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RHETORICAL LEADERSHIP IN ORGANIZATIONAL CONFLICT AND
CHANGE: CASE STUDIES OF ANTIRACIST PREACHING

by

Steven Tramel Gaines

A Dissertation

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the

Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

Communication

The University of Memphis

May 2020

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En memoria de mi padre,
maestro extraordinario,
erudito eterno,
hombre de Dios.

Acknowledgements

Countless educators, family members, colleagues, classmates, and friends have contributed to my academic and professional adventure. Although I cannot name all of them here, I would like to specify a few.

I express gratitude to the Department of Communication and Film at the University of Memphis for giving me teaching experience, supporting my travel to present research at conferences, and funding my degree until I transitioned to a full-time faculty position. I thank my doctoral advisory committee for repeatedly and patiently pushing me to grow as a scholar. That team consisted of Andre E. Johnson, Dave L. Bland, Christina Moss, and Gray Matthews, as well as Sandra J. Sarkela who served on the committee until her retirement. I also gratefully acknowledge Antonio de Velasco for sharing with me his expertise of the doctoral process and providing research guidance, Lori Stallings and Craig Stewart for pushing me to improve as an instructor, and Katherine Hendrix and Amanda Nell Edgar for ongoing encouragement, as well as Camisha Smith, Delilah Bryant, Dionne Ballinger, and Sonya Mills for measureless assistance. In addition to the professors already named, Brad McAdon, Susan O'Donovan, and Wanda Rushing gently guided my feeble attempts to become a scholar. I also express deep thanks to Michael and Suzanne Osborn who partially financed my degree through the Michael and Suzanne Osborn Fellowship for the Study of Rhetoric and Public Address.

Beyond my professors, those who read and gave helpful feedback on my pre-dissertation scholarship include Ronald C. Arnett, Kyle Christensen, Tamara Gaines, Marshalla Hutson, Kimberly P. Johnson, Melody Lehn, Mark E. Powell, and anonymous reviewers.

My professors in communication, rhetoric, and homiletics courses prior to my University of Memphis enrollment include Dave Bland, Angela Brenton, Joe Cardot, Carley Dodd, George Filpansick, Randy Harris, Young Kim, Eric Kramer, Paul Lakey, Michael Pfau, Jack Reese, Clemencia Rodriguez, Cindy Roper, and Debbie Williams. I am grateful for all of them, as well as my professors in other disciplines.

For exceptional research assistance, I express thanks to librarians Sheila Owen and Bob Turner of Harding School of Theology and Carisse Berryhill and Mac Ice of Abilene Christian University.

My gratitude also goes to Midland College for conference travel funds through the Dalious Professional Development Award.

With enriching collaboration and challenging but nurturing conversations, ministerial colleagues supported my doctoral research and refined my thinking. I thank all of them, especially Matt Carter, Earle Fisher, Barry Fowler, Thomas Fuerst, Beth Lefever, Shaun Payne, Dianna Watkins-Dickerson, and Rusty Woods.

Also, I would not have survived dark depths without friends such as Matt and Ted—thanks!

Furthermore, my gratitude goes to Cordova Community Church in Memphis, Tennessee, and First Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) in Colorado City, Texas, and Snyder, Texas, for allowing me to practice what I study.

I thank Tamara and our child Caleb for loving me and enduring more than their fair shares of my stress and distress, my mother whose example taught me to appreciate cultures and faith and whose love is tireless, and my brothers who likely will laugh if they hear students call me Dr. Gaines. I dedicate this dissertation to the memory of my father Larry L. Gaines (1943-2019) whom I thank for loving me, believing in me, and demonstrating wise leadership.

Finally, I express gratitude to and for the great mystery.

Abstract

This study investigates how leaders call for change while also caring for their organizations. The theoretical framework comes from the interdisciplinary study of a type of religious communication called prophetic rhetoric and developed by scholars of communication, English, and homiletics. That framework is used here in the analyses of speeches and public letters by leaders who challenge ideologies and practices shaped by and contributing to racial injustice. More specifically, this dissertation studies how audiences' white fragility leads to constrained prophetic rhetoric that is a communication strategy inviting change without destroying organizations or being expelled from them. From analyses of such rhetoric in religious contexts, this study produces a model of pastoral rhetoric that combines nurture and challenge and can apply to leadership in other types of organizations.

