphasis is placed on the Kingdom of God, where righteousness and justice reign, and the

importance of living by “kingdom principles” through which justice is brought about. Justice is a manifestation of God’s righteousness which the believer should aim to live out. When the thoughts and confessions of individuals are correct, correct action follows, justice reigns in the Kingdom of God (KOG), and society is transformed.

4.2.c Evangelical Nature, Conversion and Nurture of Individuals

On the surface, this prosperity gospel notion of the KOG and kingdom principles might sound like the social gospel notion in which Christian individuals bring about the social transformation needed. Yet in fact the emphasis is on evangelism, on saving lost souls and assisting people in understanding who they are in Christ: namely, that they are heirs to the kingdom and co-heirs with Christ and thus entitled to God’s promises of life, health, and prosperity.

Each tradition has a specific understanding of the purpose of the church. Each links spiritual and social functions in ways that do not narrow the purpose of the church to caring only about the souls of individuals. Each deals with functions beyond the spiritual. For instance, the SHSU understanding of the church goes beyond its religious function in its efforts to meet social, political, and economic needs within the black community. The black liberation tradition’s understanding of the role of the church also grows out of this conception linking social and religious functions. For example, because it understands God to be on side of the oppressed, ensuring a humane material existence for the oppressed is a priority in defining the function of the church.

Although the prosperity gospel links spiritual and material functions within its tradition, the purpose of the church in this tradition puts a heavy emphasis on evangelism.

Evangelism has historically been an important emphasis within the SHSU tradition also, but it has not been the main focus nor is it heavily emphasized as it is within prosperity theology. However, this phenomenon may be changing as the constituents of many black churches within the SHSU tradition have made civil rights gains and feel securely nestled in economic, social, and political mainstream of American life, and therefore, practice a spirituality that is turned inward, focused on evangelism, personal piety, and individual salvation. Religious individualism is characteristic of both the SHSU and prosperity gospel traditions, as they are of American Protestantism generally. If liberation is equated with integration and the unhindered access to what is necessary to live the middle-class American Dream, then religious individualism is a logical norm for mainline African American denominations within the SHSU and prosperity gospel traditions of the black church.

However, BLT has been critical of the overemphasis on personal piety, individual salvation, and apolitical evangelicalism which characterizes many forms of prosperity theology and other traditions within the black church. BLT's identity is marked by confrontation, conflict, and power struggle. In stark contrast, apolitical evangelicalism evoked the type of sentiment toward reforming society through spiritual and moral character which was believed to have the power to transform society versus bringing about social justice through agitation and conflict. Therefore, the understanding of the mission and purpose of the church in BLT tradition is one that emphasizes reflection and action on behalf of making life more humane for economically, socially, and politically oppressed blacks. Thus, the church is to be an active instrument for black liberation and transformation of society. The emphasis on the whole person—the social, spiritual,

economic, and political aspects of one's life is something that the BLT tradition holds in common with SHSU.

Within the BLT tradition, the purpose of the church is thus understood to be the liberation of individuals and the transformation of society. However, early on, BLT was criticized for not including "persons in the pews" and pastors in development of critical reflection and action that is 'of the people'.⁴⁴² In addition to this earliest criticism of BLT, we find also that it is relatively inattentive to the conversion and nurture of Christian individuals, considered to be among the most significant facets of the church's role. In contrast, prosperity theology is clear that one of the main purposes of the church is to attend to the conversion and nurture of Christian individuals in their faith. The SHSU traditions likewise place importance on conversion and nurture within the mission of the church.

4.3 Faith

I turn here to ask what each tradition considers to be its primary object of faith and what are the implications of that choice for relationships to community and for actions to bring about justice in society.

4.3.a Loving God: Reconciling Work

In this regard, the SHSU tradition considers faith pertinent to one's actions. For actions reveal what one believes about God. Faith for its part is centered on a loving God, and from this faith in God comes hope in Christ and Christ's reconciling work, that

⁴⁴² See Cone and Wilmore, *Black Theology: A Documentary History*, vol.2, 82.

is to reconcile people to God and to one another. At the heart of this reconciling work is love of neighbor which drives dutiful actions on behalf of those less fortunate within one's community and actions toward social reform.

4.3.b Benevolent God: Redeeming Work

Adherents of prosperity theology for their part have faith in a benevolent God who rewards obedient believers (who have enough faith) with financial prosperity and divine health. This theology centers on the importance of confession, of the power of what one speaks. Proponents believe that speaking in itself can create particular situations in one's life, good or bad. It is therefore important to speak words of faith in order for one to receive the blessings of wealth and divine health, and likewise to abstain from speaking negatively. The concern among critics of this doctrine is that God's grace through salvation and theocentric providence can be eclipsed by the emphasis on successful living found in the prosperity message which stresses wealth and health.⁴⁴³

However, we should not mistake prosperity theology of not emphasizing God's grace in salvation at all. Indeed, the saving act of Christ on the cross is central to prosperity theology. Christ's sacrifice is precisely what makes health and prosperity possible for the believer. Beyond this, as with traditional Protestant theology, another central tenet in prosperity doctrine is the law of love: God commands believers to love their neighbor. However, faith is key to a believer obtaining the blessings of wealth and health. One needs to believe that one has what God has promised (wealth and health), and one's words/confessions should likewise support this faith.

⁴⁴³ See Ken L. Sarles, "A Theological Evaluation of the Prosperity Gospel"; and McConnell, *A Different Gospel*.

4.3.c Liberating God: Saving Work

For BLT, faith is in the black Christ as liberator. Faith is in a God who sides with the oppressed. Blacks are affirmed in a society which exists in the shadows of a history of brutalization and dehumanization of African Americans, Therefore, faith is in a just God who affirms the dignity of black personhood, who discloses Self in the liberation of the oppressed. Thus, as Cone argues, God's revelation of God's Self is through action in human history, specifically action on behalf of the poor and powerless. God's action on behalf of the weak and vulnerable is in pursuit of human salvation; it is the goal of divine activity. Therefore, faith in Cone's 'God of the oppressed' holds out hope of a salvation that includes economic, political, and social dimensions of life and therefore challenges social injustice.

4.4 Christ

Here I consider the nature and purpose of Christ's action in the world. The different conceptions of Christ relate to different understandings of the church (and therefore, divergent conceptions of how individuals and the church should relate to the community). In the SHSU tradition, the conception of Christ is that orthodox Protestant interpretation which equates the nature of Christ with the nature of God. The emphasis is on the incarnation, on the fact that Christ is God. Key to this interpretation of Christ is the resurrection, a clear display of the equality of Jesus' nature with God's. A great deal of the black church tradition is rooted deeply in this Nicene/Chalcedonian formulation of

Christ, which does not privilege the significance of Jesus' ministry on earth. However, within this tradition, there is a reception of Christ as moral exemplar which is derived from his earthly ministry, despite the way this is deemphasized within the Nicene/Chalcedonian formulation.

Whereas the prosperity gospel tradition's formulation of the nature of Christ is orthodox, the results of the atonement are distinctive. The emphasis of Christ's death, and resurrection is significant in this tradition not only for personal salvation but for destroying the curse of sickness and poverty. Thus Christ's atonement takes on more meaning than its traditional emphasis on eternal salvation from damnation. Through Christ's atonement, redemption from the "curse" of disease and poverty is also made possible. Therefore, individuals and churches have a responsibility to not only demonstrate this fact but work to educate others regarding this distinctive nature of the atonement which has implications for how life is actually lived—supposedly free from poverty and sickness.

In the BLT tradition, the appropriation of the Christ figure has had direct implications for the identity, survival, and empowerment of oppressed African Americans. The debate surrounding the black Christ has had implications not only for the self-esteem of African Americans, but for individuals' faith in God. The white Christ who did not compel white southern Christians *en masse* to protest the enslavement and dehumanization of Blacks essentially implicated the White Christ in black oppression.⁴⁴⁴ For blacks struggling to survive and fighting for equality and freedom, Christ was one who identified with them in this struggle, a messiah on their side. Therefore, this appropriation of the Messiah allowed for none other than Christ being black. Yet among

⁴⁴⁴ Kelly Brown Douglas, *Black Christ*, 37.

black liberation theologians, there is disagreement regarding the nature of this black Christ. Roberts argues that it is imperative that Christ remain universal and that reconciliation be central to the salvific figure—which Roberts would argue is not possible with Cone’s black Christ, for whom reconciliation is not central, or even with Cleage’s Christ, a nationalistic and even arguably separatist figure.

4.5 Stewardship

Stewardship relates specifically to the use of wealth (resources/ possessions) and Christian responsibility regarding poverty. In the SHSU tradition, stewardship entails using resources and possessions to care for needy persons within the Christian community, where persons have moral claims on one another, as well as entailing supporting one another in business, and employing Christians over non-Christians.

Likewise, in prosperity theology stewardship is about using one’s wealth to “bless others”. One is “blessed to be a blessing to others.” However, blessing others is not necessarily limited to the less fortunate but may include blessing someone with sufficient or even abundant resources, such as one’s own spiritual leader. Also, there is a clear injunction to assist the poor. However, the understanding is that the best way to assist them is to educate them about the “curse” of poverty and lack, and the significance of faith and correct confession in changing their situation of lack. An important aspect of prosperity rhetoric is that once a poor believer comes into the Kingdom of God, they are to understand that prosperity is no longer tied to their job and their occupation does not determine their success.

With the emphasis on prospering financially, there is within the rhetoric an understanding that believers are obligated to use this wealth for the establishment of Gods' kingdom here on earth for people to hear the gospel and receive Christ as their Savior. Christians are also obligated to be wise, and to exercise sound judgment and stewardship over this wealth. Thus, with wealth comes obligations and responsibilities.

Stewardship within the BLT has a different emphasis--specifically on social, economic, and political justice for the poor and oppressed. Therefore, moral agency is demonstrated in responsible action toward this end. Thus, stewardship concerns itself with poor persons' lack of access to resources and wealth. There is, however, a move to broaden the engagement with issues that affect the life of the poor and powerless of society. Thus, for example, stewardship of the environment begins to share the stage with traditional emphases on social and economic justice.

4.6 Wealth and Possessions

Key issues raised by the category of wealth are its value and purpose and concerns related to its accumulation. In a market-driven post-industrial society in which easy access to credit allows individuals to consume an unlimited amount of goods that they cannot afford and where people are bombarded with advertisements for things that they do not need, people seem to value thrift, frugality, and delayed gratification less and less. These are some of the virtues which comprise the foundation of the SHSU tradition within the black church. Historically, the SHSU tradition was about establishing God's kingdom on earth, by morally responsible agents, themselves often marginalized,

carrying out the injunctions of the gospel in an economically, socially, and politically transformative way.⁴⁴⁵

The view of wealth and possessions within SHSU was shaped within a markedly different socio-historical context than that of the latter two traditions. Having reached its height of popularity in a post-Civil Rights movement society in which middle-class ideals predominate, adherents to prosperity theology are not encouraged to focus on traditional negative connotations of wealth and possessions, but to understand that wealth is a way of channeling blessings to others. Wealth is valued as the means by which one is able to bless others, the instrument that allows ‘kingdom work’ to be done. The prosperity gospel emphasizes wealth as a key factor in bringing about the kingdom existence. The work of the kingdom, which is primarily evangelism, is accomplished through believers’ wealth. In contemporary society, driven by capitalistic economic rationality, the logic that it takes money to move people and make things happen is plausible. It costs to reach masses with the gospel, goes the argument. Therefore, proponents of the prosperity gospel argue that spreading the gospel necessitates financial investment—like all business endeavors do. The traditional emphasis on the potential perils of accumulating excess wealth and possessions within earliest Euro-American Protestant tradition in the United States is less true of prosperity theology than the aforementioned traditions. Instead of focusing on the dangers of the love of money, greed, and covetousness, all of which are acknowledged in prosperity theology, the orientation of one’s attitude toward wealth is fundamental. The belief of prosperity gospel adherents is that obedient and pious believers have a right to wealth, in the here and now. Furthermore possessions,

⁴⁴⁵ See Darryl Trimiew, *Voices of the Silenced: The Responsible Self in a Marginalized Community*, (Cleveland: Pilgrim press, 1993).

which are usually signs of middle-class status and success in American culture, are held by this tradition to be outward signs of faith, piety, and obedience. This prosperity doctrine does not take into account historical realities of economic injustice and racial discrimination as BLT does. Therefore, there is no mention of “sedimented inequalities” that account for the disparities of wealth between blacks and whites, rich and poor.

The BLT tradition acknowledges that slavery, followed by sharecropping, a system of peonage, and decades of racial discrimination and injustice have kept blacks locked in the most menial jobs, and left the possibility of generational wealth accumulation beyond the reach of many African Americans. Therefore, with respect to wealth and possessions, BLT is centered on redistribution. Hence, its apocalyptic vision of a revolutionary existence is that of an anti-imperialist, anti-capitalist, anti-sexist, anti-racist economic democracy where the poor have a just share of the abundance of society’s wealth.

4.7 Poverty

The two aspects of poverty that are significant for this discussion are what it signifies as a state and what is the responsibility of Christians toward those in poverty. Both the SHSU tradition and BLT are clearly rooted in the reality of the oppression and dehumanization that African Americans suffered at the hands of a racist nation which relegated African Americans to the lowest socioeconomic status. Both traditions acknowledge continued covert impediments to the success of Blacks, whether a product of attitudes or perpetuation of policies and practices which result in constraints on

economic participation and success of “underclass” African Americans. Likewise, the black liberation tradition in the black church acknowledges that while the official legal barriers to social, political, and economic progress may no longer exist overtly, unofficial barriers and ‘sedimented’ inequalities created by a history of slavery, racial discrimination, and segregation from which numbers of African Americans continue to suffer have long existed.⁴⁴⁶

The indictment against prosperity theology begins with the belief that poverty, which is a curse, is rooted in a mistaken mentality of lack, disobedience, or lack of faith. Separating poverty from its historical context and spiritualizing it runs the risk of placing the blame for impoverishment on the poor themselves. If poverty is a curse, then there is no one, no institution, no structural nor systemic temporal forces which can be clearly implicated in the injustice suffered by masses of poor African Americans. A black liberation perspective would argue that prosperity doctrine regarding poverty denies historical facts of the oppressive structural forces rooted in racism, sexism, and classism. BLT asks where is there room in this theology to deal with the injustices suffered at the hands of oppressors? Prosperity theology considers the root causes of poverty to be disobedience, lack of faith, and incorrect thinking which lead to incorrect confessions, and satanic forces which operate to keep money out of the hands of believers. The belief is that addressing these root causes will alleviate the problem. Satan, as the deceiver who

⁴⁴⁶ Oliver and Shapiro offer an analysis of the racial distribution of wealth in America, demonstrating “how wealth uncovers a qualitatively different pattern of inequality on crucial fronts.” (3) Their analysis of racial differences in wealth reveals dynamics of racial inequality otherwise concealed by income, occupational attainment or education (3). Whereas the gap between income and educational attainment may have closed somewhat between Blacks and Whites, when measuring the wealth of these groups (comparable in educational attainment, occupation, family status and age), the gap widens. They examined the intergenerational transmission of inequality and explain how an oppressive racial legacy continues to shape American society through the reproduction of inequality in subsequent generations. See Oliver and Shapiro, *Black Wealth, White Wealth*, 130.

keeps children of God in a mindset of lack, confessing lack, and living beneath their privileges, is a greater foe than temporal structures and political machinery that would have to be tackled to address economic injustice. Another complicating factor is the belief among adherents of this doctrine that African Americans have made great strides economically in the post-Civil Rights era and can no longer blame structural and systemic forces for lagging behind their white counterparts economically. The argument follows that there are more opportunities now, and that the overt legal, social, and political barriers that existed during slavery, Jim Crow, and post-Reconstruction no longer exist.

4.8 Work and Class

The emphasis in this category is the value and meaning of work. The emphasis in the SHSU tradition is on the dignity of labor being central for a population of persons for whom work has been historically associated with the most menial tasks, subordination, powerlessness, and exploitation. The class division that existed within the black community post-Emancipation was viewed as an impediment to racial progress. The biblical notion that “God is no respecter of persons” was behind the understanding of what should be the proper relationship between classes--namely one of unity without regard for social class distinctions. Among the virtues extolled in this tradition were notions embedded in the Protestant work ethic, such as, thrift, industry, self-determination, and social uplift.

Given the fact that the norm that one is to achieve in the prosperity theology tradition is associated with middle-class values and trappings, what would this prosperity theology tradition's internal class analysis look like? What is made evident in this prosperity gospel tradition is that the poor are not the ones to be working on behalf of, mainly because of the conceptualization of root causes of poverty which do not amend themselves to necessitating such work, as with the black liberation and SHSU traditions. What is clear is that one should work toward attaining wealth and achieving middle-class status which are evidence of success. Where that leaves the poor is marginalized, unlike the efforts of work in BLT and SHSU which attempt to end marginalization of the poor.

The black liberation tradition emphasizes that poor people need a determinative role in controlling their environment, not just natural resources but materials of production and power in relationships with those who own and control resources. The objective is the elimination of marginalization and monopolization. Therefore, the vocation of all is human effort toward liberation. Our work is for the poor, and is, therefore, sacred.⁴⁴⁷ The tradition understands that God reveals God's plan for creation by using human exertion/work and sacrifice to bring about a new reality of just social relations.⁴⁴⁸ It is thus through the spirituality of work for freedom that humans participate in the dynamic relation among God, Jesus and human purpose.⁴⁴⁹

In comparison, within the prosperity gospel tradition, work is left with little meaning. The pragmatic approach to work leaves adherents with the understanding of work as necessary toil. The most important aspect of the conception of work is that it is not the source of a believer's wealth, it is merely a channel through which one can meet

⁴⁴⁷ Hopkins, *Shoes that Fit*, 165.

⁴⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 166.

⁴⁴⁹ *Ibid.*

some practical needs, such as keeping one's bills paid. The source of one's promised supernaturally attained wealth is God; the primary channel of wealth, however, is the believer's tithes and sowing (financial "seeds"). Prosperity gospel yields theological validity to the lack of confidence in 'worldly' (economic) systems in which people labor for little to no reward.

4.9 Significance and Relevance of Womanist Critical Consciousness

The goal of placing the theological traditions in conversation was to allow them to serve as a critique of one another. However, it is necessary to "interrupt" this discussion by incorporating a womanist voice. This interruption is warranted precisely because the privileging of male experience has left black theological and Christian ethical discourse deficient. The norm of black male experience in these discourses functions to mask black women's contributions as responsible moral agents throughout history. Furthermore, a BCEEWB is inclusive, therefore attention to the womanist tradition allows it to be so. Additionally, the notion of well being, which is an essential concept in the womanist tradition, necessitates the inclusion of the womanist tradition. Lastly, principles from the womanist critical tradition support principles from the predominant traditions and most importantly, undergird the framework for the construction of the NeoSHSU heritage.

A critique of all three traditions (BLT, SHSU, and prosperity gospel) is the Church's perpetuation of sexism. The issue of sexism has pervaded all traditions within the black church broadly.⁴⁵⁰ Women, the constitutive backbone of the church and the majority of the volunteer labor force which supports the very life of the institution, have

⁴⁵⁰ See Cone and Wilmore, *Black Theology: A documentary History*, vol.2,79.

historically dominated in membership but fail to be represented in any significant way in the leadership of the church. It is thus necessary to incorporate a womanist lens through which we can more fully view these traditions within the black church. This lens pushes us to consciously incorporate gender, class, race, economic, political, and cultural considerations within our discussion.

Womanist scholars do justice to theological and ethical analyses of black church communities by demonstrating that historically black women have been and continue to be conscious actors who have altered the theological picture in significant ways.⁴⁵¹ Cannon argues that, “in order to move toward a black liberation ethic, attention must be paid to an ethical vision that includes black women.”⁴⁵² As a foundational source for a BCEEWB, African American experience, grounded in African American theology and ethics which is marked by patriarchy and misogyny, makes a womanist lens a significant one through which to view black church tradition.

Layli Phillips defines womanism as

A social change perspective rooted in black women’s and other women of color’s everyday experiences and everyday methods of problem solving in everyday spaces, extended to the problem of ending all forms of oppression for all people, restoring the balance between people and the environment/nature, and reconciling human life with the spiritual dimension.⁴⁵³

The significance of a womanist critical consciousness is that it takes seriously a commitment to the struggle for social justice by marginalized populations, such as persistently poor African American women, and their communities in the rural South. Therefore, I perform several tasks. In my theological-ethical and social scientific

⁴⁵¹ Cannon, *Katie’s Canon*, 127.

⁴⁵² Ibid.

⁴⁵³ Layli Phillips, ed., *The Womanist Reader*, xx.

analyses of the lives of these women and their communities, I critically engage the male-centered Euro-American Christian tradition, using a womanist lens⁴⁵⁴ which begins with the concrete suffering of such marginalized populations. Furthermore, I envision how critical reflection on a community's economic ethics can stimulate a re-evaluation of shared economic life and ethics with the hope of bringing communities, public policy, and ultimately broader society more in line with the demands of justice.

In her book, *The Black Christ*, Kelly B. Douglas contends that consistent commitment to family and community has led black women on a search for a politics of wholeness as they have evaluated their participation in various freedom movements such as the contemporary woman's movement and the 1960s black freedom struggle.

"These women needed a political strategy that would assure black people, men and women, rights to live as whole, free, human beings and that would keep the black community whole, unified, in striving for liberation."⁴⁵⁵ A social-political analysis of wholeness reflects this concern. It seeks to eliminate anything that prevents black people from being whole, liberated, unified people in community.

It does not seek to prioritize different forms of oppression, or to pit women against men/the poor against the rich. ...this analysis of wholeness might challenge the 'haves' in the black community who maintain their status by supporting structures of oppression. It will confront the alienation that often develops between the black middle class and the black poor.⁴⁵⁶

Likewise, a social-political analysis of wholeness addresses the ways in which the black community and black institutions (church and schools) perpetuate black oppression.⁴⁵⁷

⁴⁵⁴ A womanist lens recognizes the significance of attending to dimensions of race, class, gender, culture, sexual orientation and ecology.

⁴⁵⁵ Kelly Brown Douglas, *Black Christ*, 98.

⁴⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 99.

⁴⁵⁷ *Ibid.*

4.9.a Church

With its emphasis on the primacy of relationship with the Divine, and one another, institutions such as the black church historically have had a significant role to play in this spiritual dimension of womanism. Not only have the formal and informal women's groups and women's conventions of mainline black denominations been dynamic social activist arms of the black church, but the faith of many individual women was shaped within the walls of these religious institutions.

In her work, *Sisters in the Wilderness: The Challenge of Womanist God-Talk*, Delores Williams offers a womanist critique of the black church. Foremost, she contends that the black church escapes definition, that it does not actually exist as an institution.⁴⁵⁸ It is not limited to the visible African American denominational churches, but rather, for Williams, is also invisible, "rooted in the soul of community memory".⁴⁵⁹ She defines the black church as,

The heart of hope in the black community's experience of oppression, survival struggle and its historic efforts toward complete liberation. ...It is community essence, ideal and real as God works through it in behalf of the survival, liberation and positive, productive quality of life of suffering people.⁴⁶⁰

Her perception of the black church comes as a "God-full" presence to the struggles of the oppressed; a presence that quickens the heart, "measures the soul and bathes life with the

⁴⁵⁸ Williams argues that, "As many discussions of [the black church] as there are, there will be that many (and more) different definitions. Some believe it to be rooted deeply in the soul of the community memory of black folk. Some believe it to be the core symbol of the four-hundred-year-old African-American struggle against white oppression with God in the struggle providing black people with spiritual and material resources for survival and freedom. Others believe it to be places where black people come to worship God without white people being present." See Delores Williams, *Sisters in the Wilderness*, 205.

⁴⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 206.

⁴⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 205-06.

spirit.”⁴⁶¹ For Williams, this presence comes as moral wisdom, as “folk-analysis”, and “folk-faith”.⁴⁶² Thus, the purpose of the church is imbued with notions of liberation, empowerment, and sustenance for the soul of the oppressed within their daily struggle for freedom, equality, and justice.

A significant contribution of Williams for the purposes of this project is her critique of African American denominational churches. She indicts the church for its “sins” of sexism, denying African American women leadership roles and what she perceives as sins against the black community—for not “being effective instruments of freedom, survival and positive quality of life formation for all black people.”⁴⁶³ The failure of these congregations to pool resources across denominational and class lines in order to deal effectively with poverty, hunger, and health problems that plague black communities she also cites as sin.⁴⁶⁴ Another sin is that of its teachings and exhortations being too “spiritualized and ‘heaven directed’, that women parishioners are not encouraged to concentrate on their lives in this world and to fight for their own survival, liberation, and productive quality of life.”⁴⁶⁵

Although prosperity theology can boast of setting its gaze firmly in the here and now, attending to the material needs of this life, its approach to oppression and oppressive forces in society are problematic. The challenge of directly addressing systemic and structural justice, and focusing on personal piety to the point of assigning the blame for poverty to the disobedience and sin of the poor and oppressed is a major drawback of

⁴⁶¹ Ibid.

