“Making It Make Sense: Womanist Ways of Reading Sacred Texts & Constructing Black Social Ethics in Black Baptist Churches”
By

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Abstract

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This subject matter – biblical hermeneutics and the construction of Black social ethics – is of particular import and keen interest to me because of the ways that scriptures have been historically weaponized against minorities. Particularly problematic is the way in which said literature has been used to justify virulent theologies, which have led to perverse material realities and carries grave theo-ethical implications for practitioners. The way [we] read, present, study, and make meaning of prose, narratives, and literary corpuses situated in the Hebrew Bible and the Christian Testament often influences our ethical and ecclesial commitments and shapes our religious experiences, collective hermeneutic, and social imagination.

This project is an exploration of biblical hermeneutics and the correlation of social ethics as teased out by members of Beulah Baptist Church of Atlanta (Vine City). When referring to biblical hermeneutics[1], that simply means the way in which individuals read sacred literature and make meaning of said literary corpuses that is applicable to their lives and contexts. By that, I am asking what is normative and authoritative for them as they extrapolate meaning from the literature that drives their understanding of what is (socially) ethical and what is not?

This research project does not aim to homogenize the congregation or render a monolithic reading of the parishioners' hermeneutics, but it is meant to help excavate the religious landscapes and the ways it shapes the contours of persons' socio-political consciousness. Black religious landscapes includes practices, beliefs, traditions, theologies, sacred texts, and rituals that constitute the basis of one's religious identity. For example, in some Black religious spheres, scripture is utilized as an authoritative document whereby individuals construct a moral compass and theological template predicated upon their interpretational gazes of biblical literature, which – prima facie – seems tenable. However, when it comes to robust sexual ethics and the ways scriptures are taken literally – perhaps through a fundamentalist reading of literature – there seems to be a disconnect that we might call "cherry picking," or an ability to overlook certain passages that are antithetical to persons' lived realities or contested praxis.

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[1] See Stone & Duke, *How to Think Theologically* as they argue "the principles that guide exegesis are biblical hermeneutics. Exegesis is the actual analysis of its meaning. Eisegesis is readings that impose our own ideas on Scripture instead of the meaning that is there." p. 49

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By

Winford K. Rice Jr.

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Emory University, Th.M., 2018

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How do we, Black practitioners, reconcile literal, or fundamental, readings of literary narratives that seem to be authoritative on some matters, but less constitutive on other praxiological issues of keen importance, such as one's sexual identity and/or orientation? Why are passages of scripture authoritative on some social matters (sexuality, women in ministry, Pauline household codes, etc.) but not on other matters also of grave importance? What does this look like in the Black church context, particularly in the Bible belt/South? How can we help parishioners to re-imagine the role scripture plays in the life of the practitioner?

Ethnographic research will utilize thin and thick descriptions[2] of congregational life as well as the mechanical and developmental puzzle research models espoused in Mary Moschella's text *Ethnography as Pastoral Practice: An Introduction*. Ministry practices that are critical for this project are Sunday School curriculum, Bible Study, preaching during Sunday worship services as well as church by laws/governing documents that were drafted in accordance with biblical authority.

Participants for Focus Session

Name	Education Level	Age	Member of Beulah
Doris Fuller	Morris Brown College	79	Yes
Chavous Langhorn	Morehouse College	19	Yes
Ronald Brown	Southern Tech	76	Yes
Caleb Cage	Morehouse College	21	Yes

[2] "Thick description" is a detailed and interpretive description that conveys your understanding of the deep meanings of your observations. [Geertz, The Interpretation of Cultures, 1-30]. See Moschella, Mary. *Ethnography as Pastoral Practice: An Introduction,* 197.

Name	Education Level	Age	Member of Beulah
Dr. Francine Samuels	Ed.D., Educational Leadership	60	Yes
Frederick Adams	College Graduate	30	Yes
Asia Brown	Spelman College, Emory University	23	Yes
Laila Brown	Spelman College	19	Yes
Winfred Hill	M.S., Georgia State University	65	Yes
Benne Copeland	—	47	Yes
Marcus Cone	Graduate School	49	Yes
Pierce Nabors	Morehouse College	20	Yes
Laura Jewell	—	70	Yes
Cynthia Jewell	M.Ed., Graduate School	51	Yes
Cydnei Williams	Hampton University, Emory University (M.Div)	30	Intern
Harold Baldwin	Morehouse College	70	Yes
Pamela W. Cottrell	Spelman College	63	Yes
Dr. Christian Johnson	DMD, University of North Carolina	41	Yes
Wesley Samuels Jr.	Morehouse College	32	Yes
Nicole Samuels	M.A., Organizational Leadership/HR	30	Yes
Rev. Marvin Bailey	Graduate Degree	35	No
Keiona Noel	Spelman, Clark Atlanta University	32	Yes
Chatiqua Ellison	Spelman College, Georgia State University (M.P.P.)	33	Yes
Mariah Colon	Spelman College, University of Massachusetts	33	Yes

Members in this study represent a diverse demographic of individuals, opinions, theologies, ages, and beliefs. Because Beulah is an intergenerational church, an aggregation of generations were

present, who represent: The Silent Generation (1928- 1945); Baby Boomers (1946-1964); Gen X (1965 - 1980); Millennials (1981 - 2000); and Gen-Z (2001 - 2020).

The Introduction

Beulah Baptist Church is a historic, Black Baptist congregation founded in 1889 having split from The Mt. Zion Second Baptist Church in Atlanta on Boulevard. Situated on the west side of Atlanta, in the historic Vine City district, Beulah has been in existence for 135 years executing the work of spiritual and social transformation. Beulah identifies as one of the mainline, Black Protestant traditions that typify the proverbial Black church, as delineated by Lincoln and Mamiya in their seminal work, *The Black Church in the African American Experience*.[3] As evinced in the church's bylaws, the purpose of the church is "to worship and serve God and fulfill the great commission of Jesus Christ as set forth in Matthew 28:19-20."[4] Article IV, "Articles of Faith" states, "We affirm the Holy Bible as the inspired Word of God, and as the only basis for our beliefs. Although it is not binding, this church accepts the "Baptist Creed" as a General statement of our faith."[5] Beulah is a bibliocentric church, meaning that it centers the Bible as the point of authority for congregational life and textual engagement serves as the springboard for liturgical worship, programming, and social action.