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CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

Recent scholarship has explored inter-systemic prophetic rhetoric in which calls for change come from outside the targeted systems. A noted example is Martin Luther King Jr.'s challenge of his nation's government. Although he was a member of the nation, he was not an official in the government he invited to change. This project, however, considers intra-systemic prophetic rhetoric in which calls for change come from leaders of the targeted systems.

Intra-systemic prophetic rhetoric is different from inter-systemic prophetic rhetoric. When leaders of organizations invite change in their systems, they tend to communicate differently than do change leaders who challenge systems that are not their own. This dissertation explores how competing desires to call for change and to nurture groups combine in intra-systemic rhetoric in organizational leadership. The guiding question in this research is how such intra-systemic rhetoric differs from the "directness and firmness" exemplified by King, who challenged his nation's government but did not have leadership responsibilities in that organization.¹

That intra-systemic combination of competing goals occurs in rhetorical leadership of organizational conflict and change in various contexts, including businesses, hospitals, universities, neighborhoods, and more. Building on works by David Zarefsky, Stephen Skowronek, and Edwin Hargrove, Catherin L. Riley writes that rhetorical leadership is "the ability to shape a community by defining and reinterpreting

¹ Andre E. Johnson and Anthony J. Stone Jr., "'The Most Dangerous Negro in America': Rhetoric, Race and the Prophetic Pessimism of Martin Luther King Jr.," *Journal of Communication and Religion* 41:1 (2018): 8.

meanings,” making “room for their new visions and goals” through the control of historical understanding and the replacement of “old frames of reference” to offer fresh perceptions of values and beliefs.² In this dissertation, I assume that the controlling and shaping in rhetorical leadership are more invitational than coercive or persuasive.

Furthermore, drawing from Frederick Douglass’s commemoration of Abraham Lincoln, Kirk H. Wilson mentions principles of presidential leadership. At least two of those principles may apply to rhetorical leadership in churches and other organizations: “Leadership for one . . . community is not necessarily leadership for all communities” and “is not leadership in the same way for other communities.”³ These principles lead to an observation and an assumption for this study. The observation is that each sermon and letter analyzed here operates as rhetorical leadership in a specific community (i.e. a local congregation or a network of congregations) and not for the United States of America, its government, or any other organization other than that in which the letter or sermon functions; and the assumption is that rhetorical leadership strategies vary in diverse situations.

Because of my leadership experience in the Churches of Christ, I have chosen to narrow the scope of this study to rhetoric in that branch of the Stone-Campbell

² Catherine L. Riley, “Rhetorical Leadership and the Black Church: Revisiting 1940s’ Durham,” *Howard Journal of Communications* 27:4 (2016): 298; David Zarefsky, “Lincoln’s 1862 Annual Message: A Paradigm of Rhetorical Leadership,” *Rhetoric and Public Affairs* 3:1 (2000): 5-14; Stephen Skowronek, *The Politics Presidents Make* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993); Edwin C. Hargrove, *The President as Leader: Appealing to the Better Angels of Our Nature* (Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, 1998).

³ Kirk H. Wilson, “The Paradox of Lincoln’s Rhetorical Leadership,” *Rhetoric and Public Affairs* 3:1 (2000): 16.

Movement, one of the oldest Christian traditions birthed in the United States of America.⁴ Because of my interest in race relations in the Churches of Christ, I further focus this study on antiracist preaching that has combined the previously mentioned competing goals in change leadership related to a subject of substantial social conflict. Recent publications⁵ have addressed race relations in the Churches of Christ through perspectives of history, theology, and biblical studies; and my research engages the discussion through rhetorical analysis.

I write this dissertation for multiple audiences. If my effort here is effective, it will provide an opportunity for scholars of rhetoric, religious communication, and preaching to think anew about the leadership of organizational change and conflict. Furthermore, I hope that my work here may empower practitioners of religious rhetoric in church leadership and practitioners of organizational leadership in multiple contexts to consider their navigation of competing goals in rhetorical leadership in times of conflict and change.