⁴⁶² Ibid.

⁴⁶³ Ibid., 209.

⁴⁶⁴ Ibid., 208.

⁴⁶⁵ Ibid.

prosperity theology. However, the BLT tradition enables the type of focus on “this-worldly” existence in the fight for survival, liberation, and quality of life.

Therefore, for Williams the purpose and mission of the black church is not tied up solely in the visible institution, but in the “Godforce” behind it, for she acknowledges that from this Godforce,

Denominations founded schools for black people, built housing for the poor, birthed the civil rights movement and black “salvation bearers” such as Harriet Tubman, Sojourner Truth, Frederick Douglass, Martin Luther King, and many other ordinary black women and men. The black church has been the holy Godforce holding black people together body, soul and spirit as the perpetrators of genocide tried to exterminate the community.⁴⁶⁶

Thus the purpose and mission of the church is clearly empowerment, liberation, unification (not to be confused with uniformity), and being the bearer and purveyor of wisdom and virtues that grow out of the experiences of oppressed people struggling for justice and freedom. Crucial to broadening the public arm of the church and making it the most powerful institution of racial self help in the African American community⁴⁶⁷, African American church women, alongside men, pushed for equal rights not only for blacks but for women, They contested racism, racist institutions and ideology, established black schools, and advocated for voting rights and economic justice.⁴⁶⁸ The moral agency of these historically invisible women comprises the strong public arm of the black church.⁴⁶⁹

Williams’ Godforce seems to be behind the impetus for responding to social and economic justice. This Godforce is exemplified in each tradition’s work to meet needs of those in their communities, even within the prosperity gospel tradition. Many prosperity

⁴⁶⁶ Ibid., 210.

⁴⁶⁷ Higginbotham, *Righteous Discontent*, 1.

⁴⁶⁸ See Higginbotham, *Righteous Discontent*; Williams, *Sisters in Wilderness*; Riggs, *Awake, Arise, Act*.

⁴⁶⁹ See Frederick, *Between Sundays*; Riggs, *Awake, Arise, Act*; Higginbotham, *Righteous Discontent*.

theology churches have also established schools, inclusive schools for people of all races to train them in “kingdom” principles of life and business, to teach them how to get out of debt, prosper, and use their resources for the advancement of the Kingdom of God. The belief is that these kingdom principles allow people to live, minister, evangelize, and run businesses based on love, righteousness, forgiveness, integrity, and other virtues taught by Christ. In addition to establishing such schools, these churches also have inner city and international missions.⁴⁷⁰ This Godforce is evident in the SHSU tradition (and the BLT tradition as its outgrowth), within its history of mutual aid and prominent role that many congregations of this tradition played in the great Educational Crusade post-emancipation and beyond; and the tendency to see in the mission of the church the need to attend to the “whole person”, thus the characterization of many black religious institutions as spiritual and social in function and nature.

4.9.b Faith

Womanist spirituality is of course not limited to Christianity, and therefore faith can be broadly conceptualized as having as its end a connection with the Divine as experienced in persons, nature, or Spirit. Thus, that faith can be locked into deep rooted ideological perspectives some perceive as a limitation. Because oppression is understood to commence in the realm of beliefs, attitudes, and behaviors, to attack physical conditions or institutions is to attack the outer layer, rather than the inner, where

⁴⁷⁰ The concern, however, is with the actual basis of the mission model of these churches. That it not be based upon the traditional mission model that has been perpetuated throughout Christendom for centuries, which is focused on sentimentality and charity, inattentive to social justice and liberation.

problems actually originate.⁴⁷¹ The origin of problems is understood to be psychological and spiritual and to be manifest in the material and institutional realms, therefore womanism is concerned with shaping thought processes and relationships.⁴⁷² The end of faith is wholeness—in relationships between humans and nature, one another, and Spirit. Faith in the Divine, in Spirit, or Christ is not discouraged, but held to the light of criticism in terms of liberation, to discern whether it is a faith in an empowering Christ who identifies with and moves toward liberation from the multi-dimensional oppressions facing black women.

This is the challenge faced in black church tradition in general. black women have kept faith amid religious institutional structures and theologies that are rife with sexism and patriarchy. Prosperity theology and other traditions reinforce heterosexist norms with the perpetuation of archaic gender roles of women within churches. Within the SHSU tradition, likewise, women have been marginalized into powerful women's conventions and groups within male dominated church structures. BLT tradition, mainly an intellectual phenomenon, in its earliest years privileged race and ignored issues of sexism. One example of this is demonstrated in the issue of the black Christ which will be discussed below. However, with the evolution of BLT, it has made strides in incorporating the black woman's experience and voice.

⁴⁷¹ Phillips, *The Womanist Reader*, xxx.

⁴⁷² Ibid.

4.9.c Christ

Within the black liberation tradition, Christ is considered to be black. However, Kelly Brown Douglas provides a womanist critique of the inadequacy of the black Christ as appropriated by various black theologians. The Christ ('various appropriations of black Christ') of BLT is one who identifies with the black struggle against racism.⁴⁷³ In her examination of the meaning of a black Christ, she uncovers limitations of this Christ figure for a complex and dynamic black community with struggles that reach beyond race. She notes some of the same shortfalls of the black church that Delores Williams describes in her work (such as inadequate responses to issues of health, poverty, classism, sexism, etc.). Douglas argues that the limitations of this black Christ are evidenced in the black churches' responses to or lack of response to the various challenges of a changing black community.⁴⁷⁴ She contends that,

...the black church's inability to respond to the complex issues of class, gender and sexuality is tied to the way in which Christ's blackness has been defined. ...the Blackness of Christ in the black church community has had more to do with Christ's commitment to black freedom than to Christ's appearance.⁴⁷⁵

The limitation lies in the fact that this black Messiah challenges black churches to be prophetic in relation to issues of race, leaving black churches ill prepared to respond to concerns that go beyond race.⁴⁷⁶ This black Christ is merely committed to the liberation of black people from white racism, drawing attention to only one dimension of black oppression.⁴⁷⁷ Likewise, feminist theology emerged as a movement with a uni-

⁴⁷³ Douglas, *The Black Christ*, 3.

⁴⁷⁴ *Ibid.*

⁴⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 4.

⁴⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 5.

⁴⁷⁷ *Ibid.*

dimensional perspective regarding social oppression. Therefore, both black liberation and feminist theologies failed to adequately address black women's multidimensional oppression. "Consequently, both have developed understandings of Christ that do not necessarily reflect black women's experience. In this regard, both have contributed to the emergence of womanist approaches to Christ."⁴⁷⁸ The hope and empowering force that oppressed African Americans need, according to Delores Williams lies, not in the Nicene/Chalcedonian Christ of the SHSU tradition. It is Christ's actions, Christ's life, not crucifixion and death that holds this hope and empowerment, for Williams. Williams also argues that the focus of this Christ figure that identifies with oppressed Blacks should be on the redemptive power of this Messiah's life, as opposed to Christ's death. For through Christ's life, God has demonstrated how humans are to live—peacefully, productively and abundantly *in relationship*.⁴⁷⁹ She argues that,

Jesus showed humankind a vision of righting relations between body, mind and spirit through an *ethical ministry of words; through a healing ministry of touch and being touched; through a militant ministry of expelling evil forces; through a ministry grounded in the power of faith; through a ministry of prayer, compassion and love*. Jesus came for life... As Christians, black women cannot forget the cross, but neither can they glorify it. To do so is to glorify suffering and render their exploitation sacred. To do so is to glorify the sin of defilement.⁴⁸⁰ (author's emphasis)

The ministry of Christ as moral exemplar gives hope and serves as an empowering force as churches and individuals draw upon the example of Christ's life in their "faith in justice". Christ's militant ministry of expelling evil forces is drawn upon in the sacred work of expelling forces of sexism, classism, racism, and economic injustice. For black women, Jesus is the equalizer because he is for all people without regard for gender,

⁴⁷⁸ Ibid., 96.

⁴⁷⁹ Williams, *Sisters in the Wilderness*, 167

⁴⁸⁰ Ibid.

class, race, etc. Jesus is also liberator because he empowers black women in their liberative work on behalf of the oppressed. Christ's ministry of compassion and love provides an example for those involved in the fight for economic, political, and social justice. This conception of Christ has implications for church and individual work on behalf of justice.

4.9.d Stewardship

In seeking to reconcile relationships between different groups of persons, between persons, and nature and individuals and Spirit, womanism seeks wholeness and restoration of balance in these sites. It is in the commonweal that these dimensions of creation are held together in an ideal state of balance. Since this commonweal does not yet exist, social change activity has as its end bringing this commonweal into existence.⁴⁸¹ which it does largely through what can be broadly described as stewardship, since stewardship covers relationships between various aspects of creation—persons, Spirit, and nature. Black liberation's concern with the lack of resources and access to them is in line with the womanist concern with poor black women. The same concern holds with respect to inequality in access to resources for sustenance and human flourishing, and to power dynamics that perpetuate the inequitable distribution of wealth and resources. Of utmost concern for womanists are the ways that class and gender further complicate extant inequities in wealth and access to resources. Therefore, like the BLT tradition, for womanism, stewardship in this tradition begins with the reality of

⁴⁸¹ Layli Phillips, *The Womanist Reader*, xxvi.

inequity and suffering experienced as a result of sedimented inequalities due to historical racial, gender, and class discrimination.

Stewardship also entails wholeness in the relationship between persons and nature/environment. Thus, Womanist scholars have also made strides in linking environmental justice, economic justice, and civil rights.⁴⁸²

4.9.e Wealth and Possessions

Throughout the global community women are over-represented among the vulnerable class of impoverished individuals. Layli Phillips argues that,

Black women and other women of color have been at the bottom of every social hierarchy created by man, particularly during the four centuries of the modern era, and multiply so, based on the interaction of race, class, and gender hierarchies and systems of identity.⁴⁸³

Black women who are without wealth, comprise the majority of the lower, working, and “underclass” in American society. Poor African American women are marginalized within broader society but also in the black community.

African American females are over-represented in this black ‘underclass’. Katie Cannon argues that,

Black women are the most vulnerable and the most exploited members of the American society. The structure of the capitalist political economy in which Black people are commodities combined with patriarchal contempt for women has caused the Black woman to experience oppression that knows no ethical or physical bounds.⁴⁸⁴

⁴⁸² See Emilie Townes, *In a Blaze of Glory: Womanist Spirituality as Social Witness* (Nashville, Tennessee: Abingdon Press, 1995); Karen Baker-Fletcher, *Sisters of Dust, Sisters of Spirit: Womanist Wordings on God and Creation* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1998); Delores Williams, “A Womanist Perspective on Sin,” in *A Troubling in My Soul: Womanist Perspectives on Evil and Suffering*, ed. Emilie Townes (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1993).

⁴⁸³ Phillips, *Womanist Reader*, xxxix.

⁴⁸⁴ Cannon, *Black Womanist Ethics*, 4.

Thus, the popularized form of the prosperity gospel which has emerged within the black religious community, holding out the attainment of middle and upper class lifestyle as a measure of spiritual success, piety, and one's obedience to God, does poor African American women an injustice.

In line with SHSU tradition is black liberation tradition's explicit emphasis on social justice. BLT tradition's focus regarding wealth and possessions is centered on redistribution. The reason for this focus is the acknowledgement of "sedimented inequalities" that account for the disparities of wealth between blacks and whites, rich and poor and decades of racial discrimination and injustice which kept blacks locked in the most menial jobs, leaving the possibility of generational wealth accumulation beyond the reach of many African Americans. Likewise, womanists note this historical material reality and offer the vision of a commonweal existence which entails an anti-imperialist, anti-capitalist, anti-sexist, anti-racist economic democracy where the poor receive a just share of the benefits of social cooperation, particularly in the form of the abundance of society's wealth.

Womanists understand that often much of womanist dialogue occurs within the academy, among privileged black women, and that there are issues of power which continue to leave masses of black women on the margins even *within* the black community. The womanist voice on behalf of poor black women is often the privileged upper-class academic who must, to be true to womanism, take her work "into the pews", reaching the masses of working class, poor, and "underclass" women who have yet to be heard or exercise autonomy in naming their own experience.

4.9.f Poverty

The defining feature of the masses of humanity at this time is the condition of poverty. While academics and politicians euphemistically speak of ‘class’, the real issue is poverty—want, need, and the dehumanizing lack of resources required for survival and quality of life. Black women and other women of color have experienced racialized, gendered forms of economic deprivation at the same time as they have been responsible for the survival, care, and nurturance of others under these conditions.⁴⁸⁵

Cheryl Townsend Gilkes argues that the most glaring economic failure of many in this society has been the historical failure to secure economic justice for black women.⁴⁸⁶ She notes that many churchwomen recognized this failure and therefore worked to secure economic justice for their communities. These women, she notes, “...saw the call to secure economic justice as an essential task for creating an ideal society for everyone.”⁴⁸⁷

One of the most important mechanisms for survival and flourishing of black women and their communities under the burden of poverty has been the networks of mutual aid such as those that historically have been a natural outgrowth of the SHSU tradition within the black church. Such networks are not encouraged within prosperity gospel churches because of the way poverty is conceptualized (as a curse, a result of wrong thinking/confessing, lack of faith, etc.). Thus, many of the poor black women who ascribe to this theological perspective are left waiting and wishing for the supernatural windfall of wealth *ex nihilo* (or for the wealth of the “wicked” which is laid up for the “righteous”) that is supposed to change their situation instantaneously. The prosperity theology tradition has serious implications for African American women, who comprise the majority of the membership of black churches. One cannot argue that women’s

⁴⁸⁵ Phillips, *Womanist Reader*, xxxix-xl.

⁴⁸⁶ Gilkes, *If It Wasn't For the Women*, 204.

⁴⁸⁷ *Ibid.*

overrepresentation in the ranks of individuals caught in persistent poverty, or in the ‘underclass’, is merely attributable to some transcendental force. For this allows us to continue with the practice of not holding our social, legal, political, and economic institutions accountable. It allows us to continue to ignore power relations within public and private institutions, and persist in ignoring the way patriarchy, racism, and classism combine to form oppressive structures within black women’s existence. To then argue that a women’s poverty is also attributable to disobedience, a misguided mentality, or wrong confessions continues the historical exploitation of black women which began in slavery.

Because womanist critical consciousness is liberationist, like the BLT tradition it cannot ignore the structural and systemic aspects of poverty, which are rooted in imperialism, sexism, classism, and racism. Therefore, the task of securing economic justice for poor black women and their communities still awaits the undivided attention of the black church.

4.9.g Work

In her work, Katie Cannon illustrates historical connections between race and the U.S. economy. She highlights dimensions of racism as economic reality, arguing that racism is an inherent part of the basic capitalist political economy.⁴⁸⁸ Her claim is that racism provided the moral rationale for the subjugation and exploitation of Blacks as “inferior” people, and that their labor power made economic systems of exploitation such

⁴⁸⁸ Cannon, *Katie’s Cannon*, 146.

as chattel slavery an irreplaceable necessity to Whites.⁴⁸⁹ It is this same capitalist structure of labor exploitation, she argues, that gives form to the distinctive potency of modern racism.⁴⁹⁰

Historically, black women have had to bear demeaning laborious tasks of fieldwork, breeding more chattel for slave owners, and as surrogates for white mistresses. Post-Emancipation, black women continued to be relegated to menial and domestic work. Well into the early twentieth century, black women had to endure racial discrimination, being passed over for jobs because of race, and once hired they were often subject to dangerous work in factories and on farms.⁴⁹¹ The imagery used by Zora Neale Hurston of black women as “mules of the world” is appropriate when discussing the history of black women and work in America.

Joan Martin performs a womanist reading of the Protestant work ethic, key to SHSU. The qualities that lead to economic success, qualities such as self-reliance, frugality, and hard work, are held out as virtues on the assumption that the moral agent is free and self-directing and can make suffering a desirable norm.”⁴⁹² However, enslaved women did not have this freedom. In the early American context, within which African American women developed notions of work and its meaning, economic relations structured the economic life and work of enslaved black women.

Enslaved women’s relation to work was not a relationship of opportunity, potential achievement, or possible fulfillment. “Their relationship to work did not come with access to the economic, social, legal and political resources from which further

⁴⁸⁹ Ibid., 148.

⁴⁹⁰ Ibid., 160.

⁴⁹¹ See Townes, *Womanist Justice, Womanist Hope*; and Cheryl Townsend Gilkes, *If It Wasn't for the Women*.

⁴⁹² Townes, *Womanist Justice, Womanist Hope*, 176

access could be turned into opportunity.”⁴⁹³ Thus, Martin argues that “enslaved peoples’ lives have focused not on the meaning of work as exemplified in the traditional formulation of ‘the work ethic’ but on how they lived their lives beyond their work.”⁴⁹⁴ As Martin demonstrates, a womanist reading of the work ethic calls into question the historical romanticization of work and calling embedded in it.⁴⁹⁵ She notes that this dominant notion of a work ethic remains operative in theological and socioeconomic sensibilities of African American women in the struggle for quality of life, freedom, and liberation.⁴⁹⁶

Martin suggests instead that, “ ‘Freedom’ meant freedom from work because work was understood to mean providing the necessities of life. The ‘free’ person did not work because others—women and men slaves and women in the domestic sphere—attended to the labors of life.”⁴⁹⁷

Womanist work, like black liberationist work, is for the poor, and is therefore sacred. Furthermore, the vocation of all is human effort toward liberation. While the relationship to work has changed for many contemporary African American women, wherein with work comes access to economic, social, legal, and political resources which in turn enables access to further opportunity, this has not been the case for masses of poor and working-class women and those in the black “underclass”.

This section has served as an “interruption” in our conversation between the predominant forms of engagement with economic justice—BLT, SHSU, and prosperity gospel. The significance of this interruption lies in the fact that a fundamental source for

⁴⁹³ Ibid., 133-34.

⁴⁹⁴ Ibid., 138.

⁴⁹⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁹⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁹⁷ Ibid.

a BCEEWB is church tradition and African American theology and ethics, all of which are firmly rooted in the bible. Feminist and womanist analyses attest to the patriarchy and misogyny that mark the bible text, as well as African American religious tradition.⁴⁹⁸

Claiming that the role of advocate for economic justice for African American women and their communities is essential to the ministry of the Church, Gilkes argues that black churches should be in the forefront of movements and strategies to uplift African Americans economically.⁴⁹⁹ “African American women and their communities stand to benefit from advocacy for economic justice more than any other group of women.”⁵⁰⁰ As a key contribution of this work, to assist churches in engaging economic justice on behalf of such marginalized populations, a framework for a BCEEWB is articulated from the theological-ethical investigation of the predominant forms of engagement with economic justice within the African American religious experience. The following section of this chapter discusses the sources, assumptions, and development of such a framework for a BCEEWB.

4.10 Framework for a Black Christian Ethic of Economic Well Being

From chapter three’s descriptive sketch and this chapter’s critique of three predominant forms of the black church’s engagement with economic justice, we can

⁴⁹⁸ See Joan Martin, *More Than Chains and Toil*, 115; Jacquelyn Grant, “Black Theology and Black Women” in *Black Theology: A Documentary History*, eds., Cone and Wilmore, 418-43; Kelly Brown Douglas, *The Black Christ*; Renita Weems, “Reading Her Way Through the Struggle: African American Women and the Bible,” in *Stony the Road We Trod: African American Biblical Interpretation*, ed. Cain Hope Felder, (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1991); Cheryl Townsend Gilkes, *If It Wasn’t for the Women*; Higginbotham, *Righteous Discontent*; Peter J. Paris, “From Womanist Thought to Womanist Action”, in *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion*, 9, 1-2 (Fall 1993); Katie Cannon, *Katie’s Cannon*.

⁴⁹⁹ Gilkes, *If it Wasn’t For the Women*, 204.

⁵⁰⁰ Ibid.

articulate some foundational principles for a BCEEWB. This section begins to conceptualize the framework for such an economic ethic based upon an examination of theological, social scientific, and philosophical work of African American scholars.

Womanist reflection has been fundamental to my scholarship because the moral agency and ethical consciousness of African American Christian women, who comprise the majority of black congregations within the rural South, is shaped by their unique historical experience within a racialized, gendered, and class conscious society. As mechanisms of social stratification and constructed forms of human identity, race, gender, and class have been historical bases of discrimination; sources of injustice; and thus, hindrances to human flourishing.

The principles that undergird this ethic are gleaned from an investigation of black church traditions which are predominant forms of engagement with economic justice. The principles within these traditions are not mutually exclusive but overlap. In all the traditions under study, there is an emphasis on: (1) upward mobility from poverty through different means emphasized by each tradition; (2) economic prosperity and economic independence; and (3) freedom from oppression and dehumanization to wholeness, dignity, and black personhood. These, along with the principles summarized at the end of chapter 3, provide the basis for the framework for a BCEEWB. As outlined in chapter 1 and reviewed in chapter 3, they derive from the categorical and comparative analysis performed.

4.10.a Principles from Self Help Social Uplift Tradition

Much of the economic activity in the early black church grew out of the necessity for individuals' daily survival. For instance, during Slavery, the black churches of freedmen as well as those 'invisible institutions' (more closely scrutinized and restricted because of the fear of white planter class of slave rebellion and insurrection) in the South were not only sacred places of worship but served dual purposes of organization and mobilization for mutual aid, social action, and civic impact on behalf of disinherited African American populations. Leaders and lay persons within these first black owned and operated institutions were active in abolitionist causes, and in agitating the government for citizenship rights of freed blacks, in addition to their voluntary associations for mutual aid. This SHSU tradition within the black church provides the BCEEWB with the fundamental principles of freedom, self determination, individual economic independence, education, thrift, hard work, and the importance of prosperity and ownership. Both the black liberation and prosperity gospel theological traditions within the black church are built upon the foundation of the SHSU tradition.

4.10.b Principles from Black Liberation Theology

The form that theology takes is determined by the social context in which it develops. Black liberation theology was birthed in the hearts and minds of enslaved Africans who resisted the imposition of identity based on "Christian" sanctions of slavery by oppressive European Americans. They fought to survive sub-human conditions and

economic exploitation in a racist, imperialistic nation. The evolution of BLT took place steadily as enslaved Africans gained their freedom and continued to fight for equal citizenship rights and privileges. BLT took formal shape as an intellectual phenomenon during the Civil Rights and Black Power Movements⁵⁰¹ The initial criticism of black theology was that it was mainly an intellectual development and disconnected, not reaching the ‘people in the pew’. However, as it evolved, under the leadership of a later generation of scholars efforts were made to strengthen the bond between scholarship, ministry, and social activism.⁵⁰² Thus, black theology began to be explored from various dimensions of African American life including gender, sexuality, and ecology, among others.

The subject of black theology is Christ, the black messiah who is the God of the disinherited, the liberator and reconciler. This black Christ endorses African Americans in their struggle for human dignity amid racial oppression. However, “The womanist Christ is seen not just as sustainer and liberator—as presented in black theology—but also as a prophet.”⁵⁰³ This womanist black Christ is present in the black community working to sustain and deliver women and men from, not just uni-dimensional but multidimensional oppression.⁵⁰⁴

The principles of BLT tradition that undergird this BCEEWB include upward mobility from poverty, collective and individual economic independence, self determination, dignity, pride in African American heritage and institutions, and creation

⁵⁰¹ In Cone’s work, *For My People*, he argues that the three major contexts for contemporary black theology are the Civil Rights Movement, Black Power Movement and the publication of Joseph Washington’s book, *Black Religion*.

⁵⁰² Fredrick Ware, *Methodologies of Black Theology*, 5. See also, Dwight Hopkins, *Introducing Black Theology of Liberation*; Peter Paris, “From Womanist Thought to Womanist Action”; and Stephanie Mitchem, *Introducing Womanist Theology*.

⁵⁰³ Douglas, *Black Christ*, 107.

⁵⁰⁴ *Ibid.*

of an independent economic base. It is critical of aspects of the capitalist system that tend to dehumanize and oppress.

4.10.c Principles from Prosperity Gospel

Various elements of prosperity theology fit a BCEEWB and are in line with the SHSU tradition in the black church. One example of this is the response to poverty as a central element of its doctrine, and the emphasis on a God who acts supernaturally to transform human situations. The traditional notion of a God who ‘makes a way out of no way’, a God who performs miracles for those who are marginalized—who have inadequate or no access to resources necessary for subsistence, is understood to be the same God in prosperity doctrine who rewards believers who have enough faith, correct confessions, and who follow necessary spiritual laws that bring about wealth and health.⁵⁰⁵ Principles from the prosperity gospel tradition include: individual economic prosperity, individual success, middle-class lifestyle as goal or aim; criticism of particular aspects of ‘secular’ economic system (this criticism is usually related to the absence of kingdom principles of love, righteousness, integrity, etc.). However, this tradition encourages individuals to participate fully in the ‘secular’ economic system, as is, but with “Godly” or “Kingdom” economic principles, which also entail an emphasis on sowing and tithing. The belief is that as they participate as believers, they will transform

⁵⁰⁵ This became very clear for me as I collected data in the field. In speaking with laypersons who grew up in mainline traditional African American denominations or who had come to the prosperity gospel church from such congregations, it was clear that there was no disconnect for them in their espousal of this new prosperity doctrine. They were clearly serving the same God, it was just that they perceived themselves to have been in churches where the pastor “didn’t know any better”, they didn’t know their identity in Christ and what that then meant in terms of their rights and privileges (pertaining to wealth and health). In fact, for them, this God who makes a way out of no way, is the same God who can bless them with supernatural financial “increase”—there was clearly no disconnect for these individuals.

the existing system, somewhat akin to Rauschenbush's notion of "Christianizing the social order".