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[3] "The Black church is primarily comprised of seven denominations: African Methodist Episcopal (A.M.E.), African Methodist Episcopal Zion (A.M.E.Z.), Christian Methodist Episcopal (C.M.E.), National Baptist Convention USA Incorporated, National Baptist Convention of America, Progressive National Baptist Convention, and the Church of God in Christ (C.O.G.I.C.)" [Mamiya and Lincoln: 1990]

[4] Beulah Baptist Church Bylaws, p. 1

[5] Beulah Baptist Church Bylaws, p. 2

Beulah Baptist Church is duly aligned with the Progressive National Baptist Convention, nationally, and the New Era Baptist Convention, locally, which is a subsidiary of the national convention for the state of Georgia.[6] Its membership is diverse, as it is a commuter church, meaning that the majority of its members do not live in proximity to the church, but reside throughout the suburbs of the Metropolitan Atlanta community. It is an intergenerational church with a mélange of white collar professionals, middle class families, blue collar working class individuals, as well as food and housing insecure people. Per the church's most recent membership audit, conducted in August 2024 and completed in November 2024, the church has 297 active members on its roster. Of that, 24 parishioners voluntarily participated in the research focus group on Sunday, January 19, 2025. Announcements were made during Sunday morning worship and members received emails inviting them to participate in the focus session. Congregants were given waivers and consent forms to participate of their own volition.

In 2012, Beulah Baptist Church called its first Black woman, Reverend Trina Evans, to pastor in the church's 135 year history.[7] There was great excitement and enthusiasm amongst the congregation to have a Black woman serving as pastor, following the fifty-three (53) year tenure of Beulah's most beloved and longest serving pastor, Reverend William L. Cottrell Sr. This is a striking contrast to the Pauline household literature, which emphatically asserts in 1 Corinthians 14:34, "women ought to be silent in temples." And yet, the church called its first woman to lead the congregation as its pastor. How do we reconcile what the scriptures say, that we profess to be authoritative, and our praxis? Older men and women in the congregation argued that men should

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[6] http://www.neweraconvention.org/about-us.html

[7] https://beulahatl.org/947-2/

be the head of the household and leaders in the community because of the socio-cultural conditions that were bequeathed to them vis-a-vis their embedded theology. Exegetical materials used to support this doctrinal stance were extrapolated from Genesis as a hegemonic model of androcentric leadership, which is foundational to the tapestry to a hetero-patriarchal society. However, many of the younger members pushed back against these notions and vehemently disagreed with these social arrangements, citing scripture as their basis too. Our focus group held on Sunday, January 19th elucidated some of the vast theological differences and diverging socio-political beliefs in our community around sexuality, gender norms, and Black social ethics that will be further explored in this paper.

Methodology

This work is an ethnographic study in the field of Black practical theology that seeks to explore two particular textual issues around Pauline literature and gender (1 Corinthians 14:34) and Levitical Holiness codes (Leviticus 18:22) referent to sexuality and social ethics. The Levitical Holiness codes cover four areas "where holiness must be exemplified including: sexual behavior (18:1-30), social ethics (19:1-37), worship (20:1-8; 27), and family relations (20:9-26)."[8] We will examine a subsidiary of these codes, in chapter 18, given it is "one of the most systematic collections of laws in the Torah on the subject of incest and forbidden sexual unions. More than any other, it outlines which unions are permissible and which are forbidden."[9] Though Levitical language calls such homosexual and homoerotic practices an "abomination," it is only applicable to men carrying out this Canaanite practice with other men; nothing is said

[8] Kaiser Jr., "Leviticus." p. 611

[9] Ibid, p. 611

here about female lesbianism or fetishization. This phenomenon will be unpacked referent to Black social conservatism and the creation of a Black social ethic that demonizes aberrant sexual practices.

In *Black Practical Theology*, Andrews and Smith offer a methodological approach to ground black [liberation] theology, as a subsidiary of constructive theology, in the larger field of practical theology. They argue that Black practical theology is "the disciplined critical reflection between religious practices (both individual and ecclesial), theology, and human sciences seeking to study God's engagement or relationship with humanity, and to interpret and reinterpret ongoing and changing historical contexts of human life, human relationship, and human struggle."[10] The aforementioned definition is critical to understanding the praxiological elements of Black practical theology. However, it fails to deploy blackness and the ways that Black practical theology is either situated in a black historical context nor does it place as its primary subject black agents (e.g., Black churches, Black practitioners, and Black socio-political institutions). The operative assumption here is that it is extracted from a mélange of Black church, or Black religious, traditions, theologies, and typologies, but the prescriptive definition provided does not convey this as clearly. This is problematic given that Black practical theology cannot be divorced from the lived realities of Black people. While they attend to the particularities of Black exigencies, later, it can err on the side of theology being tangential and disjointed as opposed to operative. Conversely, the authors proffer that "practical theology focuses on human praxis as a point of departure and the mutual interlocutory relationship

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[10] Andrews & Smith, *Black Practical Theology*. p. 10

between practices and theory and their sources."[11] Here, Andrews and Smith help the reader to disentangle practical theology from applied theology to the degree that Black practical theology is fundamentally pragmatic and is subsumed within the contours of Black church praxis.[12]

To that end, they elucidate how praxiological formulation [response criticism][13] becomes vital to the development of Black practical theology investigating the ways in which "worldviews, faith practices, and ecclesial paradigms […] sustain a bridge to contemporary challenges of oppression, not to mention the complicit challenges of liberation."[14] Utilizing a tripartite paradigm is necessary for reconciling theory, theology, and practice of black theology with the challenges that arise from [black] human experiences. They later enumerate six categories that serve as the foci of Black practical theology as identified by Black theologians: 1). Black youth, intergenerational relations, and ageism; 2). education, class, and poverty; 3). gender, sexual orientation, and race; 4). globalism, immigration, and Diasporic communities; 5). health care, HIV/AIDS, and poverty; and 6). mass incarceration, capital punishment, and the justice system.[15] The confluence of Black theology and practical theology is necessary to the degree that scholar-practitioners can investigate and identify practices that are harmful or useful for our ministry contexts and theologize them in such a way that are helpful for the shaping of peoples' material realities.

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[11] Ibid, p. 4

[12] Ibid, p. 7

[13] See Louise Rosenblatt, *Literature as Exploration*, 1938.

[14] Ibid., p. 12

[15] Ibid., p. 14

Don S. Browning notes in *A Fundamental Practical Theology*, "the only way to understand a particular religious community's theology is to begin and end with an examination of its practices. […] He describes practical theological as a critical and constructive reflection on a religious community's praxis and lived experiences and rituals in its own context."[16] From this vantage point, practical theology is an analysis of a community's beliefs and consequential behaviors that legitimates one's theological disposition. Browning argues that we must reconfigure the way we do theology arguing it "should move from practice to theory back again." This project provides a comprehensive analysis of the ways the members of Beulah Baptist Church scripturalize and foist normative social behaviors, undergirding a larger social milieu and cultural ethos in Black communities. With this framing of practical theology, I utilize Andrew's notion of Black practical theology coupled with Don Browning's theological methodology to fashion a clear understanding of Black practical theology and its functionality. Brandon Crowley notes in *Queering Black Churches: Dismantling Heteronormativity in African American Congregations*:

> Black practical theology uses the tools of critical race theory, Black liberation theology, Black feminism, Womanism, and Black queer theory to subvert the systems of whiteness, racism, sexism, homophobia, transphobia, xenophobia, and othering. […] Black practical theology begins with the experiences of Black people, it theologizes on said experiences, and lastly, it must construct more intricately nuanced practical theologies are accessible and beneficial to Black religious folk and folk traditions.[17]

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[16] Crowley, *Queering Black Churches*. p. 21

[17] Ibid., p. 3-4

Black practical theology utilizes an interdisciplinary and intersectional structure to evaluate the efficacy of a religious community's theology and its practices. This study investigates the ways in which individuals read scripture, as a ritualistic religious practice, and make meaning of texts they deem to be authoritative in Black church and the larger heteronormative Black community. The impetus is not to change the way people think. Rather it is to teach people how to think critically and introduce individuals to the necessary tools that help them rethink biblical ethics as a means to create a more welcoming space where our core values are centered around justice, love, inclusion, and human dignity.