Resistance frequently challenges organizational change.⁶ One form of resistance in organizational change related to race is white fragility. White fragility constrains prophetic rhetoric in white Christianity's antiracist preaching. Prophetic rhetoric, a topic of recent study in religious communication, calls for change based on deeply shared

⁴ I now serve in the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) and the Churches of Christ, two of the Stone-Campbell Movement's three major branches.

⁵ Tanya Smith Brice, ed., *Reconciliation Reconsidered: Advancing the National Conversation on Race in Churches of Christ* (Abilene, TX: Abilene Christian University Press, 2016); Gary Holloway and John York, eds., *Unfinished Reconciliation: Justice, Racism, and Churches of Christ* (Abilene, TX: Abilene Christian University Press, 2003).

⁶ Marit Christensen, "Communication as a Strategic Tool in Change Processes," *International Journal of Business Communication* 51:4 (2014): 360.

foundations. White fragility, the subject of only a few articles in communication research, is white people's inability or unwillingness to endure discomfort in communication about race.⁷ Many definitions⁸ have been attributed to the word "preaching," and this dissertation uses the term to refer to communication that (1) is by, in, and for a religious community and (2) is anchored in that community's sacred text(s). This definition is broad enough to apply to the two public letters in Chapter Four—documents in which a newspaper becomes a "pulpitized" space.⁹ Preaching that is prophetic invites change,¹⁰ either systemic change in the religious community or participation in broader systemic change in the society.

The claim that white fragility blunts prophetic rhetoric can give the study of prophetic rhetoric, as well as the study and practice of preaching, a step toward acknowledging the need for leaders of white (and predominately white) Christianity, who care enough to practice rhetorical (and pastoral) sensitivity to nurture faith communities, to consider audience's white fragility. This dissertation considers constrained prophetic preaching in the Churches of Christ and from those case studies draws implications about larger Christianity and for rhetoric scholarship beyond religious communication. White fragility's constraining of prophetic rhetoric also may be found in leadership, conflict, and change in other religions and organizations in which audience care is necessary.

⁷ Robin DiAngelo, "White Fragility," *International Journal of Critical Pedagogy* 3 (2011): 54.

⁸ Steven Tramel Gaines, "Redefining Preaching: A Beginning," *Res Rhetorica* 4:3 (2017): 31-45.

⁹ House, Christopher A. "Crying for Justice: The #BLACKLIVESMATTER Religious Rhetoric of Bishop T.D. Jakes." *Southern Communication Journal* 83:1 (2018): 18.

¹⁰ Steven Tramel Gaines, "Daring to Prophecy: A Challenge to Patriarchy," *Journal of Communication and Religion* 41:4 (2018): 52-66.

This study of rhetorical leadership in white communities, leadership in which speakers and writers consider audiences' white fragility, is a risky endeavor. Responding to an essay by Robert Ivie, Lisa Corrigan states that "good [rhetorical] criticism should involve *risk* to be judged as successful and productive" and that "rhetorical scholars should think deeply about what contemporary criticism *risks*."¹¹ This study acknowledges white fragility but does not overtly contribute to its eradication, risking resistance from rhetoric scholars such as Corrigan. Although I hope that research such as this that deals with white fragility may increase white people's awareness of white fragility and may indirectly contribute to its shrinking, my scholarly objective in this dissertation is to increase understanding of rhetorical leadership dynamics in intra-systemic calls for change, especially those related to race. The study also risks resistance from white communities' leaders and other members who may automatically react negatively to any mention of white fragility, a phrase that can prompt white readers to think immediately of KKK-style supremacy.