4.11 Conclusion

In this chapter I have provided a womanist critique of the three predominant forms of engagement with economic justice within the black church. I first put these three traditions in conversation, offering a critique of one another, and then "interrupted" the conversation by a womanist voice, which is foundational to the framework for a BCEEWB that is inclusive, emphasizes wholeness and is not alienating. This discussion was followed by an articulation of principles from each black church tradition examined to provide the frame upon which a BCEEWB can be built. This chapter's significance lies in its provision of the frame for the BCEEWB. The principles of the BCEEWB have been laid out in chapter 3 and their elements are rethought in light of the respondents in the next chapter, this chapter has, therefore, served as a bridge demonstrating how the predominant traditions critique one another and how the womanist tradition reinforces principles from the predominant traditions that inform the BCEEWB and the construction of the NeoSHSU framework.

The tensions in the cross comparisons came through within this chapter and it is evident that not all the principles fit together well. This chapter as well as chapter 3 have illuminated the principles which will be revisited in chapter 5, the information within the comparative and categorical analyses performed within this chapter and the previous chapter, clarify why the traditions are characterized the way they are and why they fall

where they do on the continuum. The categories, that the BCEEWB will address, contained in chapters 3 and in this chapter, have helped to construct the continuum that will be explained further in chapter 5.

Chapter 5 Data from the Field

5.1 Introduction

This study focuses on the black church's predominant forms of engagement with economic justice to gain insight into the relation between identity and economic justice in the rural southern context. These predominant forms of engagement are expressed as traditions within the black religious experience (prosperity gospel, black liberation theology, and SHSU). My comparison of them served also as a mutual critique of each of the traditions and from them I drew principles that form the framework for a BCEEWB. Because this framework is based on data from black religious, predominantly male, intelligentsia, I critiqued it from a womanist perspective.

In this chapter, I am taking the principles gleaned from my comparative work in chapters three and four and reading them in light of what individuals in a rural southern context are doing and saying. I introduce case study material gathered in the field, material that shows how race, religion, and economics have intersected in diverse ways to shape African American women and men's rural southern Christian experience. Therefore, it is now appropriate to listen to what people in the pews and the pulpit in the rural southern Black Belt are saying about Christian behavior in the marketplace and about economic justice.

The chapter begins with a discussion of sources for my fieldwork, followed by a description of the four focus study churches. Following the discussion of the interviews, I look more closely at the four representative case study churches, placing them on a

continuum to provide further insight into the theological and normative foundations of engagement (or lack of it) with issues of economic justice.

5.2 Data from the Field

Having mined the black theological and philosophical intellectual traditions in the previous chapter to articulate principles that comprise a BCEEWB, I now turn to the data collected from the case study of laity and clergy in Macon County to establish the foundation for their critique of the BCEEWB framework which grows out of the black religious intellectual tradition. I discussed several categories regarding Christian behavior in the marketplace with the study participants and each of the following sections corresponds to the categories (in chapter 3 and 4) used to establish the framework for the BCEEWB.

Macon County, the heart of the Alabama Black Belt, is predominantly black, Christian, and impoverished. The congregations under study in this dissertation include a Baptist, AMEZ, and two non-denominational churches. Three are located in the town of Tuskegee, the county seat, and one is located in Shorter, Alabama which is approximately 8 miles from the county seat. I use neither actual church names nor names of individuals in this study but assume pseudonyms. The four study churches used as focus groups I chose because they are representative of the diversity of denominations that one would find in the rural and small town South, with the exception of the one church plant (Church A). They are representative in terms of size, membership demographics, age of church, and the like. A few of these churches located in the county seat over-represent the middle- and upper-class population because of the location of the university, and

Veteran's Administration (VA) hospital within Tuskegee. The conclusions I make in each section are gleaned from participant observation (attending worship services, bible studies and special programs); from informal conversations with members in settings outside of the church; from personal interviews with pastors; and from focus groups with laity.

I used chain referral sampling to compose the sample and collected my data over a period of 18 months. Using chain-referral sampling, a sample was composed of 30 participants⁵⁰⁶, 12 clergy⁵⁰⁷ with whom I conducted 12 individual interviews, and 18 laity from the 4 study churches within Macon County with whom I conducted 4 focus groups. Through personal interviews with clergy, focus groups with laity, and participant observation, I sought to grasp their views and values. All of the interviews and focus groups were tape recorded and transcribed. There were 12 personal interviews with 9 male and 3 female clergy. Five were pastors of Baptist denominations, 4 were pastoring AMEZ congregations, 1 was an AME pastor and 2 were pastors of non-denominational churches. Of the four focus groups, Church A, the prosperity gospel congregation (nondenominational) had 3 (two female, one male) lay participants in the focus group; Church B was AMEZ and had 4 (one male, three female) lay participants; Church C, a non-denominational congregation had 5 (four female, one male) lay participants; and Church D, the Baptist congregation, had 6 (four female, two males) lay participants in the focus group.

⁵⁰⁶ The sample includes those who participated in both the personal interviews (12 clergy from various denominations throughout Macon County—beyond the four study churches) and four focus groups (18 laity from four study churches—congregations A, B, C, and D).

⁵⁰⁷ These twelve clergy were from AME, AMEZ, Baptist, and Non-denominational churches. The over-representation of Baptist and African Methodist churches is representative of the composition of the religious landscape in the rural South. They include the pastors of the four focus churches and those of other congregations in Macon County. See Appendix A which contains background information from personal interviews.

In both the focus groups and personal interviews, I asked the participants open-ended questions about poverty, economic justice, the role and responsibility of the church in their community, stewardship and wealth, and general questions about the relationship between black economic activity and African American religion (see Appendix B).

The focus groups consisted of both men and women, however, the gender composition of the focus groups mirrored the gender composition of the congregations, they were majority women with only one to two men in each group.

All of the participants were over the age 30, with the exception of one clergy who was 27 years old. The average age of laity is about 58 and the average age of clergy is 51. The laity fall within various socioeconomic categories, from middle- and upper-class, to working class, and working poor. Their occupations range from janitors, university professors, entrepreneurs, to retired, and unemployed. The clergy all have at least a high school diploma and half are bivocational.

My participant observation⁵⁰⁸ included not only worship services at the focus churches on Sunday, but also bible study during the week and special services, like Christmas programs, Church Anniversary celebrations, etc.

Church documents used in this analysis include unpublished church handouts; tapes and transcriptions of sermons (Church A had transcriptions of the sermons from which they composed little handouts with main points from the sermons made available to guide bible study during the week); books on church doctrine and polity (for example, the AMEZ Book of Discipline); church bulletins; and church newsletters.

⁵⁰⁸ The number of worship services attended include 14 services at Church A, 12 services at Church B, 10 services at Church C, and 9 services at Church D. Also, I attended 9 Bible studies at both Churches A and B; one special program (Church Anniversary) at Church C and three special programs at Church D (Pastor's Anniversary, Revival and Youth Service). I also attended worship services and special programs of churches pastored by clergy other than those of the four focus churches.

The participant observation and interviews gave me insight into the values, motives, and beliefs of African American rural women and men in the Black Belt, so that my work is informed not just by theory but by perspectives of principle agents in this particular social context. Given my familiarity with black Christian experience, there is of course the possibility of assuming shared meanings between myself and research participants, regardless of my attempts to the contrary. Many of the church members were warm and welcoming. At times it grew uncomfortable, as many began to view me as a “member” or “potential member” of their congregation. For example, on one occasion, one pastor, knowing my educational background, asked me if I would teach bible study one Wednesday, given that he was an older man who believed in giving young people opportunities to learn and train in the church setting. I reluctantly accepted. Despite preparation and efforts to the contrary, I did such a poor job of teaching that I didn’t have to worry about him asking me to do it again, so I resumed my status as a researcher.⁵⁰⁹ I had to remind several parishioners and clergy that I was there as a researcher, not a member or potential member, and I was successful in my efforts to remain an observer and not serve in any other capacity—leadership or otherwise.

5.2.a Description of Study Churches

In this section, I describe various features of the congregations observed during my primary data collection in the field, including: (1) congregational characteristics such

⁵⁰⁹ My first mistake in teaching the bible study was that I used a different version of the bible. It was unusual for a congregation in my study area to use a version of the bible other than King James Version. The second challenge was that every member of the bible study group was no younger than 80 years old (I was the youngest member of the group) and they looked at me affectionately as a daughter—actually a granddaughter.

as size of membership, attendance, average age and socio-economic status of members⁵¹⁰, leadership, and history; (2) congregational artifacts, or things the congregation makes; these include the building as the most obvious artifact, visible religious symbols or signs displayed, furniture, and the layout of the building—with the understanding that space encourages or discourages different sorts of interaction with God and others⁵¹¹; (3) worship as the most central event for most congregations⁵¹²—with an eye to what is being sung, by whom, what is being preached, and how members participate; (4) theology, both the official and unofficial ideas expressed about God, how humans are related to God, what constitutes sin and salvation, etc.; (5) language—distinctive words and phrases used for their surroundings and activities⁵¹³; (6) ministry activities, which includes how members care for one another and those in their community, with particular emphasis on activities intended to serve those beyond the congregation.

5.2.a.i Church A

Church A is the most diverse congregation in terms of class in this study, with both middle- and working-class individuals. The number of members on roll is about 100, and about half attend worship services consistently. The members of the church are relatively young compared to other churches in the area. The pastor estimates that the average age of members is 55, and the majority of the members are between 35 and 60

⁵¹⁰ Average age and socio-economic status of members was usually the leadership's estimation, or in rare cases, actual data that the church itself keeps. Many churches did not keep adequate records on membership, attendance, and demographic characteristics of membership; therefore, it was often difficult for me to gather such data.

⁵¹¹ Nancy T. Ammerman, et al., *Studying Congregations: A New Handbook*, (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1998), 91.

⁵¹² *Ibid.*, 84-85.

⁵¹³ *Ibid.*, 94.

years old. This congregation is a church plant from a 15,000 member congregation in the Midwest. The head pastor of the Midwestern congregation started this local church in Tuskegee as a mission church. It functions as a separate entity, with its own local pastor, who is under the leadership of the head pastor in the Midwest.

The physical site of the church is a storefront in a refurbished strip mall about a mile from the historic town square. Refurbishing this dilapidated abandoned mall on the main street of Tuskegee removed an eyesore and proved to be a significant investment in the community by the parent megachurch. The restoration of this mall has been taken by several community members as a sign to them that this church is willing to invest in them and their community.

The worship services at this church plant are streamed in via the Internet from the large Midwestern congregation. The local pastor, who is clear that he is under the authority of the head pastor in the Midwest, is a man who has been on the ministerial staff of the larger congregation in the Midwest for 15 years. He is a polished, business-savvy individual, who explained to me a corporate model of church operations. The local pastor intends this congregation to have a similar structure and similar effect on the local community as the larger church in the Midwest. For example, this church plant is planning on starting a school to train aspiring entrepreneurs, patterned after the business school of the church in the Midwest.

The senior pastor of the congregation in the Midwest is from the town of this church plant, and argues that the church was started with a vision. He states,

If I could summarize in a few words the vision that God has given me for [this ministry], it would be that we are a ministry fulfilling the ‘dominion mandate’ spoken by God in the book of Genesis, and demonstrated by Jesus as He healed the sick, made the blind to see and the lame to walk, and set the captives free. It

is a mandate to establish God’s Kingdom within every individual, family, business, school, neighborhood, city and nation to prepare for the return and reign of the Lord Jesus Christ. This mandate requires empowerment—spiritually and economically. Through the various ministries and business entities here at [the megachurch ministry in the Midwest], we are teaching people how to live empowered lives through the Word of God.⁵¹⁴

Upon entering the front door of the storefront where worship services are held (into an area that would be akin to a narthex), I noticed glass topped counters offering for sale Christian books on finance, being debt free, CDs of the senior pastor and other popular religious figures (many of whom are known as prosperity preachers), and tapes. One counter advertised tapes from Sunday morning worship services. On another were various sheets of paper with announcements about local conferences, events, or conferences and events at the larger church in the Midwest. On a wall beside the entrance into the sanctuary was a bookstand which contained handouts with various “Confessions” on them. Once I entered the sanctuary, I noticed that flags from various countries around the world lined three walls. The walls were purple; on the front wall behind what would be considered the pulpit area in a traditional church—a slightly raised platform in front of which stood a clear movable podium—were the oversized words, “Jesus is Lord”. On each side of the raised platform are screens because the worship services are streamed in via the Internet from the large congregation in the Midwest. To the right of the platform is an area for a small band, with a drum set and a keyboard.

Through formal interviews and informal conversations, I observed that congregants understand that the Kingdom of God is brought about by Christians who “take dominion” and influence every sphere of life. Members are therefore repeatedly encouraged not to retreat from “the world”, but to become involved in politics, education,

⁵¹⁴ Unpublished church brochure.

economics—in short, in all “spheres” of life—so that they can influence it through living out “kingdom principles”.

This church understands itself to be instrumental in establishing God’s will on earth, through establishing the Kingdom of God (KOG). As Christians, they are to transform society and this world through their influence within various spheres, both public and private. The activist orientation of this congregation is immediately evident in language during worship and Bible studies: announcements are about how one can become involved in government and the community, and emphasize one’s role as a Christian within society. Righteousness, integrity, honesty, and character are concepts that are highlighted in the discourse of this congregation, and implementing them the church understands as being a way to establish and expand the KOG on earth.

Through sermons and bible study, both pastors claim that God is concerned with three major levels in life: the spiritual, the physical, and the financial. Both the local pastor and the senior pastor in the Midwest reiterate in many ways and in many contexts that Christians and the church are not to be detached from the world or society, but they are to go into the world and “provide leadership, take over through influence, enforce the culture of the superior Kingdom of God, and bring forth principles of the new Kingdom government into the world which people are to see and want to follow.”⁵¹⁵ The senior pastor claims that one of the reasons for the decline in the influence of the Christian church in society is because it has been ‘one-dimensional’, only concerned with the spiritual, thus distinguishing his church which is concerned with practical matters beyond the spiritual.

⁵¹⁵ Notes from a sermon, September 23, 2007.

This is a self-proclaimed “Word of Faith” church. The importance of one’s speech, what one ‘confesses’ and ‘declares,’ is evident not only in the resources that are made available to the congregation, but also in sermons, bible study, and especially through the language of members. As I talk with members of the congregation, I immediately hear a difference in how they articulate their beliefs. They are visibly careful about their “confessions”, often stopping after having made a “negative confession” to “cancel it by the power of Christ” so that Satan is not given power to bring the negative confession to fruition.

Many of the members have previously belonged to other traditional denominational churches and are drawn to this church because of its move away from what they negatively call ‘tradition’ which to their minds perpetuates a certain type of thinking (thinking condoning lack, and elevating poverty as a virtue). One member of the church pauses several times during our conversation about the church doctrine regarding poverty and wealth because she is still getting used to “a whole new way of thinking” about faith, and God, having come to this church from a “traditional” congregation that does not espouse prosperity theology.

The prosperity doctrine espoused by this congregation offers something that members feel is missing from other ‘traditional’ churches (mainline Protestant denominations and Catholic churches), namely the insight into who believers are in Christ and what that actually means for the everyday lives of believers. At this church there is an emphasis on the individual as a person within community, who the individual is in Christ, and what she should be doing in light of this Christian identity.

This church is very practical in its functioning. One cannot charge this congregation with being merely pietistic and sectarian, or passive toward the broader culture. Indeed, it seems to have social gospel aspects to it. While there is an emphasis on pietism, weight is given to the importance of community and interpersonal compassion. However, unlike the pioneer of the social gospel movement, Rauschenbusch, there is less “comforting of the afflicted” and “afflicting of the comfortable” taking place within this congregation, and I am persuaded this is because of the church’s doctrinal bent towards a prosperity gospel. Because the church understands poverty not as structural but as a curse reflecting one’s state of mind and faith, comforting the afflicted (by what some believe to be structural forces that result in poverty) takes the form of re-education, or changing the ‘mind-set’ of impoverished individuals. The goal is getting them to understand the truth regarding who they are in God (that they are priests and kings), their own divinity by relation, and the truth about poverty. The church attributes individuals’ poverty to transcendental rather than structural forces. Thus, afflicting the comfortable does not take priority or the form that it took within Rauschenbusch’s social gospel. What is prominent instead is the ideal of the Kingdom of God, and it is clear that within this notion are conceptions of equality and justice. The church emphasizes personal salvation and the realization of God’s kingdom, to be accomplished through the living out of ‘kingdom principles’ such as righteousness, honesty, and integrity, which are ardently stressed through teaching and preaching. Like the social gospel movement, the emphasis of this congregations’ theological and hermeneutical standpoint is the role of the church in improving life here on earth, not waiting to get one’s reward in the afterlife.

The form that the prosperity gospel takes within this small rural town is interesting. It is less individualistic, more concerned with community, communal bonds, and the economic flourishing of individuals within the local community, a difference in approach to prosperity theology that I attribute to the social context of this congregation. As its models for progress, this congregation looks to Booker T. Washington and George Washington Carver who emphasize economic development that is indigenous in that it takes the skills of the local people and uses them to enhance the economic well being of the community.

As a congregation that ascribes to the prosperity theological tradition within the black church, what was most evident was the different language that was used within this congregation, not only within worship and bible study but during informal conversations. Among the various clues to this church's overall theological orientation was the congregational "confession" made every Sunday, that served somewhat like the "Confession of Faith" that one finds within more orthodox Protestant churches. This is usually a clear statement that contains elements of a church's theology, Christology, eschatology, and ecclesiology. Some are more specific and comprehensive than others. This church's congregational confession included some central tenets of prosperity theology, such as statements regarding the divine right of Christians to be healthy and wealthy, and a statement about who they believe themselves to be in relation to God (for example, ruling as priests and kings here in the earthly realm, being descendents of Abraham and therefore entitled to the same blessings, etc.).

5.2.a.ii Church B

Church B is a middle- and upper-class African Methodist Episcopal Zion congregation which, I was told by a study participant, has been known as “the bigshot church”. The majority of the 106 members (a little over one third attend worship services consistently) in this congregation are elderly and educated. They are mostly retired, and the average age of the members is 65. The pastor describes his members as professional people, retired teachers, professors, accountants, business persons, etc.

The church, located within a neighborhood off Main Street about 0.75 miles from the historic town square, sits on a small hill (the community of the church is historically known as Zion Hill) surrounded by small old homes. Like many neighborhoods within the town of Tuskegee, several of the homes around the church are abandoned. The positioning of homes around it reminded me of the small communities that grew up around churches once slaves were freed, since at the time independent black churches were the social, political, and spiritual hub of a black community ostracized by mainstream American society.

The church is red brick with white trim. The building is clearly in need of some restoration, not unlike many buildings in town. In such an impoverished community, it becomes the norm to see many old municipal and private buildings in disrepair. Also, the church is maintained by the giving patterns of members and the pastor was forthright about this fact, yet the presence of middle- and upper-class members does not guarantee

sufficient giving to make costly repairs for restoration.⁵¹⁶ What immediately caught my attention upon first driving up to the church is a white square on the left side of the building about 10' x 10' with a large white rock in the center. A historical marker on the rock identifies this as a historical church—the “cradle of Tuskegee University” because it is where the university began. The first classes of the Tuskegee Normal School, later to become Tuskegee University, were held on this church site. Members showed great pride in the historical significance of the church. Even on the marquee in front of the church that displays the church’s name, the pastor’s name, and the time of service, the cradle phrase is used as it is on the front of the church bulletin. This church is considered to be one of the most influential churches in the Alabama district of the AMEZ denomination because of its history as the birthplace of an historically black university.

On my initial visit to the church to talk with the pastor, I was immediately escorted downstairs to the basement of the church where there is a museum that documents the history of this “cradle.” As I enter the basement, I notice many colorful paintings which depict the history of the establishment of the university. This congregation seems to be very proud of its auspicious history of being connected to an institution which helped to rebuild the lives of so many African Americans in the rural South post-Emancipation. In 1986 this church was registered as a National Historic Site by the Department of Interior of the United States government.

Upon entering the two story red brick building, one finds oneself in the narthex, where the first thing that catches one’s attention is a large bulletin board showing pictures of members during a church picnic. Though the pictures are not current, but from over a

⁵¹⁶ The condition of the building is also a reflection of denominational priorities or resources because usually, churches can appeal the denomination for resources for repairs, specifically for historically significant structures such as this one.

year ago, what it makes clear is that this congregation has social functions often, events such as fish fries and shopping trips to outlet malls in Atlanta. The construction of the sanctuary building itself is similar to many traditional churches. There is red carpet on the floor with wooden, red cushioned pews. There are old stained-glass windows along the wood paneled walls. There is a row of pews on each side of the church separated by a center aisle. To each side of the pulpit are smaller rows of pews where the older mothers of the church and older men sit. These are the members with seniority and some with leadership positions in the church. Behind the pulpit area, with its wooden podium and cushioned wooden chairs for clergy, is the choir loft. There is a piano, organ, keyboard, and a set of drums in this area.

The pastor of this church is an educated, older man, in his sixties, who has been in the ministry over 20 years. He is also pastoring a smaller rural church within Macon County. This pattern of pastoring multiple congregations is not unusual in rural settings.

As AMEZ churches are connectional churches, pastors can move as soon as every two years from one appointment to the next. This pastor has been here only three years. Through attending worship services and bible studies (even in informal conversations with laity), I observed that there is a significant amount of focus on personal piety, and an emphasis on evangelism, which ends up feeding back into personal piety. One is to be righteous as a witness to the reality of Christ in the world. Engagement in the “secular” realm is important as it provides an opportunity for those not already saved to see how religious life can be an attractive option. One who is “saved” must demonstrate this in their home, workplace, in the broader community. One’s behavior should evidence one’s salvation; this is important because of the need for others in society to convert.

Services at this church are characteristic of traditional AMEZ services, with a mixture of traditional hymns from the hymn book along with contemporary gospel music sung by one of the many different choirs (each sings on a different Sunday). There is a mass choir which is comprised of mostly elderly members, and a men's choir, which has elderly members only, and a youth choir which is mainly female.

The focus of the sermons and bible studies that I attended were centered very much on personal salvation, evangelism, and how one should treat others (with love and fairness, according to biblical injunctions). The conception of love, fairness, and righteousness in relating to others is a thick one, the emphasis is on a sacrificial love out of which fairness and righteousness flow. The pastor reminds the parishioners repeatedly to love one another, be good to one another, fellowship with one another, and that all that they have God has given to them to be shared. The sermons were usually oriented to personal spirituality and the focus was always on personal salvation and being assured of salvation. There was usually a Christo-centric focus to all sermons and Bible studies and clear acknowledgement of human sinfulness and the need for Christ's saving grace and act. Unlike the focus on being actively engaged in politics or emphasizing active engagement of the public sphere I saw in congregation A, this congregation gives little emphasis to engaging the public sphere. For example, the pastor considers his task in the congregation to be "shepherding the souls of folks". As a leader of the church, he can focus on the spiritual aspects of existence because there is no longer need for black pastors to assume the political roles they have in the past, he says. Although the pastor may not be politically engaged (unlike the pastor of church A who ran for mayor, for

instance), it does not preclude members from being so. Several members are active in local civic and political organizations.

The overall theological orientation of this congregation falls within the self-help/social uplift tradition of black church experience. The self-determination ethos and pride in African American heritage and institutions is clear in conversations of leaders and members. Also, although members are encouraged to “do what they can” to contribute to making society better, there is not a radical push for social transformation. The congregation, like many within our nation, is marked by religious individualism and insularity.

5.2.a.iii Church C

Church C is a relatively young nondenominational church in a historic community. It is a small rural congregation which meets in a humble building which looks like a single family home off a rural county road, outside of the county seat, in the rural town of Shorter. The outside of the building is white and beige wooden clapboard, with two windows in the front of the church on each side of the door. Over the windows hang banners, one (about 2 by 2 ½ feet) that reads, “Jesus” with smaller biblical symbols (cross, lamb, bible), and a larger banner (about 4 by 3 ½ feet) with the church’s name. Upon entering the church, you find yourself immediately in the back of the sanctuary, there being no separate narthex. The church seems to have been built originally as a home and gutted to accommodate pews and a pulpit. To the right is a wall which divides the sanctuary from the restrooms and what seems to be a small office and two other

smaller rooms. To the left there are two rows of about seven pews on each. At the front of the church is a small approximately 18 inch tall divider, lined with artificial plants and on each side of this divider stand white columns. This area is clearly dividing the pews from the pulpit. Behind the divider is a small, humble wooden podium with a microphone attached to it. There are two pews on each side of the podium along the walls that face one another, and three pews directly behind the pulpit that face the congregation—presumably where a choir would sit. However, there is no choir and no musical accompaniment to the congregational spirituals and songs that are usually sung during worship. There is a small CD player which the pastor uses sometimes during moments of service to play gospel CDs since there is no choir. There is a very gifted singer in the congregation who usually sings or leads the congregation in song at the appointed times during worship. She typically sings a cappella as does the congregation.