Hermeneutics - What Is It and Why Does This Matter?

How we read sacred texts matters because of the premeditated assumptions and perceivably unconscious biases we bring to any text as a 'pre-horizon of understanding.' A pre-horizon is the level of understanding about the passage we bring to it when we read and is reflective of our positionality, social location, and other critical interlocutors (i.e. race, gender, sexuality, age, etc.). Hermeneutics is also consequential to this work because of the vast historical atrocities that have been justified by weaponizing scriptures to subordinate groups of people. Inevitably, peoples' lives and materials realities have been, and will be, altered by the way we ingest, interpret, and institutionalize scripture and what [we] believe it says to be authoritative. Thus, it is necessary to prod deeper in the larger the discipline of hermeneutics and unpack certain concepts that will afford the reader the opportunity to aptly make meaning. Namely, this study will delve into Friedreich Schleiermacher's conception of romantic hermeneutics and Paul Ricouer's ideation of a hermeneutic of suspicion. Enlightening the congregation about these hermeneutical frameworks is critical for discourse to better understand

the scriptures at the epicenter of our query. Romantic hermeneutics is an attempt to repristinate, or reconstruct, the author's original intentions when composing said literature. Schleiermacher simply defined hermeneutics as "the art of avoiding misunderstandings."[18] The task of reading scripture is not done in a theological vacuum or with conscious objectivity. It is done with all of our experiences and epistemologies that have uniquely shaped and formed us. Gadamer argued that the art of interpreting is not reducible to pedagogical tactics given that exercise is inherently about "making intelligible what others have said in speech and text." [19] The purpose, then, is not to question the sanctity of these documents (i.e. LXX [Greek Septuagint], Tanakh [Torah, Nevi'im, Ketuvim], Peshitta, Latin Vulgate, Talmud, etc.) that are instrumental for religious socio-historiography and instructional for practical theology inasmuch as it is to responsibly deconstruct their etiology (or origin) and its historic meaning so that we can appropriately (de)contextualize them along with any gross misunderstandings and misapplications of certain passages that thwart human flourishing.

In this method of romantic hermeneutics, Schleiermacher further suggests "that the author can really be understood only by going back to the origin of the thought. […] It is ultimately a divinatory process, a placing of oneself within the whole framework of the author, an apprehension of the inner origin of the composition for, a re-creation of the creative act."[20] Gadamer purports that we juxtapose psychological interpretation with grammatical interpretation

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[18] Gadamer, *Truth and Method*. p. 191

[19] Ibid, p. 192

[20] Ibid, p. 192-193

to glean greater insights about textual composition.[21] These interpretive methods provide profound techniques and technologies that assist in deconstructing sometimes convoluted, esoteric passages. Some of the methods employed are literary criticism, form criticism, source criticism, textual criticism, and rhetorical criticism. Though list is extensive, it is not exhaustive and demonstrates the ways that scripturalizing must be methodically approached to responsibly interpret its complex content. The aforementioned tactics assist the reader to tease out what sociologists call hidden agendas and hidden curriculum meant to perpetuate and systemize hegemonic practices that are engineered to depreciate the quality of life for marginally disenfranchised people. Thus, imploring a romantic hermeneutic, inclusive of both grammatical and psychological tactics, is critical for the reader to properly exegete literary materials.

Paul Ricouer's method of reading with a hermeneutic of suspicion germinated from the quest to decode nebulous scriptures and unearth their hidden agendas in his 1975 essay, "Biblical Hermeneutics." In short, using this modality of interpreting allows the reader to question the authority, autonomy, and agency of the text contra posed to a hermeneutic of trust. This hermeneutical tradition is "an integral part of all appropriation of meaning. And it follows the deconstruction of prejudgements which impede our letting the world of the text be."[22] According to this tradition, our extrapolations of canonical and extra-canonical materials must not naïvely trust the content of certain texts without knowing its context. We must also ask foundational questions of the text about authorship, intended audience, and the *telos* (purpose) of the subject matter, especially when handling clobber texts, texts of terror, holiness or household codes.This

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[21] Ibid, p. 192

[22] Baumann, p. 65

forces us to wrestle with the possibility that the Bible may not be the word of God, but perhaps the words of God are in the Bible. This also helps the reader to avoid bibliolatry, which is the practice of idolizing and worshipping the Bible as an authoritative, (a)historical document.

While some individuals read scripture literally, other members read it literarily, meaning that they interpret text(s) not as universal truth, but as parables, allegories, myths, and metaphors meant to convey greater spiritual truths or deeper anthropological meaning to the shared human condition. Contrarily, some members ingest materials word for word and believe that the Bible is the 'word of God,' which we might denote as biblical literalism. Biblical literalism is reading the text as it is, literally and not literarily, which deviates vastly from fundamentalism. Fundamentalism is a largely Protestant idea that "affirmed the literal factuality of all biblical statements and rejected post-Enlightenment questioning of biblical infallibility."[23] The danger associated with reading biblical passages in this way is that we fail to investigate the historical, geo-political, social, theological, or philosophical backdrops in which these sacred canopies were comprised. To read with no appropriate contextualization is to misinterpret, at best, and grossly misapply a literal rendition that bastardizes the integrity and intentionality of the text, at worst.