I accept these risks because, although scholars need a better understanding of white fragility's function in organizational leadership, a search for that topic in the Communication and Mass Media Complete database finds nothing. Another reason I accept these risks is that practitioners of religious and organizational communication need intelligent reflection on how audiences' white fragility shapes rhetorical leadership. I hope that scholars who dislike—and those who prefer to ignore—white fragility will endure whatever discomfort they experience in reading this dissertation and will fully

¹¹ Lisa M. Corrigan, "On Rhetorical Criticism, Performativity, and White Fragility," *Review of Communication* 16:1 (2016): 87; Robert L. Ivie, "Scrutinizing Performances of Rhetorical Criticism," *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 80:3 (1994): 2.

consider its claim that white fragility is a reality with which leaders of predominately white communities must wrestle when speaking and writing against racism. In addition to that academic ambition, I hope my research will fuel related discussions in predominately white congregations, denominations, and perhaps other organizations and communities.

In this dissertation, I analyze sermons in which preachers countered (i.e., spoke against) racism in response to racial turmoil in the larger U.S.A. society in 1968, in the aftermath of Martin Luther King Jr.'s assassination. Then I study public letters written by church leaders in response to continued social turmoil related to race in 2016, in the aftermath of the Charleston church shooting and the controversial deaths of Sandra Bland and Freddie Gray. Considering such religious communication in 1968 and 2016, I wonder about the audience's white fragility's ongoing influence on prophetic rhetoric in organizational leadership in times of racial conflict. I also wonder if earlier challenges to racism shape later ones. I choose sermons and letters from leaders in the Churches of Christ not because the speakers, writers, sermons, or letters are significant in themselves (although they may be vital for their communities) but because they represent an experience significant to scholars interested in religious communication, religious rhetoric, rhetorical leadership, and public address in general, especially that which highlights racial conflict. The experience which these sermons and letters represent is that of leaders in predominately white communities who navigate the difficult combination of challenge and nurture to lead organizations in recognizing, admitting, and responding to their participation in and contribution to systemic racism.

To better understand that experience, I draw primarily both from literature about prophetic rhetoric and from homiletics, the interdisciplinary study of preaching.

Homiletics combines rhetoric and theology as well as history, philosophy, psychology, and other disciplines. Although recent homiletics has preferred theology and philosophy in prescriptively discussing what preaching should be and how it should be done, here I prefer interpretive rhetorical criticism, a descriptive approach in which I put sermons and public letters “under the microscope” and write about what I find. I outlined that approach in a recent journal article.¹²

Rhetorical Criticism

Rhetorical criticism methodologies seem as numerous as definitions of rhetoric.¹³ Two major methods of rhetorical criticism are etic and emic. Etic criticism deals “with generalized statements about rhetoric that are derived from well-defined methodological procedures,” and emic criticism “is completely situated within one rhetorical situation as it is contextualized in culture and history; thus the observations or patterns described can . . . be valid [only] in relation to that one particular setting and cannot be described by a generalized theory that is imposed on a particular rhetorical situation.”¹⁴ According to Michael Leff, emic criticism demands more of a critic than the etic approach does; emic critics “must have a thorough knowledge gained . . . through intensive analysis of specific critical studies. And they must also have a detailed, intimate, and sympathetic understanding of the subject under investigation.”¹⁵ My dissertation will combine etic and

¹² Gaines, “Redefining Preaching.”

¹³ Jennifer deWinter, “A Bibliographic Synthesis of Rhetorical Criticism,” *Rhetoric Review* 25.4 (2006): 389.

¹⁴ deWinter, 392.

¹⁵ Michael C. Leff, “Interpretation and the Art of the Rhetorical Critic,” *Western Journal of Speech Communication* 44:4 (1980): 349.

emic criticism and will be more emic than etic. The study will carefully investigate specific rhetorical events within a singular network of religious communities and will suggest implications for scholars and practitioners of rhetorical leadership beyond preaching and church leadership.