This working-class congregation is comprised of about 30 members, led by an educated young female pastor (37 years old), who founded the church 11 years ago. She has been in the ministry for almost 20 years. She has a master's degree in Political Science, Public Administration, and is currently pursuing her Educational Specialist degree. She is from a rural area that neighbors Shorter, so she knows her church's community well. She currently lives in Montgomery where she is employed as a junior high school English teacher—meaning that this pastor is bivocational. Prior to teaching, she was a social worker in larger cities of Montgomery and Birmingham, and the small town of Tuskegee. Thanks to these experiences, she has had a unique experience of knowing this community and the challenges community members face personally.

The congregation is comprised mostly of women, the majority of whom are between 21 and 59 years old. The pastor estimates that 90% of the congregation are women, 10% men, 20% are over 60 years of age, about 40% are 21-59 years old, and about 40% are under 21 years old.

This congregation could be characterized as charismatic. They believe in speaking in tongues, and have emotional and expressive worship. The worship services I attended would at times remind me of a Pentecostal worship service. Attendance was typically 15 to 18 members; there were usually about two to three men present, including the husband of the pastor. It is clear that this is a close-knit congregation that serves as one another's support and encouragement. There were always testimonies to this fact during the "testimony service" in Sunday morning worship, which is a time for members to stand and proclaim God's goodness or grace in their lives by telling of how God either provided materially or worked supernaturally to get them out of a difficult situation at work or school. There were always testimonies to how God made a way for individuals to pay bills when their money was low and how God provided for them materially even though they were experiencing financial difficulties. This congregation was clearly working class and included the "working poor". In fact, in my formal focus group with the members, several identified themselves as poor.⁵¹⁷

The sermons were usually focused on personal piety, sin, and salvation, but the pastor also typically incorporated a critique of capitalism and "middle classness," emphasizing the believer's responsibility to make a difference in the broader society by living out Christian principles.

⁵¹⁷ This type of identification would not happen at church A where members do not accept "lack" as their reality. Even if members are poor, they are to "confess" and believe that they are rich.

What was interesting about this congregation is how independent it was. There were several occasions when I attended the church and found that the pastor was absent. There were about three individuals who were called ministers within this congregation; together they provided leadership when the pastor was absent, and they provided a supportive role to her when she was present. On the occasions that the pastor was absent, a middle-aged woman who was charismatic in her leadership style typically took the reins. Like the pastor, she typically preached on personal piety, sin, and salvation. She did not incorporate the materialist critiques like the pastor. However, it seemed that she may have been influenced by televangelism, as she would sometimes pray and use statements about “prosperity” and “supernatural financial blessings”. Yet this assistant minister definitely was not a prosperity preacher. In fact, during the focus group, she provided a scathing critique of the “name it, claim it” doctrine. In our personal interview, the pastor of the church did acknowledge that while they are not a prosperity gospel church, they do believe in the prosperity message. Yet she was critical of the message’s emphasis on wealth. She argues that not everyone will be rich, that it is not about being a millionaire but about stewardship. She emphasized stewardship and that true riches are not about wealth accumulation. Her appropriation of the prosperity message seemed to be tempered by the socio-economic reality of her congregants. In fact, when I asked her about the “poor”, she argued that she and her congregation do not like to use the word poor, but rather use the word “needy”, because all people have needs and therefore using the word needy does not embarrass like the use of the word “poor” does. She spoke of poverty not in ahistorical or apolitical terms as is often done in the prosperity message,

her concern seemed to be more with being sensitive to the stigma that the word poor has for those in her community.

Although the theological orientation of this congregation is chiefly characterized by the self-help/social uplift tradition, the pastor has also critically appropriated the prosperity gospel. The congregation therefore does not so much emphasize wealth or health as divine rights of children of God but stewardship and having the proper relationship to wealth and possessions. Included in its theological leanings is also criticism of monopolistic capitalism, but it would not be true to say this is central to their theological understanding.

5.2.a.iv Church D

Church D is a middle-class Baptist congregation, located about 3 miles from the center of town, just inside the city limits. This 500 member church (between 25 and 35% attend worship services consistently) is surrounded by what was once a middle-class neighborhood, sits next to a high school, and is about a mile from a housing project. This is a well established church in the community having been organized during the late 1800s. Its origin is in another local Missionary Baptist church on the east side of town. The members of this original congregation of which it was part, who lived on the west side of town, decided to establish this congregation because the distance from their homes to church was too far to travel on foot (approximately 9 miles). Thus, this congregation was formed on the West end of the town of Tuskegee to accommodate the needs of members there. In the course of its 120-year existence, this church has had 22

pastors. The current pastor has been in leadership for 31 years. He holds a doctorate of ministry and lives in the county seat where the church is located.

Upon entering the church during my initial visit I noticed a wall of pamphlets and brochures on health related items such as how to manage diabetes, high blood pressure, nutrition, aging, how to get help with substance abuse, etc. To the right of the breezeway is a door that leads to a large fellowship hall equipped with a kitchen, library, and classrooms. Under the current pastor's leadership, construction of a new sanctuary took place in 1978, while the church was experiencing rapid growth. The sanctuary is large and can accommodate 750 to 800 people. This church also has a van ministry which it uses to pick up elderly members and students at the university. Upon entering the large sanctuary, one notices the carpet and cushioned wooden pews. The pulpit area is also large and accommodates several associate and visiting ministers. Behind the pulpit area there is a large choir stand. This church has various choirs. It has a mass choir (comprised of all choirs), two youth choirs (one for ages 3-12 years and the other for teenagers), a male chorus, and an inspirational choir (for persons ages 45 and above). There is also a young adult choir for those ages 20 to 45. The music at this church is usually very moving and of professional quality. The music ministry staff includes a director, pianist, drummer, and bass guitarist. They usually sing contemporary gospel, hymns, and spirituals.

One of the striking features of this church is the presence of students from the university in town. On several occasions, upon visiting this church, the pastor would announce the presence of students, not only from the local university but from other historically black universities in the region. The church has what it calls

College/University and School Day observances. This is a day when students and representatives from an educational institution will come and participate in worship on their designated day and are given a special financial contribution by the congregation. The schools that participate in these observances include: Selma University, Tuskegee University, Alabama State University, Morehouse School of Religion, and the Macon County School System. It became clear to me also through interviews that this church supports education and educational institutions.

Although Tuskegee is a “university town”, the students are not present in any appreciable number within the various congregations. There seem to be a few churches that are where the students go, and this seems to be one of the congregations that “welcomes” or provides a welcoming environment for students (be it through an accessible worship style or after church dinners, etc.).

Also, I noticed that this church takes time repeatedly to acknowledge the children in its congregation. There is usually a special “children’s message” during worship. At this time the young people gather around the pastor, who comes down from the pulpit to stand among the children while he delivers an interactive homily that has a practical and encouraging message for the children. While at first blush this seems positive, on reflection I see it more as continuing to drive home the point that church is not for young people but for adults. As another example, although the sermons and activities are often family-centered, they are normally geared to the adults of families. However, this congregation did seem to provide an encouraging environment for the youth. On various occasions the pastor acknowledged specific youth in the congregation for their accomplishments in school and extracurricular activities.

This church has many ministries and has a strong social outreach arm. Among them are: a mission fund used to assist needy members, a clothing ministry and food pantry, a strong senior citizen ministry; youth ministry, a scholarship fund for high school graduates; a church newsletter; and College/University and School Day Observances. This church is very active in the community and members are proud of its extensive charity work and social activism.

Beyond this, the congregation emphasizes Christian education and outreach to the community. It is clear that this pastor is one who has lived in this community and is known as one who is concerned for the well being of the community. He has also been involved in local politics as a former member of the Macon County School Board. When I visited, his sermons usually included content on personal piety; community engagement; and social justice. There were several times when I visited this congregation or participated in worship when the pastor was out of town (his travel schedule was intensive as he is extremely active in district denominational work) or had a guest minister for special observances or one of the associate ministers delivering the sermon, so I heard the fewest sermons of all pastors of my study churches from this pastor.

This congregation is firmly rooted in the self-help/social uplift heritage of the black church. Both leadership and members emphasize the ideals of the Protestant work ethic, advocate economic independence and self-determination, and emphasize education. The pastor has been actively involved in politics, and the church has a history of social outreach within its surrounding community.

5.2.b Voices from Pew & Pulpit

In this section, I present interview and focus group data that I collected over the course of eighteen months. These are derived from the recorded responses of the 30 participants, both clergy and laity, to questions regarding: poverty; economic justice; the role and responsibility of the church in their community; stewardship and wealth; and general questions about the relationship between black economic activity and African American religion. This data is a significant component of the framework for a BCEEWB that takes seriously the concrete situation of individuals in the persistently poor Alabama Black Belt.

5.2.b.i Church

In this section, I highlight the respondents' understanding of the role or purpose of the church in their lives and the lives of those within their communities. Not only is the evangelical nature of the church central to respondents, but the role of the church also includes: providing support and encouragement for individual believers; providing a sense of community and nurturing important communal ties (usually limited to the congregational community); and meeting practical needs which includes education and economic assistance through social outreach. Unanimously, the lay and clerical participants argued that the foremost purpose of the church is evangelistic, that is, to assist individuals in attaining personal salvation. For the prosperity gospel congregants, as well as others in more orthodox Protestant congregations, the responsibility to the "least of these" includes evangelism; their "soul's salvation" was as important as having

their physical needs met. A lay participant from church A argues: “well, the role of the black church to me is getting people saved. Uh, and having church...” The African American churches in this sample were evangelical in nature; not only the traditional mainline denominational black churches but also the nondenominational congregations who ascribe to prosperity theology and are formed by the more popular religious culture. When asked the purpose of the church and its role, participants repeatedly argued that it is to “save souls” to “preach the gospel”, that it has an evangelical focus. Many respondents echoed this sentiment. A lay participant from church D stated that,

Well, I know [...] we used to call it the black church but I look at the church more universally, it just so happened that we all happen to be black that go here basically. But our purpose is to win souls for Christ and [...]we[...] are a place where people can come together and fellowship...I don't think we were intended to be all by ourselves, and uh I think we get strength and encouragement by being together as a group and supporting each other, supporting our community, uh, but our main purpose...is to win souls for Christ, the growth of the Kingdom.⁵¹⁸

A female middle-aged lay participant at church A who also contended that the role of the church was to “save souls” railed against the emotionalism and ritual she experienced in what she considered “traditional” churches in the area. These churches were marked by DuBois’ “frenzy” observed in black churches. She claimed that the ‘traditional’ churches that she had attended in the area, “...seems to me [they] just like ‘having church’, you come in sing songs, you do a lot of shouting and wait for the preacher to get up there and, you know, just back him with the hollering and the fainting and just...just like years ago.” Clearly, this style of worship, being associated with the “way church was years ago,” she now considers outmoded. Church now should be

⁵¹⁸ Though I used the concept, “the black church” as a general descriptor of the local congregations in this study, many of the lay participants took issue with the use of such an identifier. They argued that there is no “white church” or “black church”, there is just one church. Several of them contended that it was merely circumstantial that they happened to live in an area which was predominantly black and thus, their church was so.

focused on evangelism, conversion, and teaching (as opposed to preaching; this is usually in criticism of a certain style of preaching, which is less like what respondents call “teaching” and more emotional/expressive).

In addition to its evangelical focus, the laity of congregation D, as did others, highlighted the supportive and encouraging role the church plays in their lives. They emphasized the community it provides and the opportunities for fellowship that it makes possible. Especially for many elderly members, their church was clearly their social outlet (a fact admitted to by both laity and Seniors themselves). Churches understood this and therefore provided activities beyond worship for elderly congregants and members of community. Such events include health fairs (where the elders could get free minor medical care and receive information regarding preventative health measures and how to manage their various ailments), fish fries, picnics, luncheons, and afternoon bible studies.

The majority of clergy and laity suggested that there is a more practical dimension to the role and purpose of the historical and contemporary black church than simply evangelism and proselytizing. A young (pastor 2) male clergy of a Baptist congregation in Tuskegee elaborated on the black church’s actions in this regard, saying that, “...the black church has been more faithful in demonstrating God’s love for all people than other churches in the majority culture. ...the black church still stands at the forefront of offering the love of God and practically working that out...”

The middle age female pastor of church C contends that the role of the black church broadly is to,

...inform and educate, as well as inspire and motivate black people to come together to...embrace education and change, to be trailblazers, pioneers, to beat the pathways for the generations to come, to bridge the gap you know, for

those...who are a little stray-ward at this time, to make sure that there's a place of refuge.

This pastor's reference to church as a refuge is notable. Many pastors spoke about America having historically been a hostile environment for Blacks because of racism and racial discrimination. The church, therefore, served as a place of refuge for African Americans seeking solace from oppression and dehumanization. It was also the place where African Americans could receive education at a time in history when Blacks were faced with substandard segregated schools and no public (meaning government supported) schools were available for African Americans. This traditional emphasis on education was evident in various churches and was emphasized repeatedly in many of the congregations. The emphasis was on both "secular" and Christian education. Thus, various churches made it a point to publicly encourage young people in their congregation by acknowledging their scholastic achievements. This emphasis on education also included financially supporting educational institutions, locally and in some cases also regionally.

The church having a role beyond the spiritual lives of people is a constant and common thread in the response of all participants in my research sample. For instance, the pastor of church C also noted that the church should be a

...place where we are prepared to take care of our own, to provide for our own and uh, not just depend upon a system that really wasn't designed for us in the beginning. And to also, make a way so that when the system fails, cause we know that the economy is not as stable as it was, so in the event that the system fails, we'll be in a place where we can continue to grow and thrive; where our communities will continue to grow and thrive.

One lay respondent who is a member of church A, the self-identified prosperity theology church, argued that the church has a very practical function within the life of the

community. He notes the mobilization and social outreach function of the black church.

He claims that,

To me the church is organizing people who are looking for something higher, or something... It's like man is always seeking something greater than himself to believe in, something to grab on, to give hope. I think the church is the campground for that... to bring people together and try to create a vision for the people so that the people can progress themselves from the situation they're in to another level. The church is to organize people and to help people to give them that foundation so that they can move... now, this church here, by building the mall, [the purpose] is to open up doors for people to become entrepreneurs or to think on another level. Because we tend as human beings to be in a box, most people are in a box and need something to draw them out. I think Christianity can draw you outta there because it makes you think of something higher than yourself because if you had to depend on yourself all the time, you're not gonna go too far. So the church open those little doors up, and gives me the understanding of who I am, what I need to do... The church is an organization, organizing people, bringing them together to create a higher life level or dimension.

This layperson emphasizes the important role that the church has in assisting individuals in enhancing their situation in life, particularly their economic position. This is done either through practical help provided by the congregation⁵¹⁹, as in his example of the church rebuilding the mall, or through psychological and spiritual resources available that feed people the hope or inspiration needed to continue to “make it” or to thrive beyond merely “making it” (surviving) and moving to a better place financially.⁵²⁰

⁵¹⁹ An example of practical ways that congregations in my study site assist individuals in enhancing their economic situation is one of the clergymen from a Baptist church would ask individuals who were out of work and wanted a job to identify themselves and he would then ask the entrepreneurs in the congregation to stand and would pair them up so that before they left the church that day, those who needed work had a commitment from those who owned businesses. Other churches offer help with obtaining a GED diploma or enhancing employable skills.

⁵²⁰ Examples of congregations offering the psychological and spiritual resources needed to help move an individual to thriving economically (or to a different place economically) are at one non-denominational charismatic church, where the pastor shared a “prophecy” with an individual about how she has been struggling financially but she has the *power*, through Christ to break out of this cycle of struggle and impoverishment, and the individual, who was on welfare, soon after got off of welfare, obtained employment and attributes her success to the empowering words spoken to her by her pastor. Another example is of a young lady who shared with me that before attending her church, she used to spend money “foolishly” and get into debt just buying clothes, shoes and jewelry, however, after attending her church, where she was taught that she had the *power* to not gratify her desires instantaneously, and instead to

When asked about the mission of their local congregations, the clergy and laity all responded with functions that reach beyond the spiritual life of individuals, and noted a strong social activist function of their local congregations. This activism takes various forms and is limited by congregation size and (financial and human) resources. However, the lay and clerical participants of the churches emphasize that churches must meet the needs of the “whole man” or the “total person”, as several participants stated. The pastor of Church C, the small nondenominational charismatic congregation stated that,

Our mission is to impact the life of every person and to help them come into more quality lifestyles. That’s our emphasis, to impact the whole man, meaning physically, mentally, emotionally and spiritually. We’ve also added financially because we want to see them blessed.

In the Word of Faith congregations, the emphasis is on the “Word” (scripture), on teaching the Word. The perception is, that as in various African American Protestant congregations in this study area, it is through the word of God that people are transformed. The mere knowledge of this word has the power to change lives. Therefore, lay participants at church A, consistently referred to the Word, the centrality of this Word in the purpose of the church. The older male participant argued that the purpose of the church is foremost,

... to be teaching the bible, what the bible says, not what man says. In my younger days, the minister would...read a scripture from the bible and preach an hour...but he actually wasn’t preaching on that scripture, he was preaching about what was going on in the world and within the church, it wasn’t actually about the word...so the role of the church now is preaching...the word of God rather than the word of man. ...[the purpose is] to teach people how to become more loving and how to help others...

practice temperance, through the power of Christ, she quit smoking and quit spending excessively and began saving her money and practicing more sound financial management. In both cases, the individuals’ ability to change was attributed to the spiritual empowerment gained from their church attendance or their pastor.

This emphasis on the Word (scripture) is significant because of congregants' belief in the power that mere scripture has in the life of the believer. They believe that the Word, in conjunction with faith is what can heal, bring wholeness and even wealth to a believer. Within these churches, scripture is given a central focus within their doctrine and praxis; indeed, the sermons are filled with varied scriptural references, church confessions are filled with Scripture quotations, and congregants are encouraged to "speak the Word" or quote scripture always. During my attendance at a service in the Word of Faith study church, a young woman stood up to "testify" to how "speaking the Word of God, instead of speaking the word of man [sic]" works, she said. She found out that her sister had a tumor and immediately went to the bible and found a passage regarding healing and every day she spoke that passage. She said that "man [the doctor] said that my sister was sick, however, the Word says that 'by His [Christ's] stripes she is healed.'" She contended that after a few weeks of speaking scripture every day, her sister was healed.

For the majority of churches, the denominational mission is what drives the local church mission and purpose. However, some clergy find their local church mission to be in conflict with the broader denominational mission, particularly because the latter is understood to be more insular, usually meaning more inwardly focused on church functions, as opposed to meeting individual needs within communities. A middle-aged pastor in a traditional Baptist denomination (pastor 4) argued that,

...In the local church, in my church, we put more emphasis on the ministry. ...see the Convention doesn't speak to family ministry, single's ministry, women's ministry...and some of those things which relate to those targeted ministries which help to meet the needs of the people in the community...substance abuse ministry and those kinds of things. [The denominational mission] speaks mostly to the auxiliary work of the church and that's a problem because we're losing a lot of people, we're caught up in the

auxiliary and organization and not focused on Biblical principles based on ministry.

What he (and others) consider ministry is that which actually touches the lived experience of those in community. Since denominations often focus on institutional maintenance and growth, the realities of individuals within congregations can be neglected. However, local congregations will wane without attention to the lived experience of those within their pews and broader community. Clearly, in my research site, those churches who attempted to meet the perceived and felt needs of the community were among the most vibrant and thriving of congregations. Those who were, like this Baptist denomination, insular and inwardly focused, were in decline.

The respondents also acknowledged that the role of the black church is not what it once was. In this vein, an elderly male layperson in church B stated that,

...I still look at the spiritual basis, but you know as our community, our population has changed, the role of the church or the purpose of the church has also changed, because at one time...the church was the only place people really could get together and somewhat socialize...but that's no longer the case. There's a lot of competition out there for entertainment options besides what the church is able to provide. So at one time it was the bedrock, I would say, of community activity. I don't know that it's true today, unfortunately.

Even though the purpose and mission of the church is understood to be evangelical in nature, the emphasis on attending to aspects of the "total person" or "whole man" factor heavily in the definition of the purpose and mission of churches in this study.

In summary, for those respondents that espouse the prosperity gospel, the purpose of the church is foremost evangelical; personal salvation is key, and a strong evangelistic emphasis characterizes the understanding of the purpose of wealth. Thus, wealth is hallowed in its "kingdom work". Likewise, the churches most firmly rooted in the SHSU heritage of the black church emphasize the centrality of evangelism in the church's

purpose. Yet they go beyond this, emphasizing also the church's role in meeting needs outside of the spiritual, thus attending to the social, political, and economic needs of individuals.

5.2.b.ii Faith

What is the object of the faith of these respondents? And what are the implications of that faith for their relationship to community and for agency on behalf of justice? For the study participants, faith is evidently an impetus for their engagement with economic justice—faith in a God who mandates care for the poor and needy within and beyond Christian community. As an elderly female respondent in church B claims, “...the church has a responsibility to the poor and the needy because it’s a mandate from Christ that we do.” The type of faith that is evident in these congregations is holistic or tending to the “total person”. For it is faith in a God concerned for the plight of humans—a God who is active in human history, who is concerned about those within rural, poor contexts like their own.

An elderly clergyman (pastor 5) who is an absentee pastor of a small Baptist congregation argues that faith is extremely important and is the foundation of why Christians do what they do in the community on behalf of the needy. He states that,

Faith is the substance of things hoped for and evidence of things not seen. Ah, it’s very important for us to have faith, and not just faith in ourselves but first of all have that saving faith, and that saving faith is what causes us to be given salvation, you got to have faith in God and that Jesus died for our sins, ...so first of all we have to be saved and once we do that then we can have faith in God that he’s gonna provide all of our needs for us and that he’s going to direct our path and that he will carry out the promises he has made us in scripture so it’s very important for us to have faith...too often we have faith in the wrong things, its gotta be in God.

For this pastor, we serve Christ by serving others. For him, caring for the poor and those less fortunate “is something we are commanded to do...because the Lord commands us in his word to love one another. And love is not just a saying, love is a doing, and as we do for one another we are spreading the love of Jesus and we are showing love, we are commanded to do this.”

The object of faith for the participants in this study is the incarnation of God in Christ, who is understood to have had an earthly ministry in service to the poor and needy. The study participants unanimously understood their care for and charitable deeds done on behalf of the needy to be following the holistic example of Christ in his earthly ministry. Faith is understood to be that place from which our actions on behalf of the needy originate. These actions are modeled by the moral exemplar, Christ.

However, those congregants in the study area who subscribe to the prosperity theology put much weight on faith for changing the circumstances of the impoverished. Indeed, a lay participant argues that, “You don’t have to be poor, uh, you know according to the Word of God, He, He [God] wishes that we all prosper and be in good health, so we don’t have to be [poor], but it’s just got to be taught that we don’t have to be, no we don’t have to be poor.” And it is by faith, it is believed, that one will supernaturally change one’s circumstances from lack to abundance. Church A and their parent church “confesses” during worship service that:

...We are citizens of the kingdom of God and we have what we say.
 ...We are what the Word of God says we are, we have what the Word of God says we have, and we can do what the Word of God says we can do. We hold fast to our confession of faith... We are God’s chosen generation, His royal priesthood and we are reigning as kings in the earth...
 ... We are the healed of the Lord. Jehovah Rapha has taken sickness and disease away from the midst of us...We are redeemed from debt, poverty and lack...We are increasing more and more and wealth and riches are in our house.

... We are sowing bountifully and reaping a bountiful harvest on every seed sown.
 ...We have strong marriages and families that are knitted together in love and
 rooted in the Word of God

...[this church] is prospering at everything it sets its hands to. We have a
 great work to accomplish and we command finances and all resources to come
 forth now without delay. ...We declare that the wealth of the wicked, the
 treasures of darkness and the hidden riches of secret places come to us now....⁵²¹

This statement of faith is an important part of the worship service. All the congregants stand and recite it together from the screen in the front of the church. This statement contains the basic beliefs of the congregation regarding wealth, health, identity, family relationships, “confession”, faith, etc. Identity as citizens of the Kingdom of God is foundational to this doctrine. This identity dictates how people perceive themselves, how they will act, what is important to them, and what they believe about the world and their place in it. As “Kingdom citizens,” they are “sanctified and consecrated” and believe themselves to be set apart from the world. Also, this identity enables them to live in this temporal realm under another “government” and under “supernatural laws”; they use their words or “confessions” to effect change in the world and in their lives because they are not limited by this temporal realm being instead under the authority of God and God’s reign. Likewise, as God’s chosen and royal priesthood, they believe that they also “reign” as kings in this life and therefore, have authority (given by God) and agency. Thus, they understand themselves to be taking “dominion” for Christ, for the Kingdom of God in this world. This seems to be an empowering aspect of this doctrine, enabling believers to realize a form of agency, even if mainly a psychological and spiritual one. Because of their identity as citizens of God’s kingdom and their God-given ability to reign as priests and kings in this life as God’s chosen, there is a belief in abundance of financial provision that suits such an identity. Therefore, they believe that they have the

⁵²¹ Unpublished church document.

divine right to be wealthy. Another empowering aspect of this doctrine is the belief that one can actually command (by faith) the wealth and resources one needs in this life—wealth that comes not by the sweat of one’s brow, but by supernatural means.