To combat this ignominious practice, Esau McCaulley offers a Black ecclesial interpretative model that is counter cultural, counter narrative, and counter hegemonic to white, evangelical modalities of interpreting, analyzing, and utilizing sacred literature in *Reading While Black: African American Biblical Interpretation As An Exercise in Hope*. McCaulley posits, "I contend that a key element in this fight for hope in our community has been the practice of Bible reading and interpretation coming out of the Black church, what I am calling Black ecclesial

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[23] Harris, G-14

interpretation." [24] McCaulley attends to the dimensions of secular and spiritual life that converge to form a critical nexus of Black interpretation. Central to this hermeneutic is both Black nihilism and Black hope[25] – a matrix centered around the reality of being Black in America often characterized as despondency – and a faith that examines the marginality of the Black experience and dares to proleptically and prophetically envision a better reality for the self and others.[26] More pointedly, McCaulley argues, "what makes Black interpretation black [*sic*], then, are the collective experiences, customs, and habits of Black people in this country."[27] That is to say that a robust, meaningful Black hermeneutic is not just a repudiation of white religious nomenclatures – as that would place whiteness at the epicenter of Black theological discourse thereby rendering it disingenuous – but it is an affirmation of blackness in all of its various manifestations, forms, and substances. Moreover, this tradition also carefully curates "a canon within a canon"[28] for the purposes of Black emancipation and the negotiation of what constitutes particular texts as authoritative. McCaulley recounts the story renowned theologian Howard Thurman shared as told by his grandmother, who was formerly enslaved:

> "During the days of slavery," she said, "the master's minister would occasionally hold services for the slaves. Old man McGhee was so mean that he would not let a Negro minister preach to his slaves. Always the white minister used as his text something from Paul. At least three or four times a year he used as a text: 'Slaves, be obedient to them that are your masters ... as unto Christ.' Then he would

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[24] McCaulley, p. 4

[25] Ibid., p. 3

[26] See Charles Long. *Significations: Signs, Symbols, and Images in the Interpretation of Religion*. 1999

[27] Ibid., p. 20

[28] See *Katie's Canon: Womanism and the Soul of the Black Community*. 1998.

> go on to show how it was God's will that we were slaves and how, if we were good and happy slaves, God would bless us. I promised my maker that if I ever learned to read and if freedom ever came, I would not read that part of the Bible."[29]

McCaulley rightly identifies and crystallizes the problematic nature of certain passages that have been embattled against racial groups in North America, offering a colonial reading and perfunctory social ethic, steeped in the logic and entrapments of white supremacy that desecrated Black ontology. This Black ecclesial interpretive model not only helps to guide a responsible reading of texts that have been inherently racialized, but it also provides a blueprint for unpacking scriptures that aid in the process of "othering." McCaulley offers a legitimate model for doing Black biblical interpretation that is "unapologetically canonical and theological; socially located; and is dialogical with Black and white critiques of the Bible in hopes of achieving a better reading of the text."[30] This Black interpretive model cautions the reader against operating with a hermeneutic of trust and invites the reader to ask deeper questions beyond a conventional reading.

Perhaps there is no greater example of this "othering" is found outside of clobber texts and texts of terror. Clobber texts are passages that condemn non-heteronormative ways of being that are often quoted as the basis of moralistic theologies that demonize same sex practices. Texts of terror are passages that have exacted metaphysical violence against minorities, specifically women, and have feverishly been used to substantiate practices of misogyny, misogynoir, heterosexism, and patriarchy.[31] It is necessary to distinguish between the two because of their

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[29] Ibid., p. 19

[30] Ibid., p. 21

[31] See Phyllis Tribble, *Texts of Terror: Literary Feminist Readings of Biblical Narrative*.

form and functionality. Crowley contends, "Scriptural references and verses such as the Sodom and Gomorrah story in Genesis 19:1-38; the Levitical laws in Leviticus 18:22 and 20:13; and the indictments against cult prostitution in Romans 1:25-27 are all examples of clobber texts that Black heteronormative churches have used to marginalize Black Queer Christians…"[32] The Bible, as we have it, is a complicated composition that many interpreters have used to relegate non-heterosexual, non-male, and non-white individuals to the periphery of American society. Inasmuch as it is a (pseudo) historical corpus replete with invective passages, in many Black churches, the Bible is still largely thought to be authoritative. Crowley rightly notes:

> Most Black churches have remained wedded to pre-modern, nineteenth century white Evangelical, and post-Reformation beliefs in the exclusive authority, infallibility, clarity, self-sufficiency, internal consistency, and self evident meanings of the Bible. The Bible serves as the archetypal source of ethical and moral instruction for most Black Christians.[33]

Despite the ways mainline Black Protestant denominations have reckoned with biblical authority and issues surrounding Graeco-Roman and American slavocracy, it remains an instrument of moral instruction, theology, and religious practice.[34] As we unpack certain clobber texts and texts of terror, lingering questions remain about the authority of these passages. How should we interpret these? What did they mean and for whom were they written? Are we to live by these admonishments? Why do Black heteronormative churches "cherry-pick" which laws are authoritative while ignoring others as Crowley notes "people in Black churches generally do not

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[32] Crowley, p. 9-10

[33] Ibid., p. 38

[34] See "Southern Baptists Apologize for Slavery Stance." https://www.npr.org/2009/08/28/112329862/southern-baptists-apologize-for-slavery-stance [2009]

believe it is sinful to eat shrimp (Lev. 11:10) or pork (11:7) or to wear clothes with mixed fabric (19:19), even though the Levitical code forbids these actions along with same-sex affection."[35] By reading with a hermeneutic of suspicion, and upon necessary textual, literary, form, and rhetorical criticisms, new found truisms emerge from appropriate contextualization. Meaning greater clarity is gained about the passage's historical construction, intended target audience, and ethos of that culture and their religious laws. Furthermore, by utilizing a romantic hermeneutic, the reader is empowered to ask the questions what did this mean, as an enterprise of the psychology of religion, and what does this mean? The exegete should always seek to understand what the writer meant at the time of composition and to whom were they writing.

The next section explores origins of Black Christian heteronormativity and homophobia that has shaped our collective hermeneutic and (Black) ethic primarily with Kelly Brown Douglas' work *Sexuality and the Black Church* and Crowley's *Queering Black Churches*. Though this project is praxiological, it is informed by theo-ideological frameworks that enliven and embolden everyday ethical and ecclesial practices.

The Investigation: "Making It Make Sense"[36]

The mythic narrative of Blacks being hyper homophobic more so than the wider heterosexist community of which they are a part is a direct consequence of American slavocracy

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[35] Ibid., p. 39

[36] Some of the names in this report have been pseudonymized to protect the identities of members within the congregation of Beulah Baptist Church.

due to the (de)sexualization of Africans in the Antebellum South (1812-1861). Crowley contends,

> Black Queer persons and Black queerness predate African colonialism, the slave trade, the trans-Atlantic passage, and American chattel slavery. […] A thick theological description of the history of Black homophobia must begin with an investigation of Black enslavement, oppression, sexual trauma, and suffering. The institution of American chattel slavery is undoubtedly the original birthplace and progenitor of Black homophobia and heteronormativity.[37]

Kelly Brown Douglas explores this phenomenon further and calls in to the question Black biblical authority and its relationship to heteronormativity, homoeroticism, and homophobia in the Black church and Black community. Historically, scripture has been authoritative throughout Black religious nomenclatures primarily because of generational biblical illiteracy, wherein Africans did not have the distinct ability to read for themselves, and secondly because of the aura-oral tradition by which literary corpuses were passed down perennially. And yet, a consistent trope of homophobia and heteronormative social ethics has been engrained in Black communities and religious landscapes. Douglas attends to the particularities of this socio-theological quandary:

> Given the Bible's unclear view, to use the Bible to support a position on homosexuality would seem untenable. Yet scripture is often the cornerstone of homophobia in the Black community. Why is this the case? It is probably safe to say that homophobic prejudice has driven our reading of the Bible, as opposed to the Bible shaping homophobia.[38]

Here, Douglas highlights the way confirmation bias has been used to shape the contours of our hermeneutical experience, she is debunking the notion that homosexuality and homoeroticism

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[37] Ibid., p. 12-13

[38] Douglas, 999.

are explicitly repulsed by the historical Jesus in the Christian Testament — as this would be ahistorical — and she also illumines the fact that many of our Christian ethical commitments are based on Pauline literature, not the commandments Jesus gave the disciples to love radically and revolutionarily. Furthermore, Douglas elucidates the ways in which scriptures have been weaponized against persons identifying as queer, which also includes gender neutral, gender non-conforming, and non-binary individuals. Hetero-patriarchal norms have rendered other ways of being as non-traditional, and therefore morally impermissible. In the Black community, this variable is compounded by respectability politics, which is the notion that African Americans must comport themselves in a such a way as to acquiesce to whiteness to acquire domestic goods and cement their upward social mobility.[39] Homosexuality, in all of its manifestations, then, threatens to rupture the fabric of heteronormative, Black society which engenders respectability politics and Black social conservatism. By doing so, male centered, non-heterosexual acts (particularly for Black men) are an aberration from the norm, and thus result in further social stratification and theological malpractice.

It is my contention that while certain passages are deemed as authoritative, not all passages are equally constitutive for one's faith formation, moral compass, or social ethic within Black religious communities. Predicated upon our social ontology, [we] superimpose our malformed theological assumptions, reared and reified in the social imaginary and Black religious spheres, about social conventions on to the scriptures and allow those to influence our reading and understanding of the canon — specifically about gender and sexuality. Gottwald

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[39] See Evelyn B. Higginbotham on respectability politics in *Righteous Discontent: The Women's Movement in the Black Baptist Church, 1880-1920*. [1993]

argues, "how we construe the Bible is greatly affected by our experience and identity as interpreters. There appears to be a complex of factors at work in all of us as biblical interprets, no matter how different our conclusions."[40]

For example, one pseudonymized member of Beulah decided to leave the church and move their membership over a comment I made during a Word on Wednesday (Bible Study) series on the fruits of the spirit. In this study of Galatians 5:22-25, Paul pedagogically proscribed a prescriptive ecclesiology for contending with sexual immorality. In my teaching about the book of Galatians, I shared that Paul was not singularly referencing same gender sex, homoeroticism, or non-heterosexual relationships, but was addressing larger ethical issues that infringed upon the Galatian community. In their communique dated October 11, 2024, they stated:

> The bible calls homosexuality a sin and an abomination (Leviticus 18:22). If we believe the Bible is the Holy Writ and inspired by God, then we believe that this is true. The Old Testament is clear regarding homosexuality. The New Testament mentions it as well in the following scriptures. Jude 1:7; Romans 1:26-28; 1 Corinthians 6:9-10; 2 Timothy 1:8-11; and 1 Corinthians 7:2. […] The birthrate is declining because some men have stepped outside God's boundaries and have forgotten who they are and were created to be. Likewise, there are women who are trying to be men and refuse to marry or mate with a man and conceive children. Men have also brought HIV home to their wives and girlfriends as they stepped out of their relationships and God's boundaries. Now, there are commercials for HIV medicines that glorify this lifestyle with both genders. They must know the truth so as not to die in their sins and miss heaven. Playing around on earth and giving into all kinds of sexual desires is not worth spending an eternity in damnation. When you mention homosexuality, you almost seem to justify it. For differing in points of view, I can no longer be a member of Beulah, but I am still your sister in Christ.

This member's email is laden with theoretical and theological language extracted from an admixture of scriptures and social mores. Firstly, this individual engaged in the egregious

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[40] Gottwald, *Reading From This Place*, p. 257

practice of proof texting, which is the habitual tendency of arbitrarily selecting passages that, prima facie, seem to support one's theological belief or argument without the necessary contextualization. The danger with this practice is that it subverts and undermines the integrity of pericopes being wielded to uphold damaging beliefs and behaviors without doing the necessary unearthing to discover what that passage means and if it is corollary to others being used. It also uses scripture as a means to an end, which is often done to support our pre-existing matrix of theo-ethical beliefs. Stephen L. Harris notes in "Paul and the Pauline Tradition":

> Paul's controversial opinion about same sex love affairs, common in the Greco-Roman world, was probably determined by the prohibitions against them in Leviticus, but Paul's attempts to validate this Torah ordinance is based on his assumption about the history of religion. […] Twenty-first century historians and anthropologists find no evidence to support this Hellenistic Jewish hypothesis, on which Paul grounds his condemnation of same-sex attraction.[41]

Secondly, we observe the conflation of sex and gender and the preservation of cis-heteronormativity. The foundational difference between the two categories is that one's sex is biological while one's gender is sociological, meaning it is purely and discursively a social construct. Gender is largely predicated upon our sex assigned at birth. Just because an individual is assigned male or female at birth does not mean that they will choose to identify as cis gender (meaning their gender matches their sex assigned at birth) and perform it in such a way that fits into the myopic conceptions of masculine and feminine. Westernized conceptions of gender are often bifurcated and are built upon rigid views of how gender ought to function in tandem with sex. Their reference to effeminate behaviors of men also bespeaks the way they understand traditional gender roles to work in a Black, heterosexist culture. Thirdly, we observe the

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[41] Harris, "Paul and the Pauline Tradition," p. 346

correlation of their social belief with their religio-theological belief. It is their estimation that the conflation of gender roles, same-sex encounters, and any teachings that do not support heteronormativity are diametrically opposed to Biblical directives regarding sexual ethics. To this end, Crowley asserts, "Black Christian heteronormativity reinforces the categories of male and female as the only moral gender identities in God's design for humanity."[42] Perhaps this individual's recalcitrance is rooted in a Black social conservatism that affirms a rigid identity politic. Our theology shapes our social politics and practices and, vice versa, our social beliefs equally shape our theological principles. Crowley concludes,"Black ecclesial heteronormativity is influenced by the social practices of Black communities. These practices are situated within specific social realities of Blackness, which are often influenced by Black theology(ies)."[43] Without homogenizing, many Black churches generally purport homophobic theologies based on literal interpretations of the Bible. This can be damaging, as was revealed by one member during their formative childhood years, because of the ways it was wielded against their burgeoning identity as an adolescent. The traumatic experience of a nine (9) year old still haunts Adam and forces us to dig deeper into the Black church's refusal to embrace discourses around alternative ways of being. Kelly Brown Douglas poignantly raises the question, "Why does the mention of homosexuality often create acrimonious debate?"[44]