Two critical developments in the history of rhetorical criticism pertain to context and longitudinal criticism. Michael Calvin McGee writes, “Discourse ceases to be what it is whenever parts of it are taken ‘out of context,’” and context is not as simple of Bitzer’s rhetorical situation.¹⁶ Every piece of that situation is fragmented, and its “multifaceted nature” pushes “the thorough critic to examine a great many potentialities.”¹⁷ Acknowledging context, especially historical context, reveals rhetoric “as a perpetual and dynamic process of social construction, maintenance, and change rather than as an isolated, static product.”¹⁸ Longitudinal criticism enlarges the potential of rhetorical study, which traditionally “focused on a close reading of an isolated text or a specific rhetorical situation.”¹⁹ The longitudinal approach to rhetorical criticism fosters consideration of contexts as developed over time instead of static at the time of a specific rhetorical event, and longitudinal study of rhetoric respects not only “the art of the

¹⁶ Michael Calvin McGee, “Text, Context, and the Fragmentation of Contemporary Culture,” *Western Journal of Speech Communication* 54:3 (1990): 283; Lloyd F. Bitzer, “The Rhetorical Situation,” *Philosophy and Rhetoric* 1:1 (1968): 1-14.

¹⁷ Craig R. Smith and Scott Lybarger, “Bitzer’s Model Reconstructed,” *Communication Quarterly* 44:2 (1996): 205.

¹⁸ Kathleen J. Turner, “Introduction: Rhetorical History as Social Construction: The Challenge and the Promise,” in *Doing Rhetorical History*, ed. Kathleen J. Turner (Tuscaloosa, AL: University of Alabama Press, 1998), 4.

¹⁹ deWinter, 395.

speaker” but also “the interpretive traditions of the audience or audiences.”²⁰ This approach allows for a recognition of diverse meanings and includes “a close analysis of both the primary text and the texts that are produced in response to it.”²¹ A thorough longitudinal study of antiracist preaching in the Churches of Christ would be too much for a dissertation, so I plan to study seven events—a sermon in a congregation, four radio addresses, and two public letters—in the eras of the Civil Rights Movement and the Black Lives Matter Movement. Again, the significance of these lies not primarily in themselves but in the heuristic value of their analysis to enhance understanding of competing goals of challenge and nurture in rhetorical leadership.

Although rhetorical criticism methods are numerous, they allow critics to do their jobs. One aspect of their jobs is to find consequence: “The study of rhetoric considers talk and mediated discourse (including photographs, advertisements, musical compositions, paintings, situation comedies, films, novels, and so on) to be *consequential*, to have an effect in the world.”²² This study is consequential in the ongoing discussion of racism in homiletics and the Churches of Christ.²³ Wayne Brockriede claims that “useful criticism .

²⁰ John Angus Campbell, “Between the Fragment and the Icon: Prospect for a Rhetorical House of the Middle Way,” *Western Journal of Speech Communication* 54:3 (1990): 369; c.f. David Zarefsky, “Four Senses of Rhetorical History,” in Turner, 19-32.

²¹ Leah Ceccarelli, “Polysemy: Multiple Meanings in Rhetorical Criticism,” *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 84:4 (1998): 407.

²² William L. Nothstine, Carole Blair, and Gary A. Copeland, “Invention in Media and Rhetorical Criticism: A General Orientation,” in *Critical Questions: Invention, Creativity, and the Criticism of Discourse and Media*, ed. William L. Nothstine, Carole Blair, and Gary A. Copeland (New York, NY: St. Martin’s Press, 1994), 3.

²³ Hesel; Tanya Smith Brice, ed., *Reconciliation Reconsidered: Advancing the National Conversation on Race in Churches of Christ* (Abilene, TX: Abilene Christian University Press, 2016); Holloway and York.

. . . must function as an argument.”²⁴ The main argument of this dissertation is that white fragility constrains prophetic rhetoric in antiracist preaching as rhetorical leadership of organizational change.

According to Marie Hochmuth Nichols, rhetorical critics “must serve . . . society and [themselves] by revealing and evaluating the public speaker’s interpretation of the world . . . and the peculiar means of expressing that interpretation to [their] generations.”²⁵ Similarly, Robert Scott describes rhetorical critics’ function as “inviting others to re-experience and casting that invitation in such a form that will not only arrest attention but constitute a matrix for further thought,” and that inviting and casting are done by and for participants in the “bureaucratized knowledge” of rhetorical criticism.²⁶ On the other hand, Martin Medhurst calls rhetorical critics to write for readers beyond the discipline.²⁷ My dissertation will use language and methods of rhetorical scholarship and will write for a wider audience; the study will serve both the academy and the church.