In addition to faith, these congregants emphasize teaching, understanding that faith comes not just by itself but by being taught—and specifically faith in what they deserve or what is theirs as children of God. Central to the prosperity doctrine is the belief that scripture is the Word of God and that one who has faith and speaks or confesses the truth found in the Word is able to change any life situation for the better. It is clear that prosperity theology offers this hope, or a fulfillment of what Mitchem refers to as ‘spiritual longing’, in a way that traditional self help social uplift doctrine does not. During conversations with laypersons who ascribe to prosperity theology, they were very open about their disappointment with traditional (usually meaning mainline denominational) black churches that they had attended most of their lives. These ‘traditional’ churches they considered to be deficient, “caught up in ritual and lacking the *real* truth and knowledge” that Word of Faith churches have.

The object of faith for respondents, whether rooted firmly in SHSU heritage or prosperity gospel tradition of the black church, is Christ as moral exemplar of how they are to relate to others in their congregation and communities. As Christ demonstrated, they are to relate to others with sacrificial love that prioritizes the needs of others, particularly the poor. Their faith is in a God who they understand to mandate care for those less fortunate. For those within the prosperity gospel tradition, faith takes on an even thicker meaning, in that it allows one to literally change one’s life circumstances, from poverty to plenty for instance.

5.2.b.iii Christ

Pertinent to this discussion with study participants about Christ is the nature and purpose of Christ's action in the world. How should the divergent conceptions of Christ relate to diverse understandings of the church and the church's relationship to the community? The majority of the participants understand their relationship to Christ as one characteristic of black theology—that is, a Christ who is on the side of the oppressed, who identifies with and works on behalf of the poor. Several conversations with laity and pastors reinforced the notion of an active Christ, an exemplar of moral action, who meets the needs of the poor and oppressed, through those within the community of faith. This work of Christ on behalf of the poor is done through believers, in other words, God is active in history through us. Thus, an elderly female respondent in church B states that our service to those in need is "...actually just living out that role of Christ." A young (pastor 2) male clergy of a 480-member National Baptist congregation in Tuskegee likewise states that, "[As Christians] we represent our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ in what we say, what we do. ...When we talk about being representative of Christ...we have to put all of that in action, we have to do outreach..." He claims that the church must make the gospel relevant to those who are in the community in practical ways. "Because, ...we are supposed to be the light of the world, salt of the earth and those are beautiful pictures of what God's people should be...then our challenge becomes how do we practically apply that, how do we...reach out to people with the love of God, ah, how do we show them the mercy of God?" In other words, how as Christians do we model our moral exemplar's characteristics?

One 63-year-old male pastor (pastor 5) of an 80-member Baptist church comprised of mostly elderly members, states that,

I think that the message that Jesus gives us, His routine in life, His daily walk, is that we are to help those who cannot help themselves. [...]Those of us who have must...give. ...Jesus was a man of low esteem and He loved the poor, widows and orphans, and those who had need, He blessed them. So...we have a responsibility to help [the poor] where we can, where we're able to...

Each of these respondents emphasizes the example of Christ as an impetus for their actions, and for churches in general beyond mere evangelism to “meeting the needs of the total person, emotionally, physically, economically, psychologically.”

Those in the various mainline traditional Baptist, African Methodist, and nondenominational charismatic churches spoke repeatedly of a God who “made a way out of no way”, who acted on behalf of those with few or insufficient resources to maintain a decent quality of life, or to maintain a middle-class lifestyle. This God does work supernaturally on behalf of those in need. However, unlike the emphasis in the prosperity theology congregation, these mainline believers do not think that God necessarily intends for one to be rich. “Making a way out of no way” is a far cry from being wealthy; it is more focused on survival, on day to day existence. This is the kind of God that is incarnated in Christ in many of these rural southern congregations, one who is with individuals in their impoverished circumstances and allows them to “make it just one more day”. The majority of congregations emphasized a Christ who is more interested in the survival of those in need, not in their being wealthy. This Christ is also to be distinguished from Cone’s or Cleage’s or even Robert’s “black Christ.” Several participants shared their image of Christ and it was the image of the white, frail, suffering

Christ on the cross. So, Christ is one who suffers, who suffers with us, one who identifies with our situation of suffering, but not necessarily one who is black.⁵²²

Nevertheless, this Christ figure is still understood in very evangelical terms. Christ is “Lord and Savior”, Christ has given believers a Great Commission that summarizes the purpose and mission of various local congregations in this study (to go into the world and preach the good news...). Clearly stated by clergy and understood by laity is the notion of a God who offers redemption for the sinner and salvation for the lost. The roots of mainline African American denominations within white mainline evangelical churches in the South become evident once one spends time in worship and listening to stories of origin of the various churches within this study.

Likewise, for laypersons in the church that emphasizes a prosperity theology, Christ is understood to be Lord and Savior in the traditional sense and their mission as a Christian community is also summarized by the Great Commission. However, Christ has also made a new life of prosperity possible for the believer. As one middle-aged lay participant in church A explains,

...back in the old days... you wasn't taught how to be rich, it was like if you was poor, then that's something you were supposed to have been comfortable about, you know, in whatever state you were in. [... But] today we are being taught that Jesus has paid that price for us not to be in poverty, you know, because He said we are the seed of Abraham, and Abraham was rich, very rich, so now we are being taught that we don't have to settle for being poor, and that God has a better plan for us. So back then, that kind of teaching was not being taught but now today it's being taught, so now we know what our rightful places are so that's why people are advancing today, you know because they are really taking the teaching, really taking it to heart,... they are meditating on that Word [scripture].

⁵²² However, there were two clergy who shared their image of Christ as a black messiah, in line with that of black liberation theology, but this did not seem to be the norm.

This member elaborated on how once she began attending this church, she began to understand who she is in Christ; to her it felt as if she began to understand her true identity. The prosperity message taught at this church is that believers rule as a priests and kings with Christ. Because of this identity as priests and kings, believers have authority to command riches to come unto them—riches to which they already have a right as children of “The King”. Key to this doctrine is the centrality of the word; as the respondent notes, one must meditate on ‘the word.’ This refers to memorizing and confessing certain scriptures that not only tell of Christians’ identity as priests and kings, but that also tell of the privileges and entitlements of wealth and health that are available to them. What is most striking about this woman’s comment, though, is her conceptualization of the atonement: that Christ’s death did not just redeem “sinners” from death but from poverty (and sickness).

In summary, for those participants belonging to churches rooted in SHSU heritage, Christ’s actions in the world are characterized by acts on behalf of the poor and oppressed, and are a catalyst for believers’ actions toward others in their communities, particularly the needy members of community. Additionally, the atonement is emphasized because of the evangelical nature of these congregations. It has determinative significance for participants for whom personal salvation is central. However, for congregants who espouse the prosperity gospel, Christ’s most significant act *is* the atonement, not merely because of its meaning regarding salvation from sin, but because through the atonement believers are also redeemed from poverty and sickness.

5.2.b.iv Wealth, Possessions and Stewardship

The category of wealth and possessions is concerned with their value, purpose and accumulation. Stewardship relates to the use of wealth and possessions and Christian responsibility regarding poverty. In the personal interviews and focus groups, my respondents made clear their understanding that Christians have a responsibility regarding wealth and possessions. I heard repeatedly, from clergy and laity, the phrase, “God blesses us to be a blessing to others,” that material possessions and wealth were not the believer’s but are gifts from God to be used wisely. In response to the question of Christian’s responsibility regarding wealth and prosperity, the participants always clearly tied these phenomena to stewardship. A middle-aged pastor (pastor 4) of one of the oldest black congregations in the county seat argues that,

He [Christ] talks about how much easier it is for a poor man to go to heaven than it is for a rich man. It’s difficult because a rich man... is more secure in himself where the poor are not. They [the poor] have more dependence on spiritual things and the worship of God. That’s why God wants us to remember that as we are blessed, as we increase in our wealth, we have to remember that God, He’s our source, He’s our provider. Everything that God gives us is not for us. He [God] didn’t have to give it to us, we have to share our wealth with others. That’s our Christian responsibility, to help when we can and I like to hold people responsible because there’s such disparity in wealth in our country. I like to say to people, ‘All that you have is not for you. Some of it is for those who need help.’ ...So we have a responsibility to bless others as God has blessed us.

This pastor warns against the perils of accumulating wealth and possessions for Christians—not relying on God as the source of their material provision; becoming prideful and arrogant; letting wealth and power change them, rather than being charitable.

An elderly lay woman from church B echoed a sentiment regarding stewardship that was mentioned repeatedly by lay and clergy alike in this study when she said:

...God is a generous God and everything, everything belongs to Him. He just lets us look after it for a little while, so it's not ours in the first place, you know. So... I think it [stewardship] has to do with those gifts and talents and all that other kind of stuff...you ...give...what really don't belong to you in the first place.

She understands that Christians are merely stewards over what actually belongs to God. Although wealth is approached differently in the prosperity doctrine than it is in orthodox Protestant theology, stewardship is an important aspect of the prosperity theology tradition as well. The pastor of church C, who actually ascribes to prosperity theology, offered something of a critique of it. In regard to the hope that this message offers a longing population, she contends,

I'm in the nondenominational arena and...we talk a lot from the doctrine of 'believe it receive it'. We talk a lot about how money will be increased and multiplied. A lot of times when people don't have the background knowledge to these scriptures if they just hear one message they won't understand that success does not happen overnight, [and] that...not everybody will be rich. Everybody is not going to be a millionaire. So what we have to teach people is how to be faithful stewards with what you have and understand what true riches are; it's not about the accumulation of money...

A concept that was repeatedly associated with stewardship for the majority of the study participants, both clergy and laity, is tithing. An elderly member of church B argues that,

...tithing will help us learn how to give... when you do it [tithe] without any doubt, it's something you grow into understanding, ...I believe that if people will tithe, whether you only have a dollar, if you learn that part I think it will be a little bit easier to learn how to want to meet the needs of others....

This is one of several justifications parishioners offer for what they consider a biblical mandate to give 10% of their income to God (through their local congregation) as a tithe.

An elderly woman at church D claims that, "...to whom much is given much is required,so if God blesses me to have much, I'm not to hoard it and think I can take it

with me [when I die], I'm to share that with those around, and give...the proper portion of that back to the Lord." Indeed, tithing was held out as something that was an essential Christian duty and was always tied to the concept of stewardship. Thus, a good steward is one who fulfills his or her obligations to others, by taking care of persons (members of family and poor community members), and things (wealth and possessions, by investing and using them wisely), and, who most importantly, fulfills their obligation to God, and therefore, to one's local church through a tithe.

For the research participants, actively tithing seemed to allow them to maintain an "appropriate" relationship to (and attitude towards) wealth and possessions. The clergywoman from church C argues that the purpose of tithes and offerings is to care for the needs of those in the community. She claims that, "...tithes and offerings, that's the arm, that's the strength that enables you to care for other's needs."

The disparity between the wealthy and the impoverished is often addressed through charity. There is no evident thought of offering a critical social analysis of the current economic arrangements and challenging individuals to discover how they could be complicit in perpetuating extant inequalities (for example, through inaction and thus perpetuating the status quo). Indeed a few times I heard a theodicy of poverty which viewed the poor as serving a purpose for wealthy individuals in that they provide an opportunity for "spiritual development" of the wealthy through their exercise of giving. Of course, this giving is always conceived of as mere charity; there is apparently no notion of spiritual development catalyzing the wealthy to evaluate and work to dismantle political and economic structures that keep persons impoverished.

Upon my site visits to several of the churches in this study, I witnessed the church secretary, and in some instances the pastor, talking to individuals either in person or on the phone regarding financial assistance with heating or electric bills and food. Many of the churches have a strong social outreach or charity arm and do provide emergency financial assistance for individuals in their congregations or within the community who are in need. Because of limited resources, some churches are only able to help those within their local congregation. One older pastor of a Baptist congregation (pastor 5), argued that like many of the congregations in the county, which are small, rural and comprised mostly of elderly adults, they are more limited in human and financial capital than many of the urban churches in the two metropolitan counties which surround Macon county. He noted that this limitation does not hinder the member's sense of social responsibility and duty to care for those within their community. The elderly women of his congregation give of themselves, their time, and talents in ways that demonstrate concern beyond the four walls of their local congregation. For example, he proudly described his church's "Sock it to me" ministry, which is a group of elderly women who knit socks for those in the local nursing home.

Many of the parishioners reiterated that wealth comes in different forms, and the prominent form of wealth within a community may be love, care, and concern for others rather than money. Therefore, they were apt to see wealth not as being limited to material possessions but as including health, time, and other intangible assets. It was clear that in an impoverished community dignity was bestowed upon community members through valuing what they possessed (time, talents, desire to care and love others), not focusing on what they lacked (money and possessions).

In summary, stewardship is an important aspect of all theological understanding in the study churches. Respondents repeatedly acknowledged God's ownership of all things, wealth, resources, possessions, and the Christian responsibility to be stewards over what is considered God's. A significant aspect of stewardship for all traditions is tithing, not only because of its use in caring for needy members of community, but for its role in helping congregants to maintain a healthy relationship to wealth and possessions.

5.2.b.v Poverty

The aspects of poverty that are relevant for this discussion are how the state of poverty is understood, and Christian responsibility toward the poor. The majority of the clergy and laity understand poverty to have many causes. Some causes of poverty are understood to be structural; others, a matter of personal responsibility, or a result of misfortune such as death of an income earner, sickness, or loss of job. There seems to be a consensus among the clergy and lay participants in this study, with the exception of those who adhere to the prosperity theology, that the causes of poverty are numerous and complex.

One of the questions asked of clergy and laity was "Why are people poor?" An elderly clergy man (pastor 9) of a small African Methodist Episcopal Church argued that people are poor because of greed and imbalanced power relations between the wealthy and impoverished members of society:

...the reason there are so many poor is because the rich is so greedy. [The rich] have the power to deny access. [The rich have] the power to deny people access and power to defeat them by cutting them off at every turn they take. That's why we have so many poor folks. We have the power of money to leverage it so we

enslave people with credit cards, high interest rates—that's what's happening now. We've got an economic crisis because people got so greedy with these interest rates and everything else that folks couldn't pay them...

Highlighting personal responsibility and rights, a 50-year-old woman clergy (pastor 7) of a small AMEZ church comprised of mostly elderly persons, claims that,

There's no one answer to why people are poor. There are some who don't have the opportunity who are poor, or don't make the best of the opportunities that are provided. Uh, but then there are some, uh, the opportunities are not there. You know, uh, even though on paper it says, 'you should have the same opportunities as everybody else,' but moving from paper to what's real, we're talking about ideal and the real, there's a big distance between the two, the ideal over here and the real over here and this is that gulf of our disappointments right in the middle and so uhm, why people are poor, is trying to move from the ideal to the real, you know, trying to span that gap and find a place in between, the middle somewhere....

One of the middle-aged female respondents from church C argued that the reason that some persons are poor lies at the heart of our culture of consumerism and the economy. She contends,

why peoples [sic] are poor is also because...we are in a [culture] where 'I see it, I gotta have it right now' and...the economy makes it so that you can get anything you want and they [are] trapping you with it, with high interest rates—get a car now we don't pay for it [right now]....you still have to pay for it...so it's all these entrapments that the law of the land has set so you can be the possessor of nice things that you can't afford, yet when it's repossessed, you still gon [sic] have to pay for it, and that causes what, more debt, so the economy makes it where even when a person is unemployed he can get just about anything he wants.....and then in the end it causes you to have nothing, everything that you get is going to be lost because you trying to pay for something you don't have, trying to keep up with the Joneses now....the young people that's coming up is doing it, ya know...

This participant confirms a concern that other participants in this study expressed: a sense of regret over what they perceive as the irresponsible attitude toward consumption and the implications of pervasive consumerism for human relationships and identity. This participant was one of a few who were critical of the cultural impact of capitalistic

economic rationality. Few laity were willing to acknowledge the culpability of “the economy” in creating or perpetuating the phenomenon of poverty.

Laity who subscribe to the prosperity theology had a different reasoning behind the origin and existence of poverty than the majority of the participants at mainline denominational churches. The lay participants in church A argued that people are poor because of their mindset. For instance, the male participant in church A stated that,

Mindset, mindset, [poverty is] a mindset, people are poor because they don't want to do better. They are not taught, and they so [sic] used to handouts— other people carrying them until they claim independence or claim that they want to do better they gonna always stay poor. You say, well what about the peoples in the third world? Well, they been taught that way, their families was like that, their forefathers was like that, so who ever taught them to change? So they don't know change. Peoples [sic] here in America, you see a lot of people, I'd say, living in certain situations— look at the history of their parents, they're poor because they choose that life, because they follow in the same steps of their forefathers, you know, so [poverty is] something that you choose, it's not something that you...you can be born into poverty, but if your mindset is different, you'll move from that to the next level. I've seen lots of people move from lack into richness or prosperity because they chose to...but poorness to me is a state of mind. As long as that state of mind is there, you're gonna stay poor.

This respondent places the reason for poverty squarely with the individual: they choose to stay poor. He explains poverty in developing nations as being due to a lack of knowledge, the knowledge that the prosperity theology teaches which is able to get individuals out of poverty, or at least out of the “mindset” of poverty and lack.

It was clear when speaking with lay persons who ascribed to prosperity theology that poverty is something that can be overcome, particularly through a knowledge of who one is in Christ and by following certain universal laws (for example, sowing and reaping). The belief is that the ‘mindset of poverty’ or ‘lack’ is destroyed by *teaching* people the ‘Word’ and what the Word says.

The majority of the respondents understood wealth and poverty to be about more than money. Thus, poverty was conceptualized variously by the respondents. The concept of love (among other intangible qualities) was most cited by respondents as being what contributed to a rich or impoverished life. One elderly blue collar member of church D stated that,

...having things is not an indication that you are rich, but in the Body of Christ, you can be poor of material things but you have your spirit which is rich, there have been people who work for a dollar an hour, worked for Miss Sue and they came home and provided for a family and raised a family, there was a lot of love in that family, there was communication in that family, if you look around sometimes today, you'll see people that, everybody in that house got a car, they got all kinds of things in their houses and they don't know each other, and they wouldn't help each other, and so poverty sometimes, can be seen through, ah the light of the love of Christ.

This elderly respondent expressed a sentiment in accord with many of the elders in this study. They often retold stories of how they grew up in poor families where their parents were not paid much money but they had dignity and provided for large families. The most important aspect of these families was the love shared, and this love was what mattered most to them, and because of this love, many did not perceive themselves as being in a state of poverty. Poverty as a state was something that many of the respondents talked about. There is a negative stigma associated with the state of poverty for the majority of them. An elderly woman respondent in church D said,

...now when I grew up we didn't have but we were never poor, my daddy always said, 'we're not poor, we broke', but we weren't poor, there's a difference, we were not poor...poor is a mental state, it's how you feel about yourself. And uh,...we never even thought of ourselves as poor, we didn't even use the word.

The state of poverty is something that can be escaped. A respondent from church A argues,

[the bible says there will [always be poor among you, that doesn't necessarily mean you have to stay poor. ...we should help others but there comes a point where you should stop giving the man a fish and teach him how to fish, stop giving him vegetables, you teach him how to plant... You can be poor not only in terms of not having any food or money but you can be poor in spirit, so poorness goes a lot deeper than material things..."]

The respondents in this study invariably understand the responsibility to the poor to be linked with Christ's acknowledgement that "the poor will be with you always".

Both clergy and laity take this scripture as almost an injunction to "meet the needs of the poor". Pastor 11's response is representative of a unanimous sentiment portrayed within the interviews and the focus groups. He says,

The church does have a responsibility to the poor. Jesus says in Matthew 26 and 11, for you will have the poor with you always, so we are to share and be willing to provide for the poor, you know, too often we get wrapped up in self and satisfied that we have it made, so to speak and uh, we tend to forget about the poor, but we are to be good stewards with the worldly goods that the Lord has entrusted to us, because we own nothing, you know, houses, land, cars, we don't own these things, they [are] entrusted to us by our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ and as the Lord blesses us we are to go out and bless others so we do have a responsibility as a church to share with the poor, to try to provide for their needs.

A female pastor (pastor 7) of a small working-class African American Methodist Zion congregation described what poverty looks in the study area. She said,

...to me [poverty looks like], young people walking the streets with no jobs, no education, ah, families, ah where there may be just one person in the family working; subsidized living for a majority, or large percentage of people in the area, where the government has to subsidize their income. Uhm ...and the saddest thing to me—poverty sometimes has a big car out front of a rundown house and that goes back to where our values are, what's important...uh, that I have a gold chain around my neck as opposed to food for my children to eat...good basic uh, uh food for the children to eat, you know, as opposed to a box of cereal or something like that, you know. So, poverty is in a whole lot of places and it's different for different people. There are some people who can't do better and there are some who don't want to do better. And so, it's a difference. Those who can't but want to, we can work with them. Those who don't want to, we can work with them but it's gonna take a whole lot more, because first you gotta...help them to develop a desire to want to do better. And so, you know,

[poverty] just has a lot of different faces, it's just not one face. Poverty takes on a lot of faces...

This clergywoman notes that poverty does not always look the way we expect it to look, and highlights its connection to “our values”. What this pastor is describing is an illustration of the complex set of interlocking market enterprises that exercise virtually unchecked influence on how culture is shaped.⁵²³ These corporate market institutions are motivated by profit and Cornel West argues that their use of powerfully seductive images contribute to the predominance of market-inspired values, edging out non-market values of love, care, and service to others.⁵²⁴ Thus, in this pastor’s estimation, the example of impoverished individuals that have a gold chain around their neck instead of nutritious food to feed their children have bought into market-inspired values and have fallen prey to the seductive images that convince individuals that, through consumerism, they can take on an identity that does not associate them with their reality of economic deprivation. West argues that corporations that use their disproportionate capital, power, and influence to market goods that allow people to “redefine” themselves and escape negative identities have contributed to the undermining of traditional morality in order to keep profits coming.⁵²⁵

For many of these respondents, poverty either was (during their childhood) or is a fact of their own lives. As participants noted, the reasons for poverty are diverse and notions of personal responsibility seem to loom large with many in this study. Yet, these respondents are also shaped by the history of slavery and discrimination, living in a

⁵²³ Cornel West, *Race Matters*, (New York: Vintage Books, 2001), 25-26.

⁵²⁴ *Ibid.*, 27.

⁵²⁵ *Ibid.*, 25-27.

county classified by the U.S. Census Bureau as persistently poor⁵²⁶. Thus, they are well aware of the complexities associated with poverty and have a keen sense of their responsibility to those in need. A majority of the respondents also emphasized personal responsibility as a cause of poverty. Individuals were implicated by some as the main reason persons are poor, more so than economic, political, or social structures and institutions. Participants railed against consumerism and materialism in their discussion of individual responsibility.⁵²⁷

The laypersons in my study were eager to engage issues pertaining to economic behavior and faith. Several participants were actually critical of the effects of a capitalistic economic rationality that pervades our culture. Yet few laypersons were willing to lay the blame for poverty at the feet of “the economy”. For instance, laity at the congregation that espouses the prosperity gospel had a different understanding of the reason for poverty’s existence.

5.2.b.vi Work

This category emphasizes the value and meaning of work. Booker T. Washington’s efforts in establishing Tuskegee Normal and Industrial Institute was driven by the poor economic and social state of the Negro post-Emancipation and the need to extol the dignity of work for a people who had experienced work as forced laborers

⁵²⁶ The U.S. Census Bureau defines persistently poor areas as those for which the poverty level has consistently been above a threshold for more than three census reporting periods 30 years.

⁵²⁷ Regarding consumption and materialism, the questions that come to mind for me are, how are we connected to others through our consumption (not just domestically but internationally)? And how does and how should our faith affect our consumption choices and attitudes toward consumption and possessions and our general economic behavior?

relegated to the most menial, disdained labor. Virtues characterized by the Protestant work ethic were repeatedly used by clergy and lay participants in conversations regarding economic justice.

An elderly male respondent in church D was relating to me the value of “a day’s work.” Individuals in the past, he said, were willing to do an honest day’s work and received value from knowing that they did “good work and worked hard.” However, this is different today, he says. “In olden days you did a day’s work and get paid, now they just want to show up on the job and get the money whether [they] do anything or not...we don’t care about it now [as] long as we get that money.” Another older male respondent followed by saying, “...once you secure employment, don’t just be on the job just to get the pay but be honest enough to actually do the job that you promised to do when you were hired.”