Congregational Results from Focus Group

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[42] Crowley, p. 9

[43] Ibid., p. 29

[44] Douglas, p. 997

On Sunday, January 19, 2025, a focus research group was held in the Executive Conference Room to dialogue about the aforementioned topics, while reading the Bible with head and heart, but primarily focusing on clobber texts and texts of terror found in the Hebrew Bible and Christian Testament, respectively. Participants were asked to offer their theological rumination about the presented texts (Leviticus 18:22, 1 Corinthians 14:34, and Ephesians 6:5). Members were also asked to examine a particular passage of scripture that has served as the bases of what Dr. Noel Erskine coined as "plantation theology,"[45] as well as the aforementioned clobber texts. Questions that guided our time together:

- What meaning (if any) do these passages have for you as a Christian (i.e. how do they shape your sense of what Christians believe and how they should act)?
- Do you believe these passages are literally true/that they should be taken literally? Why or why not? What does "literally" mean to you?
- How do we understand the idea of abomination? (God frowns on it, it is shameful, it is sin, abnormal, something terrible, a bad act, immoral, forbidden)
- How do you view cherrypicking when it comes to which texts are morally permissible or authoritative? Can certain passages be authoritative and others not?
- How do we make sense of our ethical practices and what the text actually says? [1 Corinthians 14:34, "Women should remain silence in the churches. They are not allowed to speak, but must be in submission, as the law says." (NIV)]
    - How do we make sense of this passage and our own history of having a woman serve as pastor?

Douglas postulates, "Even though contemporary Black people may have more access to the written Bible than did their enslaved forebears, they do not necessarily embrace all texts as

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[45] See Noel Erskine. *Plantation Church: How African American Religion Was Born in Caribbean Slavery*. Chattel slavery during the 17th and 18th centuries in North America is not analogous or congruent to slavery in the Graeco-Roman empire.

equally authoritative."[46] This is particularly true for members of the Millennial and Gen X generations within Beulah. They, without homogenizing, enthusiastically pushed back against sacred literature that is perceivably oppressive and that undermines the pluralities of the human experience, even if it does not directly affect their lived realities. For Baby Boomers, they tend to lean into the tenets of Black social conservatism, which is inextricably bound to respectability politics.

This focus group illuminated the ways in which different generations can read the same text, but have vastly different interpolations of the materials unpacked based on competing interlocutors. For the Baby Boomers, their reading is chronocentric, meaning that their post biblical identity and world view shapes their 'pre-understanding' of the text in such a way that it is difficult to disentangle the disjunctive pretenses between sociological mores and theological constructs. They cannot be divorced because, for this generation, social norms are inextricably bound to one's theology. Identifying as socially progressive does not automatically translate to being theologically progressive.

Pauline literature about the role of women in the household and temple life resonated differently with our Baby Boomers and Silent Generation members than it did for the Millennials and Gen Zers. The older women and men of the church had more conservative views whereas the younger generations (both men and women) had more progressive, liberal views on how we should broach scripture and enact it in the life of the parishioner and parish. The older members were quick to retort, leading Ronald Brown to inquire, "but didn't God create the man to lead the

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[46] Ibid., p. 1003

household and give dominion to him over her?" This led to further conversation about perforce gender roles and the subscription to such domineering ideas.

Congregational Responses to Holiness Codes:

- Laila Brown asked, "Who wrote it? Who was the audience? What was the intended purpose? What was the context and what were they talking about?"
    - Why does this get lifted up more than other holiness codes? Laila said, "Cherry picking and people making hateful rhetoric that's political but is also muddled with like what they cherry picked."
- Harold Baldwin, "I have a problem with this. It says man shall not lie with man as they do with a woman, but the Bible also says "you shall not commit adultery" and that's one of the ten (10) commandments.[47] Adultery is wrong too. So can we say that one is wrong and not the other? One is not bigger than the other."
    - "If you read [that] about abomination and someone is homophobic, then won't they read that as sin?"
- Asia Brown remarked: "it has to do with the ways in which we construct gender and sexuality in society and confirmation bias."

Congregational Responses to Pauline Literature:

- Marcus Cone, "I guess we have to ask the question context … when was this written?"
- Ronald Brown, "But during the time period, people were not accepting women."
    - Pam Cottrell, "But Christ [did] accepted women so…"
    - Winfred Hill, Caleb Cage, and Marvin Hill pushed back, "But the women went to the tomb and spread the word "He is risen! They funded the Jesus movement."
    - Asia Brown, "I think for me, while I was at Spelman, I was a Women's Studies Major, so though the concept of womanism is how I read this. I wonder about gender roles during this time period that would've made the author of this text have this idea about women's roles in church because gender is a social construct."
    - Chatiqua Ellison, "It's the way we were brought up! It's socialization - what you were taught at home is what you know first until you get older or go to school, but in the Black community, we are taught that God is He. Look at the imagery we see."
    - Ronald Brown asked, "But didn't God put man in front of the family to lead them?"
    - Pierce Nabors, "That's also western civilization when we look at God or Jesus [males] they would have us to believe that's how God is, but that couldn't be further from the truth."
- Pam Cottrell, "if male and female is delineated in the Bible, then how do we overlook gender?"
    - Laila Brown responded, "sex is biological. It's your biology. Sex isn't just male or female because it's people who are intersex. Then based off the sex you're assigned at birth, gender

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[47] See Exodus 20:14

is proscribed as woman and man but that's based on role and how you should show up in the world.

- Asia Brown responded, "because I'm born a female I'm taught that I should be a girl who becomes a woman."

Discourses around biblical hermeneutics and the construction of social ethics are fundamentally imbricated, meaning there is a particular way in which we read biblical literature and allow it to tactically shape the way we make meaning of what is ethical, moral, or normative. With that, I return to two critical questions that I posed at the beginning of the paper quintessential for biblical hermeneutics: what *did* this mean? And what *does* this mean? More importantly, I ask myself is this metaphorical or is this metaphysical? When reading scripture, we must question if an event or phenomenon happened in a way that can be adduced metaphysically (such as the resurrection) or is it meant to be metaphorical? Meaning is it meant to be mere allegory communicating a greater truth to the reader? This is not to equate biblical narratives to Aesop Fables, or elementary stories, because the Bible has a rich and complex history that must be unpacked and contextualized appropriately to aptly make meaning. And if we are to read passages literally, then what metrics might we rely on that help to evince the factitious nature of the claims presented, such as positivism, empiricism, rationalism, or other methodological approaches? I refer to David Kelsey's distinction between de facto and de jure biblical authority and the ways he distinguishes between what is and why certain passages are authoritative.

The Innovation

The innovative component of this project involves the creation of a Christian Education series that allows members to engage scholar-practitioners on clobber texts, holiness and household codes referent to sex and gender, and to facilitate a close reading of scripture with

hermeneutical tools that help guide their exegetical understanding and application as they deconstruct existing [Black] social ethics and reconstruct new ones. Ricouer called this practice deliberative theology, which is the process of deliberating over one's a priori, embedded theological presuppositions.