What to study can be a difficult decision. Traditional rhetorical criticism has been rather speaker-focused in an elitist manner, studying texts (i.e., speeches and writings) in the canon. However, Jennifer deWinter points out, “This emphasis on major

²⁴ Wayne Brockriede, “Rhetorical Criticism as Argument,” *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 60:2 (1974): 165; c.f. David Zarefsky, “The State of the Art in Public Address Scholarship,” in *Texts in Context: Critical Dialogues on Significant Episodes in American Political Rhetoric*, ed. Michael C. Leff and Fred J. Kauffeld (Davis, CA: Hermagoras Press, 1989), 24.

²⁵ Marie Hochmuth Nichols, *Rhetoric and Criticism* (Baton Rouge, LA: Louisiana State University Press, 1963), 78; c.f. deWinter, 397.

²⁶ Robert L. Scott, “Foreword: Against Rhetorical Theory: Tripping to Serendip,” in *Texts in Context: Critical Dialogues on Significant Episodes in American Political Rhetoric*, ed. Michael C. Leff and Fred J. Kauffeld (Davis, CA: Hermagoras Press, 1989), 9, 6.

²⁷ Martin J. Medhurst, “Public Address and Significant Scholarship: Four Challenges to the Rhetorical Renaissance,” in Leff and Kauffeld, 31. In citing Medhurst, I in no way endorse his recent and controversial statements regarding the National Communication Association.

rhetoricians, while important, can sometimes lead to the silencing of other rhetorical traditions or other ways of reading the same situations.”²⁸ My dissertation will study speeches and letters that are not from people deemed “major rhetoricians,” but from people and communities who exemplified and influenced a Christian denomination at various levels. That approach will provide insights about rhetorical leadership in social conflict in a specific network of religious communities, and those insights hopefully will apply to other contexts of rhetorical leadership.

For this dissertation, I have chosen to focus on seven rhetorical events—five sermons and two public letters. The sermons were preached in in the aftermath of Martin Luther King Jr.’s assassination in 1968; and the letters were published in the context of the Black Lives Matter Movement, which Andre E. Johnson identifies as a continuation of the Civil Rights Movement in which King had worked.²⁹ As stated previously, in considering such religious communication in 1968 and 2016, I wonder about audience’s white fragility’s continuing influence on prophetic rhetoric and rhetorical leadership in ongoing racial conflict and about earlier challenges’ shaping of later ones. Before analysis of those sermons and letters, a consideration of their historical context is in order; so I will provide a brief summary of the history of preaching in the Churches of Christ.

Preaching in the Churches of Christ

I do not intend this contextual section to be comprehensive, nor do I write as a scholar of history. Instead, the purpose of this section is simply to provide a simple

²⁸ deWinter, 397.

²⁹ Andre E. Johnson, “Dislocations and Shutdowns: MLK, BLM, and the Rhetoric of Confrontation,” *Journal of Contemporary Rhetoric* 8:3 (2018): 144-145.

sketch to aid understanding of the context of the rhetorical events featured in this dissertation. The sketch is based mostly on a book by Michael W. Casey, the only source providing a broad survey of preaching in the Churches of Christ.³⁰

The Churches of Christ are one of the three major branches of the Stone-Campbell Movement (sometimes called the American Restoration Movement), which began in the late 1700s and early 1800s. The movement is named after two of its early leaders, Barton W. Stone, and Alexander Campbell, with Campbell's father Thomas also being influential in the movement's early days. The ideology of the Stone-Campbell Movement is centered around two emphases—one on the Bible and one on unity. First, much of the movement hold the Bible in high regard. This strong biblical emphasis leads to a dismissal of all post-biblical creeds and a reliance on scripture as the sole authority for faith and practice in the church and Christian life. Second, the movement has emphasized unity, with agreement on essentials of faith and diversity on other matters. Precisely what those essentials are has been a topic of debate. People in the early movement wanted to set aside denominational divisions to just be Christians but did not assume that no Christians existed in other faith communities. (That exclusivist assumption came later in part(s) of the movement.) In the late 1800s and early 1900s, with disagreements about issues such as slavery, worship styles, and missionary societies (inter-congregational cooperation),³¹ the Stone-Campbell Movement split into two groups, the Disciples of Christ and the Churches of Christ, phrases that previously had

³⁰ Michael W. Casey, *Saddlebags, City Streets, and Cyberspace: A History of Preaching in the Churches of Christ* (Abilene, TX: Abilene Christian University Press, 1995).