Remarking that values pertaining to work are instilled by parents, the respondent then stated:

Parents need to take a role in teaching young people work ethics...you show them there are rewards for the things that you learn how to do, if you have a job to do, ...you teach them that removing the trash helps keep the house clean...so that they know that there’s a reason for why you got them doing some things. If you have a job, teach them to report to that job not on the hour but a little bit before the hour...you try to do the best work that you can do and show that you have a real concern for what you do. ...so we try to teach the ethics of working not only on a job but in relationship with people, be friendly...you got to teach them how to deal with people who are not nice when they are nice to them ...if you do enough good things you feel good about yourself and that will carry you through...

The concept of work always came up in conversations about principles that ought to guide Christian economic behavior. Hard work was repeatedly extolled as a virtue by the respondents who were mostly middle aged and elderly. For my respondents, work

(whether menial labor, blue, pink, or white collar labor) is clearly imbued with dignity; indeed, it is a defining characteristic of a morally responsible agent. There was also a clear notion of rights in relation to work. When asked about economic rights, what they perceive as economic rights to which they are entitled as citizens of this nation, participants repeatedly responded that they have a right to equality of opportunity. They claimed that they should have the same opportunities available to them as any other citizen, regardless of race or socio-economic status. For example, a middle-aged male clergy (pastor 4) of a 500 member congregation in town argued that,

...where in areas of our country and areas of business, areas of society where all things are not held equal and where all people are not treated the same; there should be some economic rights to the same things that everybody else has opportunity to, not more, but the same opportunities, the same privileges without any different requirements...

The clergywoman of church C was arguing that persons have a right to work that allows them to “maintain”. I asked her to explain what she meant by this and she explained:

To continue without going into the red. ...in the area in which we live, the only jobs that are available in our community is the dog track and they have some schools, but the dropout rate is so high. We’ve got a plant in Shorter...a subsidiary of Hyundai...they pay less than the subsidiary plant in Montgomery. ...the plant in Montgomery starts off at like \$14.00 an hour. ...[our] plant starts off with \$9.00 and they stay there. ...and the majority of the people that work there are from Tallahassee and other areas. You think that’s economic justice?

She contends that economic justice does not exist in her area because there are “multi-million dollar industries...right here in our city but it’s not hiring the people in the city. ...there’s economic disparity.” She also notes that some of these industries did not provide individuals with health insurance until recently. “Some of the members of our church worked [within a local industry] for ten to fifteen years...they would work them

up to 32 hours a week and call them part-time employees so they wouldn't get the benefits of being full-time employees." Such stories of economic disparity and injustice are not unusual in rural areas where there is a large impoverished unskilled population with low levels of educational attainment.

It became clear through my primary data collection and analysis that the study churches are firmly rooted in the SHSU tradition of the black church. The ideals of the Protestant work ethic are still very much alive among the older respondents who lament the loss of these values within the younger generation. Booker T. Washington's emphasis on the dignity of work, they argue, seems lost on the young generation, who frown upon some of the hard menial labor performed by the elders. In fact, several clergy and lay persons lamented lost values that they understand as being important for economic success, values such as delayed gratification, honesty, integrity, hard work, thrift, and sacrificial love. Employing the congregations within Macon County as an epistemological source, from the data collected I am able to glean various principles that would comprise a BCEEWB in this context, which is representative of many rural places. As stated in chapter one, the principles are derived from the categorical analysis of the themes of church, Christ, faith, wealth and possessions, stewardship, poverty, and work.

5.3 Principles of Black Christian Economic Ethic in the Rural South

From the field data, principles can be articulated that would comprise an economic ethic indigenous to the study area. A BCEEWB based upon African American clergy and laity within a rural and small town southern context is heavily focused on

charity, stewardship, and care motivated by Christian love. Responsiveness to human need is given priority (understood to be as important as the Great Commission) and it is communal. The categories of a BCEEWB in the rural southern context are derived from within the previous categories (church, Christ, faith, wealth and possessions, stewardship, poverty, and work). For example, the category of church includes persons in community; stewardship and poverty includes care and charity. The challenge in articulating the principles of this ethic that is relevant to the rural southern context is that principles chosen will merely constitute a model which is intended to be representative. However, the complication in dealing with models is that, by definition, they are limited; they are not the actual reality but a partial depiction thereof. Therefore, despite the desire to include all voices and incorporate all aspects of the various theological traditions, this economic ethic is merely a paradigm which tries to incorporate minority critical voices, but is limited in what it can realistically represent. There are tensions among the differing theological viewpoints, for example, the way wealth and possessions are understood within the prosperity gospel tradition as opposed to the predominant SHSU tradition in which the study churches are rooted. Naturally, one is forced to be selective about what principles are included in a BCEEWB, as it is merely a model, and therefore cannot contain the entirety of reality.

5.3.a Care, Love and Stewardship

Within the rural southern context, a BCEEWB must begin with spiritual principles of care, love, and stewardship. It was evident from the interviews, focus

groups, and participant observation that the beginning of an ethic of economic well being has its starting point in the conception of stewardship and care motivated by Christian love. At the heart of this notion of care is the priority of responsiveness to human need.

An African Methodist Episcopal clergy contended that,

...we have to change our value system from the pulpit and from the membership...and how we live. First of all people [need to] understand that the light that we're going to shine is going to be the light of Jesus. And that is not about material wealth and material prosperity but it's about living a life of love, and living a life of dedication to Christ. And not just talking about it but revealing the fruit of the Spirit.

Living this life of love means one lives responsibly toward others, being kind, cooperative, and generous with resources, possessions, and wealth. In short, one is to be a good steward.

Stewardship is important because it is an active demonstration not only of care for others but of fulfilling one's obligation to God. Study participants unanimously understood the most significant aspect of stewardship to be tithing. This act of giving God ten percent of one's income is seen as a Christian duty.

As one parishioner argued,

...everything we have is entrusted to us from God, to carry out God's will. It doesn't belong to us to begin with. It's been entrusted to us. 'We give thee but...Thine own...all that we have is Thine alone...we trust O Lord in Thee'. It has been entrusted to us...

Since God's will is understood to include caring for "widows, orphans, and the poor", this tithe is perceived as essential because its aim is to care for vulnerable individuals within the community. Respondents clearly understood the importance of this Christian obligation in what it means to be good stewards. The priority of tithing is essential for them because of what it signifies. It signifies God's lordship in one's life. It allows one

to live with a constant sense of God's provision and presence. The act of giving a tithe is one's acknowledgment that what one has received is from God (regardless of the temporal medium through which one receives it). Tithing also signifies God's trust in individuals. God is generous and gracious enough to allow humans to take care of things that really belong to God. This trust is understood to be a burden that Christians are privileged to bear. This is the reason that the female elderly parishioner from church D argues that if people get to the point that they feel that they need more possessions, or "bigger houses or bigger barns, we need to really look around and thank God for the blessing and maybe somebody over here [has a need], maybe you don't need bigger barns, you need a bigger heart so that you can share with others what you've been blessed with." Tithing is understood by many Christians to be a matter of the heart. This is partly because of its link to caring for the needs of less fortunate individuals within the community.

Tithing is also understood as an obligation for *all*, regardless of one's socioeconomic status. As the aforementioned parishioner confirms, "We don't have to wait until we get that big blessing. We can share with our small blessings too." The majority of the respondents believed this too. This was indeed a recurring theme for a majority of the respondents in relation to the concept of tithing. Participants were clear that anything a believer owns—even if they own very little—must be given back to God. Therefore, even poor people can and should tithe. As one respondent put it, even if one "has just a dollar" one should still give God ten cents. This is because tithing is understood to be about maintaining an appropriate relationship to wealth and possessions.

5.3.b Charity

Just a few of the laity and pastors were slightly critical of the Church's focus on charity versus attending to structural phenomena and attacking social justice issues structurally. The majority argued for a heavy emphasis on education and self sufficiency, and taking responsibility for one's self. All of the churches in this study were involved in some form of charity which meets the immediate needs of persons in their community. For instance, some congregations have clothes drives or clothes closets for the community; others have "food give-aways" during the holidays; help individuals and families with paying heating and utility bills; provide meals and activities for elderly citizens; offer classes on entrepreneurship or financial management; pay for a child's college education; and sponsor various seminars and workshops targeted at enhancing the well being of those in the community. However, one lay participant from church B argues that charitable efforts are commendable but the challenge to the church is actually addressing social issues at the structural level, moving beyond charity toward long term solutions that get at the root of social problems. She argues,

You know I think.... that the church has been a mechanism for handing out little bits of money here and there trying to help but I think that we need to be more of a people who are looking for an infrastructure where we might truly help people. Help train them, get them work, we can do more than to go pay their light bill. We need to bring people in and I know that sometimes we don't want to, it seems like we're harsh when we say, 'Well we're not just going to give you any money'.... Cause the church is going to have to stand up and see what can we do to help these people, you know. Do you want to feed them a fish for today or do you want to teach them how to fish so [they] can feed [themselves]?

This attention to moving beyond immediate needs is an important step for the church as a community of responsible moral agents, who measure their morality partly by the quality

of relationships within and beyond their Christian communities. These relationships are characterized by notions of love demonstrated through care and stewardship.

5.3.c Persons in Community

Remember the scripture about when the master was going away and gave the servants some talents...five, two and one? We need to try to behave like the one he gave the five talents to, we need to invest so that the turnover will be—we can't hoard where that your hand is closed on it and nothing can come in and come out....so we have to invest and share and.we invest in many different ways. One of the things that we try to do is invest knowledge, we do Christian education, we have bible study, Sunday school, new membership classes, old testament and new testament classes, we're trying to give you knowledge, educate you. And when we invest in people, then I think our return is better than investing in things....if there is a principle—invest in people....we try to teach, we say we want to be imitators of Christ....⁵²⁸

Responsiveness to human need is a principle that guides the benevolent behavior of the participants in this study. The realities of poverty and unemployment have definitely shaped the faith life of these participants. The vast needs of the community are ever present; there is no one section of town where the poverty is concentrated amid an oasis of plenty. This county is absolutely resource poor and one cannot escape this reality.

This responsiveness to human need was evident in my respondents' people-centeredness. When discussing what people valued, it was clear that they placed the highest value on relationships, particularly within family and church. As responsible moral agents, they came up with various principles for what should guide responsible economic behavior. Among these principles are: tithing; investing in people (through investing in education, Christian and “secular”); investing in youth (by spending “quality” time with them and instilling values of hard work, thrift, and industry);

⁵²⁸ Woman lay respondent in church D.

investing money wisely; saving; guarding against materialism and excessive consumption; and caring for those who are needy within the community.

Both clergy and laity lamented what they see as a moral deficit within society. Stated bluntly by one pastor, "...our value system is so screwed up that material gain carries more weight than, you know, the moral values." These values that are to be instilled are those that guide the BCEEWB for this rural southern context: love, care, stewardship, sound investments in both financial and human capital, and the like.

Another participant admonished that we need to make sound investments, "stop spending foolishly, getting into debt..."; that we need to invest in our young people, instill values in them, and "spend quality time with them".

5.4 Continuum of Engagement with Economic Justice

African American religious institutions are significant contemporary agents for helping to ameliorate problems faced by African American communities.⁵²⁹ The great amount of community activism of many black churches in the rural south is rooted in a historical commitment to the ideals of freedom, justice, and equality. The rural south is indeed the womb of the contemporary black church which continues this tradition of

⁵²⁹ See Andrew Billingsley, *Mighty Like a River: The Black Church and Social Reform*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999); R. Drew Smith, ed., *Long March Ahead: African American Churches and Public Policy in Post-Civil Rights America*, The Public Influences of African American Churches, vol. II, (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004); Fredrick C. Harris, *Something Within: Religion in African-American Political Activism*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999); Michael Leo Owens, *God and Government in the Ghetto: The Politics of Church-State Collaboration in Black America*, (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2007); William E. Montgomery, *Under Their Own Vine and Fig Tree: The African-American Church in the South 1865-1900*, (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1993); C. Eric Lincoln and Lawrence H. Mamiya, "The Black Church and Social Ministry in Politics and Economic: Historical and Contemporary Perspectives" in *Carriers of Faith: Lessons from Congregational Studies*, Carl S. Dudley, et. al., (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1991)

social activism on behalf of its marginalized constituency. To yield further insight into the dynamism of black religious experience and engagement with economic justice in the rural southern context I will take the four representative study churches and locate them on the continuum in order to get further insight into their theological and normative foundations for engagement, or lack thereof, with economic justice.

The black church's agency in relation to economic justice is expressed through both cultures of resistance or liberation and accommodation. However, as we have seen in chapter one, actual engagement falls along a continuum, with various traditions and expressions overlapping and "bleeding" into one another. At one extreme of the continuum is the survival tradition (accommodation) and at the opposite end is liberation. The poles of survival and liberation are also parallel to the poles of charity and justice, an ongoing theological concern. The poles of charity and justice are in tension, as stated earlier, and both grow out of the theological and ethical grounding of the black church. The self help/social uplift tradition falls between the two extremes. These traditions, which are dominant modes of engagement with economic justice, are also represented within the various congregations. I have derived principles from the church's predominant forms of engagement with economic justice and list these in table 3. These modes of engagement fall on the continuum according to criteria laid out in chapter one, which I review here. Various churches can be placed along this continuum according to where they fall in relation to these criteria. These criteria that assist in determining the underlying values of the churches under study are how they understand: 1) the role of justice within their theological understanding; 2) the relationship between individual and community; 3) the relationship between church and community; and 4) their

understanding of poverty together with their understanding of the Church's responsibility to the poor.

Table 3: Principles for BCEEWB

Self Help Social Uplift	Black Liberation Theology	Prosperity Gospel
freedom and dignity	freedom from oppression	individual economic prosperity
self determination	self-determination, dignity and pride in African and African American heritage and institutions	middle-class lifestyle as a goal/aim
equality	equality	
racial solidarity	racial solidarity	multiculturalism ⁵³⁰
upward mobility from poverty emphasis on ownership and prosperity (not simply individualistic prosperity but social uplift)	upward mobility from poverty	upward mobility from poverty
economic independence	economic independence	economic independence
education	creation of an independent economic base	individual success
thrift, industry, honesty; benevolence/charity; temperance; hard work (the privileging of work)	critical of aspects of capitalistic system that dehumanize and oppress	privileging of supernatural means over privileging of work to attain wealth

⁵³⁰ See Marla Frederick, *Between Sundays*. In her book, Frederick discusses the attempt by television ministries to reconstruct the racial past and present a united front and, therefore, focus on multiculturalism which leads to a “façade of racial progress”, she argues, because it excludes a systematic critique of racism or classism.

Scholars attest to the historical connection between black theological traditions and social, political, and economic activism. This continuum thus attempts to capture the theological commitments and attendant responses to economic justice which ranges from black liberation theology, demonstrated in Cornel West's Afro-American revolutionary Christianity, to expressions of religious individualism found within the historical Pentecostal tradition and prosperity gospel. The aim of the continuum is to illustrate the prevailing values of historical and contemporary black religious experience (for example: communalism, survival, liberationist, individualism) found in the various traditions. As such, it assists in our critical examination of how the Macon County study churches relate to economic justice.

The theological and ethical foundation of the black church is shaped by its dual nature as both a social and a religious institution. Thus, the historical activity of African American religious institutions on behalf of their marginalized constituency has been justified by the ethical imperative of social (and thus, economic) justice. The various forms of black political activism and communal responses to economic injustice are directly correlated with the survival (accommodation) and liberationist traditions of the black church, which is why these are depicted as extremes on either end of the continuum. The self-help/social uplift tradition sits in the center of the continuum. The qualities that characterize each point are what is significant in our discussion. These characteristics will help guide the placement of the four study churches on the continuum. Few congregations within this study fit the exact characterizations of the traditions

represented on the continuum, but they can help us locate actual congregations along the axis.

The principles of upward mobility from poverty and economic independence are clearly in common among all three traditions on the continuum. Also, they emphasize freedom—yet freedom from and to different things. For example, in the liberation tradition, the emphasis is on freedom from oppression, and in the prosperity gospel tradition the emphasis is on freedom from poverty, from a mentality of lack, and from supernatural forces of evil that keep persons impoverished. Both the SHSU and BLT traditions emphasize dignity, equality, racial solidarity, and self-determination, which are principles not emphasized by the prosperity gospel tradition but are important to an economic ethic of well being relevant to the rural southern context nonetheless.

At the center of the continuum (the grounding point) is the self help social uplift tradition. The characteristics of this tradition are in fact the predominant values of the African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church⁵³¹, most especially the belief that God is actively involved in history. This God identifies with the historical suffering and oppression of economically, politically, and socially marginalized individuals. The AMEZ Church is not only known for its religious individualism (like a majority of the examples of religious expression within the United States), but also for its strong communal ties that make both survival and liberation possible. The appropriation of biblical faith by congregations within this denomination has been both applied to personal morality, with an individual conversionist orientation, but also to the various aspects of contemporary life, such as the economic, cultural, social, and political, fitting

⁵³¹ It should be noted that other traditional mainline African American denominations can easily be substituted for the AMEZ as being representative of the SHSU tradition, for example, the Baptist or AME.

within a liberationist stream. There has also been an attempt at finding a balance between the sectarian withdrawal from the world and active involvement in it through various forms of social activism to ensure a more just society. However, attempts at social betterment have been largely characterized as reformist rather than transformational. This grounding point lies between the survival tradition characterized by full accommodation to capitalistic economic rationality true of most African American theological-ethical thinking and economic activity, and the resistance or liberationist extreme which is marked by rejection of this economic rationality.

The purpose of this discussion is twofold: to provide a richer understanding of the black church with respect to economic justice and then to locate the four study churches so as to contextualize them in the larger black church discussion.

5.4.a Liberation/Resistance

African American theology needs a public theology that is informed by the enlightening and emancipatory aspect of postmodern African American cultural criticism. It also needs the iconoclastic rigor and utopian dimensions of postmodern African American religious criticism.⁵³²

This extreme of the continuum is characterized by a type of Christianity that is prophetic and “insists that this worldly liberation and otherworldly salvation are the proper loci of Christianity.”⁵³³ It is characterized by a theology that is informed by progressive Marxist⁵³⁴ social analysis and praxis. Such radical social theoretical analysis

⁵³² Victor Anderson, *Beyond Ontological Blackness: An Essay On African American Religious and Cultural Criticism*, (New York, Continuum, 1995), 117.

⁵³³ West, *Prophesy Deliverance*, 16.

⁵³⁴ West argues that the fundamental thrust of Marxism is self-fulfillment, self-development, and self-realization of harmonious personalities. Socioeconomic well-being has remained at the center of Marxist dogma, but the political liberties and diverse cultural activities of individuals have, for the most part, been ignored by it (16). What is important about Christianity for West is the elements of the dignity and depravity of persons. In other words the “dialectic of imperfect products and transformative practice, of

is employed to assist in evaluating the capacity of the economic system to meet citizens' needs, and evaluate its impact on the environment and other nations—in essence to allow well-informed engagement with economic justice.⁵³⁵ This union of progressive Marxist thought and prophetic Christianity is manifested in an Afro-American Christian critique of capitalist civilization.⁵³⁶ Its significance lies in the fact that it enables more serious consideration of the existential anxiety, political oppression, economic exploitation, and social degradation of actual human beings.⁵³⁷ West argues that the contribution of this type of prophetic Christian thought is that it, “...elevates the notion of struggle (against the odds)—personal and collective struggle regulated by the norms of individuality and democracy—to the highest priority.”⁵³⁸

He argues that to be a prophetic Afro-American Christian is to negate what is and transform the prevailing realities despite the present historical limits.⁵³⁹ This type of

prevailing realities and negation, of human depravity and human dignity, of what is and the not-yet constitutes the Christian dialectic of human nature and human history. This emphasis on process, development, discontinuity and even disruption precludes the possibility of human perfection and human utopias. Human beings possess the capacity to change their conditions and themselves, but not to perfect either their conditions or themselves (17).”

⁵³⁵ Harrison, “The Role of Social Theory in Religious Social Ethics: Reconsidering the Case for Marxian Political Economy,” in *Making the Connections: Essays in Feminist Social Ethics*, ed. Carol S. Robb, (Boston: Beacon Press, 1985), 73.

⁵³⁶ West, 95.

⁵³⁷ West, *Prophesy Deliverance*, 19.

⁵³⁸ *Ibid.*, 19-20.

⁵³⁹ *Ibid.* West finds hope in the union of African American Christian thought and Marxist social analysis. The two views inform one another. He posits that the negation and transformation that are at the heart of Afro-American revolutionary Christianity also lies at the heart of Marxism. “The prevailing realities must be changed. Instead of the dialectic of human nature and human history, Marxism posits a dialectic of human practice and human history.” (19) While Marxism puts forward a full-blown historicism in which the eventual perfectability of persons within history is inevitable, he argues that, “the Christian espouses a dialectical historicism which stresses the dignity and depravity of persons. The Christian world view is a clandestine complaint against history, the Marxist an avowed apotheosis of it.” Marxist critique of the Christian dialectic of human nature and human history bemoans the impotency of Christian’s this-worldly attempts at liberation and all human efforts. This impotency checks utopian aspirations. Human negations and transformations are indeed imperfect at best. Also, Marxism is critical of how Christian efforts at negation and transformation are “ill-informed” because of the limited analytical tools and scientific understanding of power and wealth in the extant reality to be negated and transformed. What both viewpoints share West argues, is a “commitment to the negation of what is and the transformation of prevailing realities in the light of the norms of individuality and democracy.” (101)

Christianity begins with the concrete situations of those who are marginalized, exploited, and oppressed. These individuals have historically stood on the margins of a society for which the norms of democracy and freedom are central. Thus, among the basic norms of African American Christian thought are freedom and democracy. These regulating norms are to ensure equality and just human relations. West argues, “Democracy requires that accountability—of institutions to populace, of leaders to followers, of preachers to laity—be the center of any acceptable social vision. This accountability exists when people have control over the leaders and institutions that serve them.”⁵⁴⁰ He argues that, “the Christian dialectic of human nature and human history makes the norm of democracy necessary and possible; yet only the praxis of imperfect human beings renders it desirable and realizable.”⁵⁴¹ Yet, what is central to this conception of freedom and democracy in terms of economic justice is achievement of *economic* democracy. The concern is with the power dynamics that perpetuate the inequitable distribution of wealth and resources; not merely with full participation in the economic system, but with ownership in the production process. Thus, there is a push for common ownership of major industries with the hope of empowering the poor and working poor. Many people believe that communal relations in the economic sphere will enhance the life of those suffering from economic deprivation. What is important is a redistribution of wealth, resources, and power, made possible through a restructuring of the economy. Hopkins goes so far as to argue that this type of economic democracy foreshadows God’s coming

⁵⁴⁰ Ibid., 19.

⁵⁴¹ Ibid.

kingdom on earth.⁵⁴² This economic democratic vision is necessary because of the historical connection between white racism and capitalistic economic exploitation.

Whereas the survivalist and SHSU traditions of the black church have bought into the capitalistic economic rationality lock, stock, and barrel, this liberation/ resistance tradition offers a wholesale criticism of it. Therefore, the task of the church in the liberation tradition is to provide specific praxis in what liberation means NOW.⁵⁴³ The church should be able to deal with the socioeconomic and political realities of individuals as well as the existential and cultural dimensions of their life.⁵⁴⁴ Therefore, in light of the existential reality of African Americans within the Black Belt, who continue to contend with historical realities of race, class, gender, religious, cultural barriers that keep them impoverished, churches within this tradition will have as their goal full engagement in social analysis which allows them to come to terms with the relationships between racism, sexism, class exploitation, and imperialist oppression.⁵⁴⁵ There will also be a social vision and concrete praxis which defines and facilitates socioeconomic and political liberation. Likewise, there is attention to issues of death, disease, dread, despair, and disappointment and how each of these relates to the suffering caused by oppressive structures.⁵⁴⁶

5.4.b Survival/Accommodation

Against the reduction to the status of a thing, enforced by unpredictable cruelty and ruthlessness, the slave's obsession was to somehow 'to make it'; to hold body

⁵⁴² Hopkins, *Shoes that Fit our Feet*, 197.

⁵⁴³ West, *Prophesy Deliverance*, 23.

⁵⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 99.

⁵⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 106.

⁵⁴⁶ *Ibid.*

and soul together for as long as possible; to engage in an unceasing interior struggle to preserve physical existence and psychological sanity—in short, to survive. Survival, therefore, became the regulative, moment-to-moment principle of the slave community...this single factor best explains the tenacity and functionality of black religion in the plantation South.⁵⁴⁷

The prevailing values of the survival/accommodationist tradition of the black church are characterized by the religion of the slaves and the invisible institution.