In efforts to deconstruct, decolonize, and decentralize Westernized, Eurocentric notions of sexual ethics and the ways Black hetero-patriarchy has been normalized in Black religious spheres, Beulah Baptist Church partnered with an organization called The Candler Foundry to foster better understandings of biblical (de) construction, canonical formation, meaning making, and applying biblical ethics to Black life (i.e. Black culture, Black faith, Black family structures, etc.). The Candler Foundry pairs local parishes with practitioners to teach on a host of hot topics as identified by the congregation as a site of theological exploration. The Foundry has worked with over 100 congregations in 18 countries and 15 denominations, engaging 5,000 people through their Courses in the Community program. The Candler Foundry is a diverse group of scholars, educators, and practitioners whose visional endeavor is to make public theology as accessible as possible. They aim to make theological education accessible to everyone - believers and seekers, Sunday School attendees and lay ministers, community organizers and non-profit leaders, regular church goers and those just curious about faith. Their objective is to develop congregational practices that enable individuals to better serve the church, advocate for justice, have meaningful conversations, and engage issues that matter to the world. The offerings are designed to be equal parts accessible and rigorous, providing wise, reliable, and relevant teaching

in formats that can be integrated into everyday life and faith.[48] Beulah is one of the 2025 participants and is exploring womanist theologies of the body and sexual ethics with Dr. Nicole Symmonds to foster a more inclusive community and facilitate responsible readings of biblical texts from a womanist lens.

The creation of our podcast called "Courageous Conversations" was developed as a means to digitize our efforts and utilize social media, namely YouTube, Instagram, and Facebook as a technology of transformation and marketing. Courageous Conversations focuses on hot topics in mainline Protestantism and in Black American culture. Topics range from sexual and social ethics to biblical construction to political theology in the age of Trump to womanist and Black liberation theologies. Parsing passages that are often used to support oppressive religious machinations, teasing out the historical facticity, sifting through ethical modalities, and applying theo-ethical options to Black life is at the epicenter of the project. This idea emanated from our focus group as a way to sustain public discourses on how to read the Bible responsibly, how to create welcoming theologies that affirms all identities and expressions, and how to enliven our Christian Education curriculum for modern, relevant 21st century ministry. Ninety five percent (96%) of gathered participants agreed to be apart of further dialogue about the subject matter in question and desire to have further discourse about the ways we make meaning of sacred literature and enflesh it as normative and authoritative. By digitizing our efforts, and opening it for public consumption, our hope is that we invite more people to be a part of the conversation who are not members of Beulah. The engineering idea is to get people to think differently about

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[48] https://candlerfoundry.emory.edu/foundry-story

the way we read the Bible, specifically clobber texts and texts of terror, to redefine and reconfigure our deontological (duty) ethic in Black ecclesial communities.

The Implementation

"Hidden Figures: Celebrating Women in the Word," was adopted as a part of our Christian Education curriculum for Women's History Month (2024) and featured Black women clerics to excavate the narratives of women in biblical literature. Undergirding this series was a womanist framework that sought to amplify the voices of marginalized women. Dr. Wilda C. Gafney argues in her seminal text, *Womanist Midrash: A Reintroduction to Women of the Throne and Torah,* that womanist midrash utilizes "a set of interpretive practices, including translation, exegesis, and biblical interpretation that attends to marginalized characters in biblical narratives, especially women and girls, intentionally including and centering on non-Israelite peoples and enslaved peoples."[49] Womanist midrash aims to centralize the narratives, names, and nomenclature of non-European and non-Israelite women who exist at the periphery of sacred literature as a consequence of patriarchal schematics and westernized scholarship that eclipse the contributions of women of color to the canon. It is a particular way of reading the text with a commitment to asking the foundational questions who is this text written for and how does it provide them with a sense of agency and ontological belonging? Gafney posits that utilizing a womanist hermeneutic allows for a reading of biblical literature that legitimates their lived experiences, social location, and historic realities as a source and norm for doing and operationalizing theology. In examining the contours of Judeo-Christian passages, Gafney underscores the importance of the womanist tradition writing, "no matter how misognyistic, how

[49] Gafney 3.

heavily redacted, how death dealing, how troubled, troubling, or troublesome the text, womanists who teach and preach in the black church do not throw the whole androcentric text with its patriarchal and kyriachal lowlights out …"[50] The womanist tradition prods at the interpretations of scripture that are authoritative for non-male, non-heterosexual individuals made by persons who do not reflect their self interests or the interests of their body politic. To this end, Gafney's disempowerment of traditionalism, usage of a hermeneutic of suspicion to question the text, and the way she creates space for a radical egalitarianism that affirms Black women bereft of feminism is crucial for our collective reading.

Presenters for this series were Rev. Dr. Gabby Cudjoe Wilkes (Co-Pastor of Double Love Church; Brooklyn, NY); Rev. Dr. Kaiya Jennings (Associate Pastor, First Baptist Church Mahan; Suffolk, VA); and Rev. Janiece Williams (Ph.D. Candidate, Vanderbilt University; Associate Pastor, Watson Grove Baptist Church; Nashville, TN).

Dr. Wilkes' exploration into Hagar's narrative effectively addressed a myriad of subjects that helped parishioners to make sense of the ways women's stories in the Bible have been told from a male, androcentric gaze. In her talk, "Hidden Figures, Hidden Stories, and Hidden Truths,"[51] she effectively disrupted the meta-ethics of story telling that have traditionally focused on Sarai and not Hagar. Through her liberating and inclusive reading on Hagar's story, she encouraged members to read this story with a hermeneutic of suspicion. Dr. Wilkes noted that reading with a hermeneutic of suspicion is critical for the engagement of biblical texts,

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[50] Gafney, Wilda. *Womanist Midrash*, p. 8

[51] Dr. Gabby Cudjoe Wilkes, "Hidden Figures, Hidden Stories, and Hidden Truths." Presented on Wednesday, March 6, 2024 at Beulah Baptist Church via Facebook and YouTube Live. https://www.facebook.com/beulahatl/videos/869119578546273

specifically where women of color are viewed as sites of sensual, erotic pleasure, and presented three compelling points generative for congregational discourse: a). ask more questions; b). if God was saying to Abraham and Sarai, what was God saying to Hagar?; and c). If we are to truly honor Black women's stories, we've got to be suspicious of any telling of stories that does not amplify our voices. Utilizing a womanist framing to give shape to these public conversations helps us to remain committed to championing equitable readings and renderings of texts that are under scrutiny and investigation. *Womanist Sass* presents a hermeneutic of suspicion as a normative practice as it "dialogues between readings of the biblical text and talk-back derived from the black [*sic*] community, including the talkback of Maya Angelou, Audre Lorde, bell hooks, Frantz Fanon, and Ta-Nehisi Coates."[52] Wilkes effectively helped us to 'talk back to the text' by asking questions implicit in Hagar's narrative that non-Black women may not be postured to ask because of their social location or body politic. By talking back to the text in a womanist way, it allowed for the reader and congregants to gain greater insight about the hidden figure in this narrative. Mitzi Smith rightly notes that "Biblical interpretation or scholarship is primarily concerned with the world behind the text (the historical) and/or the world the text constructs (the literary) and only marginally addresses the world in front of the text or contemporary (con)texts." [53] Dr. Wilkes helped us to address the world in front of us, particularly Black women, to read this story using a womanist framework to reorient the way we read and tell stories as marginal subjects whose names and narratives are oft eviscerated.