Wilmore argues that, “The religious beliefs and rituals of a people are inevitably and inseparably bound up with the material and psychological realities of their daily existence.”⁵⁴⁸ Black religion as it developed among enslaved Africans within the invisible institution used Christianity,

Not so much as it was delivered to them by racist white churches, but as its truth was authenticated to them in the experience of suffering and struggle, to reinforce an acculturated religious orientation and to produce an indigenous faith that emphasized dignity, freedom, and human welfare.⁵⁴⁹

The adaptation of the Christian faith by slaves, “rendered it something more than a dispassionate system of theology and a code of behavior.”⁵⁵⁰ Black religion within these invisible institutions was characterized by a strong Judeo-Christian base with what some scholars understand as African retentions. Also, the bible was central in this religion due to the Protestant influence:⁵⁵¹ it was the God of the Bible that slaves understood as their all powerful God who could repay even the white man for his sins. Another important characteristic of the invisible institution was the togetherness of the slaves in their own community.

⁵⁴⁷ Wilmore, *Black Religion and Black Radicalism*, 255.

⁵⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 22.

⁵⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 25.

⁵⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 29.

⁵⁵¹ Although, Wilmore notes that some slaves were adverse to the bible or “book religion” because it had been used to uphold slavery.

The survival tradition of slave religion was what emerged out of “attitudes of disbelief, codes of dissimulation and subterfuge, structures of meaning...” or a perception of existential existence and mechanisms that enabled coping and survival under enslavement.⁵⁵² Slaves survived as a community and in community. One important aspect of survival was dignity, the sense of dignity that came from being part of an authentic religious community of individuals who cared for one another and shared in drinking deeply from one another’s fountain of experience. Raboteau argues that, through spirituals, slaves had the capacity to fit an individual slave’s experience into the consciousness of the group. One person’s sorrow or joy became everyone’s through song. Singing the spirituals was therefore both an intensely personal and vividly communal experience in which an individual received consolation for sorrow and gained a heightening of joy because his experience was shared. Raboteau contends that through the basic structure of spirituals, particularly the model of call and response and the extemporaneous nature in which they were sung, one can observe communal support being articulated. He states,

In the pattern of overlapping call and response an individual would extemporize the verses, freely interjecting new ones from other spirituals. Frequently, before he was finished, everyone else would be repeating a chorus familiar to all. This pattern may be seen as a metaphor for the individual believer’s relationship to the community. His changing daily experience, like the verses improvised by the leader, was ‘based’ by the constancy of his Christian community.⁵⁵³

Also, dignity came from slaves’ understanding of being a child of God, thus equal to all, despite social caste constructions. Slave religion cannot be characterized as being exclusively otherworldly; slaves believed that God acted in human history, and many held out this hope until death without seeing freedom. This belief in God’s action on

⁵⁵² Wilmore, *Black Religion and Black Radicalism*, 256.

⁵⁵³ Raboteau, *Slave Religion*, 246.

their behalf stemmed from their understanding of themselves as a chosen people like Israel, for whom God acted within history.⁵⁵⁴ The this-worldly significance that slave religion held for its adherents led to rebellion and a sense of dignity and personal value. “That some slaves maintained their identity as persons, despite a system bent on reducing them to a subhuman level, was certainly due in part to their religious life. In the midst of slavery, religion was for slaves a space of meaning, freedom, and transcendence.”⁵⁵⁵

Thus, the churches that fall within the survivalist tradition are characterized by prevailing values of communalism. This comes across in their theological expression as well as their praxis. The focus is on helping folks to ‘just get by’, to ‘just make it’ from day to day, at the expense of critical thought regarding negation and transformation as in the prophetic Christian tradition. These congregations are strong, close-knit communities in which the members share more deeply in the lives of one another compared to congregations within other traditions. While this strong communal bond is enriching and allows individuals to “bear one another’s burdens” and be edified by their community and fellowship which is thus able to transform their individual sorrow or at least allow them to cope, this bond can also be a downfall: it can tend to being inward-looking, at the expense of attending to the needs of those beyond the limits of that congregation.

This tradition is marked by total accommodation to capitalistic economic rationality, unlike the liberation tradition. There is no reliance on radical or progressive social theoretical analysis of this economic rationality, more likely conformity to it.

⁵⁵⁴ Ibid., 318.

⁵⁵⁵ Ibid.

5.4.c Mapping Actual Churches on Continuum

Actual theological commitments and therefore responses to economic and social injustice of African Americans are diverse, falling on a continuum that ranges from black theology of liberation to traditions marked by evangelical streams with an insular focus of personal salvation, personal piety, and individualism that pervades religiously conservative churches, characteristic of some forms of prosperity theology. The purpose of this continuum is to critically examine the churches under study with respect to the way each engages issues of economic justice. This demonstrates the prevailing values of historical and contemporary black religious experience, values such as survival, liberation, individualism, and communalism that exist within various traditions. The bedrock tradition of the black church, that of self help/social uplift, falls at the center of the continuum, and the others fall along the continuum in relation to the prevalence or absence of values about economic justice, for instance, the relationship between church, individual, and community; and the understanding of poverty and their responsibility to the poor. Serving as a heuristic device, the continuum allows one to see how these traditions respond in an actual social context. The purpose of this device is simply to gain more insight into the study churches within this particular social context.

While all churches under study are clear that their reach is beyond the spiritual needs of individuals within the community, that they, in theory, also understand their responsibility to attend to the material, social, emotional, economic, and political needs of persons in community, each church in actuality has played out this belief differently, if at all.

In the early history of the black church, the primary impetus for its economic activity and engagement with economic justice was the mere survival of black people in a hostile society in which they were socially, politically, and economically marginalized. However, the primary impetus for engaging in economic activity in the contemporary black church is multifarious. Take as an example the community and economic development movement. The shape that this contemporary movement has taken is rather diverse, from megachurch ministries that own bookstores, banks, and cafes to smaller churches in small towns and rural areas who provide affordable housing for senior citizens. The following sections describe the actual local congregations with respect to the criteria, reviewed above, for where they fall on the continuum.

5.4.c.i Community, Individual, and Church

The role of the black church in the community and broader society has changed and is perceived by its members to have changed. In each study church, the laity and pastors were asked what the role of the church is and how it has changed. Each congregation seemed to understand their role differently and their relationship to their community differently also. For instance, Church A understands itself to be set apart from the “world” although the leaders encourage the laity to be fully engaged in the community, whether through politics, educational institutions, or other “spheres of influence” (such as government, business, entertainment, etc.) within the community. This church understands that the role of Christians in society is to “Christianize” the social order, to take up leadership positions within the various “spheres” in order to

literally bring about the kingdom of God, what they refer to as “manifesting the kingdom principles”. Because of their belief in “taking dominion”, members of church A are encouraged to be fully engaged in the community, to institute the “kingdom principles” of righteousness, integrity, honesty, love, etc. In Church B, on the other hand, congregants are less likely to hear the rhetoric of “taking dominion” for God’s kingdom, nor does the leadership actively petition and encourage members to be engaged in various “spheres” within the community. Actually, the pastor stated during a bible study that he believes that politics is not the business of the church, especially since African Americans have gained open access to mainstream society and no longer must rely solely or largely on the church or religious leaders for political and social access to mainstream society. He argued that “politics is to be left to the politicians” and that his job is to deal with spiritual matters and attend to the soul of his congregation. Furthermore, this church as a whole is not actively engaged in the community—although of course this does not preclude members from being actively engaged in it themselves. Several congregants are members of local political organizations, local civic clubs, and are socially active individuals in other ways too.

From focus groups and personal interviews, it became clear that for the leaders and laity of both churches C and D, the relationship with their community is central. They perceive themselves as being actively engaged in the life of the community, and many from each church stated that their mission is to the “whole man” or “total person”. Both of these congregations provide workshops for individuals in the community that address needs other than spiritual, such as health and financial management. Church D is extremely active in its community. The leaders and laity seem to perceive the role of the

contemporary church as being much more in line with the traditional understanding of the black church as an “all comprehending institution”, one which actively works to meet the material, social, political, and educational needs of their communities.

5.4.c.ii Poverty and Responsibility to the Poor

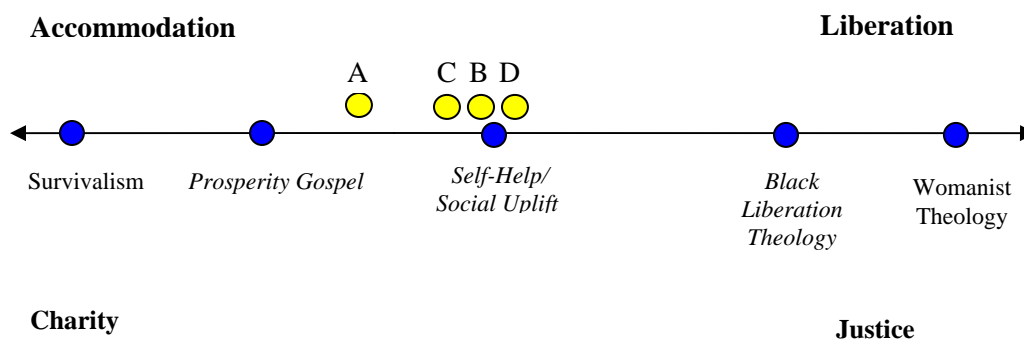
Through focus groups, personal interviews, and participant observation, it was evident that all participants in the churches under study believe that the church has a responsibility to the poor. However, the belief about the shape that this responsibility takes and even the understanding of poverty differs among the churches. For example, because members of Church A understand poverty to be a ‘mentality’ or state of mind and not attributable to structural forces within society but instead attributable to spiritual forces of evil, their responsibility to the poor then is to educate them. Ultimately, it is to help those who are poor to shed the “mentality of lack” and come into the knowledge that Christ died so that they could be spiritually and materially redeemed—redeemed from poverty, sickness, and death. Churches B and D, which were comprised of mainly middle- and upper-class persons, had interesting answers to the question of “why are people poor?” In both congregations there was a clear understanding that people are poor because of structural inequalities, but some argued that some people are poor because they “choose” to be, thus laying the fault of poverty squarely at the feet of the individual. Members and leaders from both congregations made it clear that individual responsibility must come into play when discussing poverty. Churches B, C, and D, unlike Church A, subscribe to a more mainline Protestant theology and therefore understand their

responsibility to the poor largely in terms of charitable acts. A few parishioners and clergy from Churches B and D argued for attacking structural challenges posed to persistently impoverished populations, particularly in church D, which has a high level of community involvement.

Congregations C and D constantly emphasized self determination and economic independence as means of social uplift. Church A, on the other hand, emphasized middle-class values and wealth, not so much as a solution for social uplift, but as an actual right of children of God. Congregations B, C, and D seemed to understand that one's material abundance and human capital were to be used for the uplift of others less fortunate. However, the rhetoric of the leaders of church B emphasized personal piety, personal conversion, and charity. Whereas congregation D emphasized empowerment, economic, and political empowerment, church C mainly emphasized economic empowerment. For church A, one's wealth is to be used to "sow seeds" which includes lifting up those less fortunate in the community, but seeds or wealth can also be sown into a wealthy person's life or ministry. The ultimate purpose of one's wealth, as was the doctrine in congregation A, is to spread the gospel of Jesus Christ.

It is clear from where the churches studied fall on the continuum that they are in the self-help/social uplift tradition, with one congregation serving as a bit of an outlier and falling near the prosperity gospel tradition. Although congregation A is the outlier, it is still characterized by some of the characteristics of the SHSU tradition due to the form that prosperity theology takes within the rural southern context. In chapter six I will discuss the possibility of critically reappropriating the SHSU heritage, which borrows from and is critiqued by competing traditions within the black religious experience.

Figure 2: Mapping Churches on the Continuum of Engagement with Economic Justice



5.5 Conclusion

This chapter has provided an important socio-historical contextual background for the specific churches under study in my research site. The chapter took the foundational principles of the BCEEWB (which were derived from the comparative work in chapter three and four) and read them in light of voices of the “people in the pews” and of the pulpit in the rural southern Black Belt regarding Christian behavior in the marketplace and economic justice. I introduced case study material in the field and from this gleaned principles for a BCEEWB in the rural southern context. The continuum I explained in greater detail so that actual congregations in the study area could be mapped to yield greater insight into the theological and normative foundations of engagement with

economic justice or lack of response to economic justice issues. This dissertation has used rural southern African American Christians as an important epistemological source for constructing ethical ideas regarding Christian behavior in the marketplace. The congregations within this particular rural community along with the white and black intellectual traditions have been my sources for constructing Christian social ethics. In the next chapter I explain the sources, assumptions, and development of a BCEEWB, all derived from the intellectual tradition, in light of the field data. In so doing, I allow for the development of a critical reappropriation of the SHSU heritage that characterizes the engagement with economic justice in the study churches.

Chapter 6 Black Christian Economic Ethic of Well Being

As I have worshipped within these rural communities, alongside mothers, fathers, daughters, sons, grandmothers, and wise women and men who live lives of love and hope for their community, my appreciation and comprehension of the various worlds of black people and their communities has evolved. The result has been greater hope in an apocalyptic vision of a new heaven and new earth, "...a world crafted on justice and love that holds us all in God's creation rather than in a hierarchy of oppressions."⁵⁵⁶ This hope is what initially stirred my interest in exploring how to make these worlds of black women and men in marginalized communities better.

The critiques by religious scholars, particularly womanists, that have served as an impetus behind this research indict the black church with being nonresponsive to several important issues that pose significant challenges to the black community. Included in these issues are sexism, classism, economic injustice and sedimented inequalities that continue to plague the lives of impoverished African American women, men, children and elderly in areas such as the rural Alabama Black Belt. These scholarly critiques of the church also address the church's largely unquestioned historical acceptance of capitalistic economic rationality and failure to respond to and challenge the status quo. Gilkes argues that African American women and their communities stand to benefit from advocacy for economic justice more than any other group of women. Indeed, praxis on behalf of the "least" within our nation, among whom rural southern black women and their communities are disproportionately represented, is vital to the ministry of the black

⁵⁵⁶ Emilie M. Townes, , *In a Blaze of Glory: Womanist Spirituality As Social Witness*, (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1995), 10.

church, which is predominantly made up of these women. Their historical and contemporary activism comprises the essential public arm of the black church which has cared for and struggled alongside those fighting to free themselves from structures of oppression. This public arm of the black church is evident in various theological traditions from which I draw fundamental principles forming the foundation of a Black Christian Economic Ethic of Well Being (BCEEWB). At the heart of this economic ethic is a womanist conception of well being to which wholeness, community, and unity are central. Emphasis on these principles is necessary given the results of the historical economic reality of African Americans.

As this dissertation demonstrates, this historical economic reality has influenced African American religious expression and Christian identity. Mitchem argues that this reality, historically marked by exploitation and deprivations, has created a spirituality of longing among African Americans. Therefore, the black church has been a central place—sometimes the only place, where African Americans have been shepherded through negotiating the cognitive dissonance between their reality and the promise of American society. However, Emilie Townes laments what she considers the black church's inaction and inadequate response to injustice and inequality which reinforce and legitimate class structures and uneven distribution of burdens and benefits of social cooperation. Her criticism is that instead of working for radical transformation of unjust social structures, the church has promoted the drive for inclusion into the social order. She contends that the problem is that the church does not offer a theology or spirituality that adequately responds to and challenges the status quo.⁵⁵⁷ This sobering critique by Townes is part of the impetus behind this dissertation. The church's key role in engaging

⁵⁵⁷ Ibid., 128-29.

economic justice through various theological traditions/expressions, also demands that it critically reevaluate its economic ethics.

A survey of the connection between the historical economic reality and religious experience of African Americans illustrates how theological and ethical beliefs not only reflect but shape the economic behavior of individuals by: providing normative bases for just relations in the market, and influencing expectations of and offering criticism of economic, social, and political structures. In my examination of the interconnection between race, religion and economics in which I used Macon County as a case study, I assumed that some sort of correlation between black Christian identity and a struggle for economic justice in the rural South exists. Indeed, part of the 'work' of the black church historically has included providing an arena for the production of a positive humanizing collective identity for historically economically exploited and dehumanized persons. This reconstructed identity has been formative in the development of the moral conscience of African Americans and a catalyst for action toward transformation of an economic reality of deprivation and exploitation.

The association between identity and economic justice was highlighted by analyzing theological traditions within the black religious experience. By exploring the socio-historical background of each tradition, I elucidated the characteristics of its particular form of engagement with economic justice. Furthermore, categorical and comparative analyses yielded greater insight into how each theological expression specifically addressed (or does not address) economic justice. The key common elements of these predominant strands of theological expression are: promotion of economic

independence and upward mobility from poverty. Those elements common to BLT and SHSU include: freedom, dignity, equality, racial solidarity, and self-determination.

In constructing a framework for an BCEEWB, I faced the challenge of tensions between critical liberation⁵⁵⁸ and SHSU traditions⁵⁵⁹ of the black church. Mapping study churches on the continuum made clear that within my study area there is allegiance mostly to the SHSU heritage both as transmitted through the prosperity gospel tradition and the historical SHSU heritage. The SHSU tradition contains various strands. Some strands of this tradition can result in the prosperity gospel focus on individual wealth accumulation, while other strands can lead to empowerment of community as a form of self help. It is therefore necessary to bring elements of the critical traditions to bear on rural economic realities. Also, the SHSU heritage contains important elements for the BCEEWB which may provide a corrective to problematic elements of the prosperity gospel and expand the usefulness of the liberationist traditions within the praxis of churches in this particular social context. This critical reappropriation of the SHSU tradition has led me to construct a framework for a Neo or revised SHSU framework which draws upon the three predominant theological strands of BLT, SHSU and prosperity gospel, the womanist tradition, and field data. The aim of this revision of the SHSU heritage is to challenge congregations and religious scholars to further develop a Christian economic ethic of well being that is relevant to the black rural southern experience.

This chapter begins with a discussion of the BCEEWB for our specific context within this study. Characteristics, sources, assumptions, and the development of the ethic

⁵⁵⁸ The critical liberationist heritage is represented by the black liberation theology and womanist traditions.

⁵⁵⁹ Aspects of the SHSU heritage are represented in the prosperity gospel tradition and fully represented in SHSU tradition.

are outlined. The chapter then concludes with a discussion of NeoSHSU as a viable legacy for the black church within Macon County. This study had as one of its aims, the beginning of a framework for a black Christian ethic relevant to the black rural experience. In order to develop principles for such an ethic, I focused on several predominant forms of engagement (expressed as African American religious traditions) with economic justice within the black church. I then articulated principles for a Black Christian Economic Ethic of Well Being through the theological-ethical investigation of these traditions. Central to this analysis was a womanist critical consciousness, therefore, a womanist critique was performed. Also, this framework for a BCEEWB was put into conversation with data collected from clergy and laity in the Black Belt (focus groups, personal interviews, and participant observation).

In this chapter I take the previous discussions of this framework and ask the question: What should this BCEEWB look like when put into dialogue with male, black intelligentsia, critiqued by womanist critical consciousness and read through a case study of rural southern African Americans in the Black Belt? I have constructed several characteristics of a BCEEWB from my reflection upon Christian behavior in the marketplace and the complex relationship between black economic activity and black religious experience in the United States. The question that now guides my reflection is how are we to respond? What ought we to do amid widespread economic inequality and exploitation; and amid disparities of wealth, education and gender that diminish the well being of so many American citizens, particularly poor African Americans? Or stated succinctly, how are we to thoughtfully engage issues of economic injustice that have plagued and continue to plague our nation?

The BCEEWB is intended to be a prescriptive and critical analytical tool for churches in their engagement with issues of economic justice in this post-civil rights era, to spur a re-evaluation of their economic ethics. What is presented here is merely a framework, a model that I hope will be built upon by scholars desiring to assist congregations of marginalized populations such as those in my study area in moving forward and moving to liberative action with respect to economic justice. This BCEEWB is a set of principles which may be realized differently in different contexts, hence my point that in the southern rural context, the ethic is deeply shaped by SHSU heritage, prompting the construction of a NeoSHSU framework. It became clear from my analysis that these churches have a rich intellectual heritage in the liberationist and womanist traditions, the appropriation of which is not evident in their praxis. Incorporation of important elements of this intellectual heritage will assist the black church in carrying out the most vital aspect of its prophetic ministry—securing economic justice for those most marginalized within its community.

6.1 Characteristics of a BCEEWB

The characteristics of a BCEEWB include: (1) a foundational theological belief in God, as sovereign creator of all humans, who are inevitably linked by virtue of the parenthood of God; (2) a worldview that is liberationist; communal; and critical; (3) engagement with a womanist critical consciousness which includes a sociopolitical analysis of wholeness. This sociopolitical analysis performs several tasks. It prompts black people to deal with the history that divides them from other oppressed people and

to become aware of the history that links them.⁵⁶⁰ Douglas argues that such an analysis also challenges the black community to move toward ‘wholeness’ not only as a community, but also in relationship to other oppressed communities, especially people of color around the world.⁵⁶¹ The underlying assumptions of such an ethic are that: (1) Our relationship to God has implications for our relationship with one another. Illustrative of these implications for human relations is that there is a divine mandate to love one another and the obligation to the “least of these” is fundamental to Christian faith and thus grounds this ethic. (2) Given the history of racial discrimination, and the dehumanization of African Americans in this country, the Christian faith must not be divorced from issues of social justice, indeed, God is understood to be on the side of those on the underside of history, specifically marginalized, economically exploited African Americans.

The BCEEWB is foremost liberationist. It begins with the acknowledgement of the historical economic exploitation and oppression of African American women and men. It is rooted in their struggle for justice, freedom, and dignity in an imperialist, racist, classist and sexist society. This economic ethic is communal and critical. It is critical of aspects of the capitalist economic system that dehumanize and perpetuate oppression of marginalized populations of people of color (including those in developing countries). Although (capitalistic) economic rationality predominantly characterizes the black church’s engagement with economic life in the U.S., the BCEEWB is not based solely on economic rationality, but is critical of it. The telos of a BCEEWB is economic

⁵⁶⁰ Ibid., 102.

⁵⁶¹ Ibid.

justice, as one of many expressions of God's love and a significant aspect of the Kingdom of God on earth.

Just as the sources for black liberation theology and black Christian social ethics are rooted in scripture, black church tradition(s), black history, culture, and the lived experience of African American women and men⁵⁶², these are also the sources for a black Christian economic ethic.

6.2 Development of BCEEWB

The socio-historical and theological analysis of the predominant forms of engagement with economic justice performed in this dissertation supports my initial hypothesis that there is a correlation between a particular complex identity (black Christian rural southern) and moral agency for economic justice. Historically, religious institutions within the black community have found themselves continually confronting economic injustice. Indeed, African American ethical consciousness has been shaped by a unique historical experience in a racialized society with a history of economic exploitation, and discrimination. Likewise, their unique historical appropriation of the Christian faith serves as the basis for a BCEEWB. The components of this economic ethic of well being emerge through an examination of ways the church has responded to issues of economic justice. This engagement falls along a continuum which elucidates the framework of a BCEEWB. This historical engagement with economic justice falls on the continuum with respect to criteria such as understandings of: justice; relationships

⁵⁶² Cone argues that this history, culture and experience is evident in particular sources such as sermons, prayers, songs, folklore, poetry and fiction. See Cone, *God of the Oppressed*, 17-30.

between individuals and community, church and community; and poverty and the church's responsibility to the poor. I derive these criteria through a categorical analysis of traditions which focuses on the themes of Church, Christ, faith, wealth and possessions, stewardship, poverty, and work. Through this analysis of historical and current theological and ethical framings of black economic activity, I articulated various principles, some of which the traditions hold in common, others which reinforce and still others that critique principles from other traditions. Through this analysis it became clear that the womanist tradition contains principles that both critique the BLT, SHSU and prosperity gospel and also reinforce the strengths of these traditions.

African American religious institutions understand that part of their role is to be reservoirs of black cultural heritage, and of religious and social values. Some of the most important social values that these institutions influence are those regarding economic behavior. The economic ethic of the black church is represented by the polar perspectives of accommodation and liberation. The survivalist tradition of black religious experience, as an accommodationist strategy, is exemplified in Christianity as appropriated by enslaved Africans (considered to be mere property, without citizenship rights and privileges) and freed blacks (who held second-class citizenship status). This tradition emphasizes dignity, freedom and human welfare; the bible is central; and the communal spirit of togetherness is key for persons to survive as a community and in community. Also, there is total accommodation to capitalistic economic rationality.

At the opposite extreme of the continuum is the liberationist tradition exemplified in DuBois' strategy of resistance. His promotion of socialism as a economic and political strategy for black progress and his embrace of radical Marxist theory—opposes the

accommodationist strategy of Booker T. Washington, who is representative of the bedrock tradition of the black church, and the grounding tradition of the continuum—SHSU heritage. Washington’s accommodationist strategy advocates blacks helping each other, lifting themselves economically and morally through property ownership, thrift, industry, etc.— in short without relying on political agitation but through strategies such as Washington’s push for black capitalism and embrace of the Protestant work ethic. He believed that this was the way to win the respect of whites and gain full citizenship rights, throwing off the burdensome garments of inferiority and second class citizenship. This characterization of the Christian economic ethic as represented in the form of a continuum on which black economic activity falls is the foundation upon which the BCEEWB develops.

A survey of black theological and ethical thought points to the fact that central to a black religious ethic are poor marginalized individuals for whom we have a responsibility to work towards a society in which they are included in ways that acknowledge their equality and dignity. God’s radical concern for the poor is demonstrated in Christ, whose temporal ministry was centered on the dispossessed and oppressed. Thus, central to a black religious ethic is the understanding of Christ as exemplar of moral action, especially on behalf of the poor.

6.3 BCEEWB in Light of Voices from Pew and Pulpit

A major goal of this dissertation has been to address the gap in theological and ethical discourses regarding marginalized populations of rural Americans in the Black

Belt. This project has taken the rural southern African American Christian community in Macon County as an important epistemological source for constructing a framework for an economic ethic of well being. Although there are varied theological and doctrinal expressions of their engagement with economic justice, these congregations' notions of justice are influenced by the Judeo-Christian tradition and a socio-historical context of a racialized society; and, some, influenced by tri-dimensional oppression of race, gender and class.

The construction of ethics has taken place through various means—through the traditional means of free agents, unencumbered European and European-American men who have bequeathed to us a rich intellectual tradition. However, ethical ideas emerge within community and therefore, these communities of poor rural African Americans in Macon County become important epistemological sources for constructing ethics. Within this rural southern context, central to a BCEEWB, like the intellectual tradition, is that God is concerned for the poor. This God is the one who “makes a way out of no way”, who moves supernaturally on behalf of the poor and oppressed and provides for their material, physical and psychological needs. This God attends to the “whole person”. Likewise, Christ is the moral exemplar for humans as responsible moral agents in the world.

The BCEEWB in this context begins with principles of care, love and stewardship, with responsiveness to human need as a guiding principle for praxis. Charity is the emphasis in its praxis. As in the intellectual tradition, this ethic is also communal. This BCEEWB, however, is based on economic rationality, it is not critical of it. The focus of criticism is on the individual. Individual/personal responsibility, not

extant economic arrangements or socio-political institutional structures, is the focus of its criticism. These churches presuppose individual agency. The BCEEWB in this specific context critiques the agency of the individual, particularly as it relates to consumption and materialism, whereas the intellectual tradition critiques the system and structural arrangements that perpetuate unjust institutional practices.

Such a lack of systemic critique means that the BCEEWB in this particular rural southern context falls short in relation to the principles for a BCEEWB I have developed. These limitations characterize the nature of the SHSU tradition from which this contextualized BCEEWB grows which is the impetus behind the construction of a NeoSHSU framework that seeks to bridge the gap. Among the areas of limitation are its lack of attention to class and gender; lack of collaboration and ecumenism; and failure to provide a critique of capitalistic economic rationality.

6.4 NeoSelf-Help/Social Uplift (NeoSHSU) Heritage

Through developing the economic ethic relevant to a rural setting, I employed a categorical and comparative analysis of three black religious traditions which represent predominant forms of engagement with economic justice. Employing Lincoln and Mamiya's characterization of the economic ethic of the black church with its dialectical tension between the poles of survival and liberation, I developed a continuum of engagement with economic justice which served as a frame for the categorical and comparative analyses. This continuum is illustrative of the fact that the black church's agency with respect to economic justice is expressed through both cultures of resistance

or liberation and accommodation, while various traditions lie between these two extremes. These black religious traditions and study churches were then mapped on the continuum according to prevailing values and various criteria. From mapping the study churches on the continuum, it is clear that the prevailing values of the study churches stand solidly within the SHSU heritage of the black church.

In order to suggest the directions offered by a BCWEEB, I wish to draw upon the three predominant traditions, field data, and womanist criticism to articulate a revised approach to the SHSU tradition within this post-modern context in which the black church finds itself. I begin to do this in sections below where I take elements from the predominant traditions (mainly the intellectual traditions of liberation and womanist) to build on the current SHSU tradition prevalent in the study churches. I then examine these elements in light of the analysis of field data, which allows me to elucidate the challenges that study congregations must address to move toward a NeoSHSU praxis.

As I stated in the beginning of this dissertation, agency on behalf of black women and their communities in relation to economic justice is vital to the ministry of the church. Marla Frederick acknowledges the black church's waning intensity of public involvement since its civil rights heyday. However, for many, the church remains an important place—and for some, the only place to address social concerns. In fact, in some cases, particularly within marginalized, poor, rural communities like those in the Alabama Black Belt, it may be the only, or one of the very few places to address significant concerns of community members. It offers a space for announcements,

activities, and education, but it also offers the psychological and spiritual succor needed to “just hold on”, and to continue to hope for “the change that’s gonna come.”⁵⁶³

Nevertheless, the church has historically been judged by its ministry on behalf of the ‘least of these’ in society. Preoccupied with individual spiritual transformation, personal piety, personal salvation and evangelicalism, the church has faltered in its attention to tying the circumstances of individuals to broader social circumstances. Thus, if the rural southern black church is to be faithful in its prophetic witness to the “least” in its community, then it must address the issue of economic justice which looms large in the lives of persistently poor communities such as are found in Macon County. To be a prophetic witness regarding economic justice, a revision of the SHSU tradition will prove useful because as currently appropriated by the study churches, it is a tradition marked by: individualism; inadequate attention to radical social analysis to enable well-informed praxis with respect to economic justice; overemphasis on charity at the expense of adequate attention to justice; and waning prophetic Christian witness with respect to the historical relationship between economic reality of African Americans characterized by exploitation and deprivation, and African American religious experience.

Therefore, drawing from the liberation and womanist traditions within black religious experience can assist the church in making connections between individual suffering and broader issues of structural oppression. The liberation and womanist traditions can provide resources for moving beyond individual transformation to social transformation as a strategy for making life more humane for those “on the bottom” in the here and now. This in no way negates the importance of individual transformation as an empowering force in allowing persons to work for social transformation. Indeed,

⁵⁶³ Frederick, *Between Sundays*, 215.

although religious individualism has its downside, one of the ways it has played out in some black church traditions is that the emphasis on personal transformation has, in some cases, empowered individuals in their agency for social change.

Although the SHSU heritage is marked by individualism, it also has strong communal ties which make racial solidarity, wholeness, and liberation possible. Womanist criticism pushes the black church to address its perpetuation of sexism and remind us that in order for the church to move toward a black liberation ethic, it must develop an ethical vision that includes black women.⁵⁶⁴ Thus, the revision of the SHSU tradition must be informed by a womanist critical consciousness so that its praxis is inclusive. The womanist vision for this revision is that it enables black women and men to live in solidarity as whole and free persons in community. It does not alienate members of community from one another (women against men or middle class against ‘under’ class), but will strive for wholeness and unity and will challenge those in community who maintain their status and power by supporting structures of oppression. Another important aspect of the liberation and womanist traditions that can be appropriated by the SHSU heritage is its rejection of accommodation to capitalistic economic rationality.

It is my hope that through a revision of the SHSU tradition and a re-evaluation of their economic ethics the rural black church in Macon County can move forward and move to action on behalf of its marginalized constituency. The principles of the NeoSHSU tradition include: commitment to family and community with an emphasis on wholeness, freedom, dignity, and racial solidarity; freedom from multi-dimensional nature of oppression (sexism, racism, classism); commitment to ensuring the survival of

⁵⁶⁴ Cannon, *Katie's Cannon*, 127.

all persons, women and men as whole, unified, and liberated moral agents; primacy of relationships—with God, one another, and the environment; holistic approach to black life and salvation (includes economic, social and political salvation in this temporal realm); upward mobility from poverty, economic independence, and concern with inequality in access to resources for sustenance and human flourishing (and power dynamics that perpetuate inequitable distribution of wealth and resources—necessitating redistribution); collaboration (to address pressing social needs); privileging of justice over and above charity; critical of capitalistic economic rationality.

6.5 Moving Forward, Moving to (Economically and Socially Just) Action

Peter Paris claims that a basic reason why black churches have flourished is because of their unadulterated commitment to the good of the black community.⁵⁶⁵ This commitment is demonstrated variously by diverse congregations. While these congregations are committed to the good of their communities, they are limited in their engagement with and response to issues of economic injustice. In this section, I will highlight challenges that these congregations must face in their movement toward NeoSHSU praxis with the hope of them beginning to engage economic justice beyond the current level. I discuss the NeoSHSU's principle of addressing the multi-dimensional nature of oppression in section 6.5.a, dealing with issues of class and gender as played out in study churches. Secondly, I discuss the NeoSHSU's emphasis on solidarity, and collaboration in the push for upward mobility from poverty in section 6.5.b, addressing challenges of collaboration and ecumenism that exist for study churches. Lastly, the

⁵⁶⁵ Peter Paris, *Social Teachings*, 45-46.

NeoSHSU principle of criticism of capitalistic economic rationality is addressed in section 6.5.c which highlights inequitable access to economic resources and power arrangements that perpetuate inequitable distribution of wealth that exists within the monopolistic capitalistic structure in America.

6.5.a Class and Gender

In his cogent analysis of the changing black class structure, William Julius Wilson recounts the beginnings of a distinct class structure within the black community that has now solidified to the point where one can easily distinguish ‘two nations within a nation.’⁵⁶⁶ In his book, *The Declining Significance of Race: Blacks and Changing American Institutions*, he notes that there is currently a clear social, cultural and geographic distance between the black middle/upper and the black ‘underclass’. During my field research, I clearly observed this class division within the black community in Macon County, it is indeed one of the most noticeable features of the county.

In order to address economic justice issues, the congregations within this context will first have to come to terms with the classism and other “isms” that pervade their institutional structures. This class diversity was noticeable among rather than within the churches, with the exception of church A. Churches B and D were middle-class congregations and C was a working-class and working-poor congregation. The physical segregation and social isolation that exists between classes within religious institutions is

⁵⁶⁶ William Julius Wilson, *The Declining Significance of Race: Blacks and Changing American Institutions* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1980), 124. See also Lincoln and Mamiya, *Black Church in the African-American Experience*, 384.

demonstrative of the class bifurcation in the broader black community that Wilson analyzes. Unfortunately, this social class chasm in the church has the potential to reinforce suspicion and mutual enmity between communities.⁵⁶⁷

Sexism was also apparent within many of these local congregations. Not only was there noticeable lack of female leadership within the religious institutions in the community, those women who held pastorates were open with me about the challenges female leaders face in the community. For example, within the connectional churches, they often get the “worst” appointments (the most isolated and smallest parishes that are clearly in decline) or if in non-connectional structures, they are marginalized.

The appropriation of NeoSHSU by study churches will allow them to address these issues of sexism and classism because it is informed by liberationist and womanist traditions within the black church which require addressing the multi-dimensional nature of oppression. This appropriation is practically done by first *engaging* issues of class and sex which there is little evidence of doing currently. There must be a willingness on part of the congregations to serve as safe sacred spaces where dialogue and responsiveness to issues of gender and class are entered into. The church must then work to understand how its perpetuation of sexism and classism are systemic issues, connected to the broader culture (pervading all societal institutional structures) and be prophetically counter-cultural, rejecting these phenomena at all levels within its institutional structure.

⁵⁶⁷ Marvin A. McMickle, *Preaching to the Black Middle Class: Words of Challenge, Words of Hope*, (Valley Forge, PA, 2000), vii.

6.5.b Collaboration and Ecumenism

In his article, "The Civic Impact of the Black Church in Atlanta," Alton B. Pollard, III raises the important question of whether the intermediate entrepreneurial solutions to achieving economic capacity which congregations undertake largely independent of one another are the best means to effect change in an uncertain economic and political environment.⁵⁶⁸ He further notes that the lack of knowledge of black pastors regarding economic development is a problem which is compounded by the isolation and division that characterize the black church. Pollard raises an issue that is largely neglected in the CEDM. This challenge regarding the sectarian nature of the black churches' efforts is imperative.

There are two relevant issues: first, engagement in economic issues and secondly, the significance of ecumenical cooperation in the push for upward mobility from poverty. There are various levels of engagement, they include advocacy on behalf of marginalized communities which includes education, and direct assistance. Advocacy may be to government, to push for policies that help to ensure the dignity and humane existence of impoverished individuals, or congregations may become involved in advocacy at a communal level, which takes the form of education. In this instance, churches get involved in educating community leaders and members about economic justice issues and how they may respond appropriately. In addition to advocacy, engagement of economic issues may take the form of direct assistance for individuals in community, which is the type of engagement that mainly takes place in the study area. The majority of the

⁵⁶⁸ Alton B. Pollard, III, "The Civic Impact of the Black Church in Atlanta," in *The Status of Black Atlanta*, (Atlanta: The Southern Center for Studies in Public Policy, 2002), 104.

churches are involved in charity and emphasize charity as the way to address economic justice issues within the community. However, the NeoSHSU tradition will emphasize the priority of justice over charity, hence the viability of responses like active support and re-engagement with the Poor People's Campaign that is picking up where Martin Luther King, Jr. left off. This sort of advocacy in conjunction with strategies such as collaboration and ecumenism are fundamental to the church's success in addressing the real needs of its community members.

Although sectarianism has characterized the nature of the black church's civic engagement, specifically in relation to economic and community development efforts, there have been efforts made towards ecumenism as a way of approaching various problems faced by the black community throughout its history. In her book, *Black Ecumenism: Implementing the Demands of Justice*, Mary R Sawyer characterizes the black church as both 'one and many' in her assessment of its socio-political role. "It is one in that all believers participate in the black experience in America, sharing in the religious ambiance which that experience creates. But it is many in the variety of structural components through which black religion is expressed."⁵⁶⁹ She notes that ecumenism has played out in two distinct ways within the black church—both in the quest for structural merger, and in cooperative, interdenominational activity undertaken in the pursuit of goals and objectives that transcend of church organization.⁵⁷⁰ She asserts that the objective of black ecumenism, in contrast to ecumenical movements in historically white denominations, is neither structural unity nor doctrinal consensus, but

⁵⁶⁹ Mary R. Sawyer, *Black Ecumenism: Implementing the Demands of Justice*, (Valley Forge, Pennsylvania: Trinity Press International, 1994), 1.

⁵⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 6.

bringing together the resources of the black church to address the circumstances of African Americans as an oppressed people.⁵⁷¹

The black church has not managed to sustain ecumenical activity and advocacy and involvement at the level of public policy. The only ecumenical involvement in my study area is in worship services or fellowship. Two of the pastors (pastor 2 and pastor 3) lamented the fact that collaboration between churches within their community does not go beyond worship and fellowship. There is virtually no collaboration on behalf of social or economic justice issues that the community faces. These churches act as independent entities and consequently some of the charitable services they offer to the community overlap. Because of its undergirding principle of collaboration to address pressing social needs, churches who adopt NeoSHSU praxis will necessarily give priority to ecumenical collaboration.

Study church A has begun to make some strides in this direction. The pastor has been actively engaged in calling other pastors and their congregations to work in collaboration with them as they move to enhance the economic life of those in the community. It is too early yet to know whether his efforts will be successful.

6.5.c Critique of Capitalistic Economic Rationality

Emilie Townes indicts the black church for its general drive for inclusion into this economic and social order, rather than a negation and radical transformation of it.

Indeed, this characterization fits the survivalist, prosperity gospel, SHSU traditions on the

⁵⁷¹ Ibid., 8.

continuum. These traditions fall closest to the accommodation pole of the continuum, and the categorical and comparative analyses clarified that it is because of their principles regarding justice, the relationship between individuals and community, church and community, and their understanding of poverty and the church's responsibility to the poor that they fall where they do. The failure of the black church to offer a serious criticism of the prevailing economic arrangements steeped in capitalistic economic rationality has implicated it in the ills perpetuated by what Hopkins refers to as monopolistic capitalism in America. This form of economic arrangement is characterized by the ownership of the nation's wealth by a few "billionaire families" who wield resources and power to mold the political reality of this country.

Churches with a strong NeoSHSU orientation should fall near the liberation pole of the continuum where there is an emphasis on justice over and above charity and where there is criticism of those aspects of capitalistic economic rationality which perpetuate the oppression of individuals. Womanist and black liberation theologies offer insights in this regard. Both of these liberative traditions argue that the black church must seriously engage in social theoretical analysis of poverty and related issues to economic injustice. Using Martin Luther King, Jr.'s and Malcolm X's social analysis of poverty, Hopkins outlines the important dimensions of a black liberation theology with respect to political economy. He argues that Malcolm and Martin's social analyses informed us that the political economy of capitalism in America stood against a religion for the oppressed. "...For King, the politics and economics of monopoly capitalism were the opposite of

everything Jesus Christ represented. To be a Christian means, at least, not being pro-capitalism...”⁵⁷²

Moving forward, the black church must come to terms with its failure to perform adequate social theoretical analysis and its absolute accommodation of capitalistic economic rationality. None of the churches under study are engaged in such a critique, with the exception of church A. However, church A’s critique was not informed by social theoretical analysis. It was instead informed by a spiritualized dualistic model of God’s Kingdom against the Devil’s reign in the world. Among the other churches, there was a consistent critique of the individual as a consumer. The sustained critique offered was usually of the individual engaging the system, not of the system itself. Moving away from individualism and toward a critique of economic rationality, the NeoSHSU approach can allow for the type of sustained critique and radical social analysis that will inform the church’s prophetic witness with respect to economic justice.

These limitations feed into one another. Classism and sexism are among the issues that inhibit collaborative efforts, and absence of a solid social theoretical analysis prevents congregations from engaging these limitations in an effort to move forward in substantive ways to address social and economic justice issues within the community.

6.6 Conclusion

As we were discussing the economic reality that individuals in Macon county face, one of the clergy said to me, “it’s a depressed situation here...people are leaving...it’s a place where you have to live by faith...and pray that God will somehow

⁵⁷² Hopkins, *Shoes that Fit Our Feet*, 186.

come through and break through some of this stuff...it's not the best picture but that's how it is...." The majority of the small rural towns in this county have poverty rates that are triple that of the U.S. in general; for women, they are quadruple the national rates and the poverty rates for children are even higher. Such rates are symptoms of declining economies, climbing unemployment rates and resource poor local governments. This pastor is correct—these are places where people must live by faith.

What intrigued me, however, is that he along with other clergy and lay participants with whom I spoke, held to a sincere hope that things would eventually get better. Indeed, the social outreach of these congregants and their leaders grew out of this abiding hope that they were actually working toward a brighter future for themselves and their communities. Such hope, based on and expressed through their faith, was evident in their conversations, sermons, bible studies, and fellowshiping. Amid persistent poverty and despair, these congregations are holding onto a "hope-filled" vision that grew out of their faith that, God would surely "come through and break through" the despair and spiritual longing that has characterized their communities for so long.

My own hope is that this dissertation can offer some resources for building upon their hope through the articulation of a Black Christian Economic Ethic of Well-Being and through, more specifically, the revision of the SHSU tradition into what I have called a NeoSHSU heritage. This work offers womanist and black liberation scholars a way of shaping a liberative economic ethic that can speak to the realities of black rural life. Also, it offers support for the sacred work, by the churches and individuals I have studied, on behalf of communities of the "least of these." We share a hope-filled vision of transforming the worlds of poor black women and men into worlds that uphold their

dignity, ensure fair access to economic opportunity and enable them to participate in a common humane existence.

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Appendix A Background Information from Personal Interviews

Pastor	Gender	Denomination	Age	Education ⁵⁷³	Bivocational	Years in Ministry	Years at Current Church	Number of Members ⁵⁷⁴	Characteristics of Members ⁵⁷⁵
1	Male	Baptist	63	D.Min	No	48	33	500	Multi-generational ⁵⁷⁶ & College Students
2	Male	National Baptist	38	M.Div	No	18	8.5	486	Majority Elderly ⁵⁷⁷
3	Male	Nondenominational	42	Associates in Mortuary Science	No	24	1	100	Multi-generational ⁵⁷⁸
4	Male	Baptist	43	Pursuing D.Min	Yes	32	14	500	Multi-generational ⁵⁷⁹ College Students
5	Male	Baptist	63	M. Min	No	10	4	80	Elderly ⁵⁸⁰

⁵⁷³ Highest degree earned.

⁵⁷⁴ These are numbers of members on roll, the actual number of members that attend church is in many cases much less.

⁵⁷⁵ These characteristics of members are from estimates of pastors, they are not in all cases exact numbers or proportions.

⁵⁷⁶ Elderly are 15% of congregation; Age 30-60 are 50%; Mid-late 30s are 15%.

⁵⁷⁷ His congregation is basically individuals between 55-80 years old he says. Pastor says the middle-aged group, individuals his age are off in cities working. "They are just not here" because of the lack of job opportunities he says. Children aged 2-18 make up 15% of congregation.

⁵⁷⁸ Average age of members is below 55 years (the majority are between 35-40 years old).

⁵⁷⁹ Elderly comprise 30% of the congregation, Young 30% and Students 30%.

⁵⁸⁰ Elderly comprise 60% of congregation; there are few children and youth.

Pastor	Gender	Denomination	Age	Education	Bivocational	Years in Ministry	Years at Current Church	Number of Members	Characteristics of Members
6	Male	Independent Baptist	27	Associates	Yes	7	2	50	Young ⁵⁸¹
7	Female	AMEZ	50	B.S.	No	10	10	50	Elderly ⁵⁸²
8	Male	AMEZ	60	Ph.D.	No	30	3	106	Elderly ⁵⁸³ College Students
9	Male	AME	55	B.S.	Yes	10	1 .5	50	Elderly ⁵⁸⁴
10	Female	AMEZ	61	High School Diploma	No	30	>5 yrs. At both	160 & 100	Elderly
11	Male	AMEZ	68	Ph.D.	Yes	34	--	126	Elderly ⁵⁸⁵
12	Female	Nondenominational	37	Pursuing E.S.	Yes	17	11	30	Multi-generational

⁵⁸¹ The pastor's description of his church is that it is a "Very young congregation". The average age of parishioners is between 20-30 years old and the oldest member is in there 60s.

⁵⁸² Pastor argues the young adult group is missing (ages 25-35). He says that the young people comprise 18% of the congregation.

⁵⁸³ Pastor says he has more senior citizens than any other age group. Young people range in age from babies to" college age" he says. These young people are 19% of the congregation. There are very few students who attend this church.

⁵⁸⁴ The pastor described this church as a maturing Congregation, the average age is 55.

⁵⁸⁵ Young people (18-30 years) are not there he says.

Appendix B Interview Schedule

Personal interview with Pastors:

1. Background information:

- How long been pastor/in ministry? At current church?
- Age, Educational attainment, City where live
- Job (if bivocational)
- tell me about the people of your church (general information on age, number of members, of young people, elderly, etc.; no personal specifics)
- Denominational mission and mission of church

2. What is the purpose of the Church?

3. Does the Church have a responsibility to the poor? If so, what is it?

4. What does the Bible say about the poor?

5. What role does government, personal responsibility and or faith in God play in making sure that peoples' basic needs are met?

6. Over the past ____ years how has life changed in your community economically? Would you say that things have gotten better or worse, or not really that different? How do you account for these changes? Given these changes, are there issues of justice or personal responsibility that should be considered?

7. In your own words, what is justice? What is economic justice? What does justice look like in your community, in broader society? What is individual responsibility within this economic situation?

8. Why are people poor?

9. What does your church teach about the poor?

10. What is our Christian responsibility regarding wealth and prosperity?

11. If you had to come up with principles or guidelines for churches on how to address the needs of people in their communities, what would they be? (principles for addressing economic needs?)

Focus Group Questions

1. What is the purpose of the church?
2. What is our mutual responsibility to each other?
3. Does the church have a responsibility to the poor? If so, what is it?
4. Describe poverty in this community, from the way homes look, the jobs they have or don't have...paint a picture.
5. Why are people poor?
6. What does the Bible say about the poor?
7. Over the past ___ years how has life changed in your community economically? Would you say things have gotten better or worse, or not really that different? (How do you account for these changes—are there issues of justice, personal responsibility that should be considered in your opinion?)
8. What role does government, personal responsibility and or faith in God play in making sure that one's basic necessities are met?
9. What does your church teach about the poor?
10. What is our Christian responsibility regarding wealth and prosperity?
11. Does faith impact economic decisions/life of Christians? How?
12. In your own words, what is justice, what is economic justice? What does or would justice look like in your community, in broader society? What does a good economic situation look like to you? What is individual responsibility within this economic situation?
13. What are our economic rights?
14. If you had to come up with principles or guidelines for churches on how to address the needs of people in their communities, what would they be? (principles for addressing economic needs?)

Appendix C Rural Urban Continuum Codes

Code	Description
<i>Metro</i>	
1	Counties in metro area with population 1 million or more
2	Counties in metro area with population 250,000 to 1 million
3	Counties in metro area with population less than 250,000
<i>Nonmetro</i>	
4	Urban population of 20,000 or more adjacent to metro area
5	Urban population of 20,000 or more, not adjacent to metro area
6	Urban population of 2,500 to 19,999, adjacent to metro area
7	Urban population of 2,500 to 19,999, not adjacent to metro area
8	Completely rural or less than 2,500 urban population, adjacent to metro area
9	Completely rural or less than 2,500 urban population, not adjacent to metro area

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