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[52] Ibid., p. 29

[53] Smith, Mitzi. *Womanist Sass*. p. 2

In March 2025, Beulah Baptist Church partnered with The Candler Foundry at Emory University Candler School of Theology to offer a 3 week intensive called "Reclaiming the Body: A Womanist Theology of Belonging, Inclusion, and Grace," with Dr. Nicole Symmonds, Assistant Professor of Christian Ethics at Columbia Theological Seminary. This three week course explored "the sacredness of the Black body through a womanist theological lens." Beginning with the Imago Dei in Genesis, we covered a diversity of subjects from theological anthropology to respectability politics to Africana embodiment practices, thereby fostering a more inclusive environ of radical inclusivity. The objective was "to explore the Bible, ethical ideas, and theologies that celebrated spiritual liberation and resilience." Members Pam Cottrell, Veronica Cox, Cynthia Jewell, and Dr. Myrtice Taylor were congregational respondents to her virtual presentations via our streaming platforms.

In her March 12th presentation entitled, "The Sacred Body: Imago Dei and Divine Revelation of the Black Body," she centered M. Shawn Copeland's work, *Enfleshing Freedom: Body, Race and Being* as we explored notions of the Imago Dei, as a theological construct, and the subsequent corporeal, material realities for Black women. She also unpacked theological anthropology and the onto-metaphysical implications of the ways the Black body has been historically (mis)gendered and inherently racialized in America. She used Genesis 1 as an anchoring text to ground the discussion about embodiment and related practices in biblical literature. Respondents had the opportunity to engage and ask the following questions:

The term "womanist" is derived from "womanish," which often (for women of a certain age) was not a term of endearment, how do we reconcile and accept womanism as part of our healing and growth as Christian women? If body and flesh are not the same, how do they differ?

What about spirit? For more than 400 years, black women have been the “mules of the Earth” serving at the pleasure of slave masters, working our fingers to the bones, and serving in Churches that mandate that we look a certain way, worshipped a certain way, how do we “reclaim” time to discover and create sacred (physical and spiritual) spaces?

Dr. Symmond's reading of Copeland afforded members the opportunity to wrestle with body politics, intersectionality, and introduced them to the historical development of womanist theology and how it fundamentally differs from first and second wave feminism. She noted, “womanist theology expands the notion of Imago Dei to embrace the experiences of marginalized bodies, enriching our understanding of humanity. [It] emphasizes the body as sacred, reclaiming it as a source of empowerment and identity for Black women. This theology promotes a holistic perspective that honors both individual identity and the significance of community in shaping our humanity.”

In her March 19th presentation,“Somewhere Between Michelle to Meg: Considering the Politics of Respectability and Liberative Embodiment,” she helped members of the congregation methodically unpack and wrestle with the ways Black women’s bodies have been policed — as a consequence of chattel slavery — and how this phenomenon has been perpetuated through Black religious and social practices. Centering Evenlyn Higginbotham’s groundbreaking text, *Righteous Discontent: The Women’s Movement in the Black Baptist Church, 1880 - 1920,* she delved into the hyperpolicing and hyper sexualizing of Black women’s bodies and the ways respectability politics has uniquely shaped the Black church to reflect the larger macro culture in which it is situated as a mechanism of survival, right religious action, and tool of upward social

mobility. She also used Johannine literature, as a corollary, examining Jesus' encounter with the woman caught in adultery and her accusers. Womanist ways of reading this text begs particular questions about sexuality, body politics, erotic pleasure, and patriarchal privilege that granted male bodied individuals immunity but was punitive for women in Biblical antiquity. To upend this practice, she provided three (3) measurable steps to disrupt patriarchal policing and respectability in Black churches, which included embodying sexual discourses of resistance, enfleshing a politic of deviance, and practicing erotic defiance as demonstrated in Alice Walker's, *The Color Purple*. She discursively blurred the lines between Amber Rose and Michelle Obama — as a cultural meme pit them against each other as examples of licentious and respectable women — noting that Black women's bodies cannot be reducible to affirmation of the male gaze. In using a womanist hermeneutic, she demonstrated the reclamation of the body by repudiating oppressive and colonizing theologies about women's bodies and explored dismantled the ways patriarchy and Black social conservatism warped our theologies of the body and reinscribed respectability politics.

Respondents had the opportunity to engage and ask the following questions: How can we guide the Black church toward a more inclusive and welcoming environment that embraces people from diverse backgrounds (LGBTQ) while honoring its traditions and values? What steps can be taken to challenge outdated norms (i.e. the way we dress and carry ourselves) without undermining the church's spiritual foundation? While we have made progress in allowing women in the pulpit within the Black church, and are grateful for Rev. Rice's support, resistance still exists in some congregations. How can women be seen, heard, and respected in these spaces without being unfairly characterized as angry?

This series challenged congregants to rethink and redefine their most foundational concepts of theology, ethical behavior, and ways of being and being seen in the world. It provided them with the necessary processes, rhetoric, frameworks, concepts, tools to read the Bible seriously and suspiciously, with head and hear. This series empowered members of the congregation to wrestle with the complexities of scripture and human identities, thereby forging necessary conversations and new pathways forward that allows for a more inclusive and embracing community. It centered Black women, serving as scholar practitioners in their respective contexts, modeling the technologies taught as they effectively unpacked the scriptures with a womanist hermeneutic that calls for a particular theo-ethic of inclusion, ways of being, and meaning making.

This project has provided an in depth analysis of existing social ethics within Beulah Baptist Church, which is also emblematic of Black Protestant traditions in which the Baptist church is historically situated, and how we ought to interpret and use sacred texts. Using womanist frameworks to assist members in reading and interpreting scripture is foundational to the hermeneutical process and formational in the life of the religious adherent. Reading with this lens allows for readers to exegete materials with historical, social, political, philosophical, and theological integrity while talking back to the sacred text in a dialogical way. Womanism centers one's experiences as a legitimate source of doing theology and grants the reader the agency to use their sanctified imaginations where the erasure of women's narratives exists; investigate the interiority of clobber and terror texts; and rethink the scope and breadth of holiness and household codes that have marginally disenfranchised aggregations of people historically and contemporarily. Moreover, this project has afforded members of Beulah Baptist Church to

engage with Black women scholar-practitioners and recalibrate their own theologies and social ethics referent to the body, respectability politics, erotic defiance and sexual deviance, Black social conservatism, and cogitate on ways to become a more inclusive community while reading the Bible responsibly.

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