³¹ David Edwin Harrell Jr., "The Sectional Origins of the Churches of Christ," *Journal of Southern History* 30:3 (1964): 261, 264ff. A later chapter of the dissertation will consider that apolitical theology has some leaders in the Stone-Campbell Movement to avoid social issues.

been synonyms. The Disciples of Christ have focused more heavily on unity, and the Churches of Christ have more strongly emphasized biblical agreement. However, some leaders in the Churches of Christ have worked for unity; and some in the Disciples of Christ have contributed substantially to biblical scholarship.

Casey organizes the story of preaching in the Churches of Christ around Samuel Hill's four categories of southern religion. Those categories are "truth-oriented, conversion-oriented, spiritually-oriented, and ethics-oriented."³² Although Casey identifies only the first three as relevant to preaching in the Churches of Christ, I notice all four categories in that history and present a fifth.

First, truth-oriented preaching bases "the entire sermon on a verse of scripture or a part of a verse."³³ For example, Campbell adopted a "rational approach" influenced by "John Locke and Scottish Common Sense Realism."³⁴ Campbell learned from Locke and Common Sense "that humans approached reality or nature as a set of discrete bits and pieces of 'information'" and treated "each verse of scripture when rightly understood in its context" as a fact or law.³⁵ Campbell learned from Francis Bacon an understanding of facts and applied it to read the Bible, an interpretive approach that, according to historian-philosopher Leroy Garrett, was "something as new in his day regarding Scripture as it

³² Casey, 112; c.f. Samuel S. Hill, "The Shape and Shapes of Popular Southern Piety," in *Varieties of Southern Evangelicalism*, ed. David E. Harrell Jr. (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 1981), 100-101.

³³ Casey, 19.

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ Ibid.

was in Bacon's time about general knowledge."³⁶ With that approach, Campbell functioned by a common argumentation method of his day.³⁷ For each sermon, he searched the Bible for such facts about a specific topic and assembled those pieces like a puzzle in a manner that was more intellectual than emotional. Influenced by Locke and Bacon, Campbell assumed an ability to read the Bible objectively with no interpretive lenses.³⁸ Seeking to avoid creeds and to remain "scientific" in his use of the Bible in preaching, he focused on biblical "facts" and tended not to include "stories or narration; as a result, his sermons lacked emotion."³⁹ Carisse Mickey Berryhill, however, acknowledges the role of feeling in Campbell's rhetoric.⁴⁰

Casey's history's second and third categories, conversion-oriented and spirituality-oriented preaching, are similar enough to be treated together here. Although the truth-oriented approach led some preachers to develop a combative debating tradition, others focused more on Jesus than doctrinal arguments and more on grace than propositional logic. One Jesus-and-grace-centered preacher was T. B. Larimore, whose "love for the poor . . . belief in pacifism, and . . . positive preaching reflected a deep

³⁶ Carisse Mickey Berryhill, "Alexander Campbell's Natural Rhetoric of Evangelism," *Restoration Quarterly* 30:2-3 (1988): 112; Leroy Garrett, *The Stone-Campbell Movement: The Story of the American Restoration Movement*, rev. ed. (Joplin, MO: College Press, 1994), 24.

³⁷ Berryhill, 111.

³⁸ Tim Sensing notes "the apparent incongruity between the prevailing deductive homiletical practice within the Stone-Campbell Restoration Movement and its strong Baconian inductive philosophy." Timothy R. Sensing, "Baconian Method and Preaching in the Stone-Campbell Movement," *Stone-Campbell Journal* 3 (2001): 164.

³⁹ Casey, 29.

⁴⁰ Berryhill, 115; c.f. Alexander Campbell, *Familiar Lectures on the Pentateuch: Delivered before the Morning Class of Bethany College, during the Session of 1859-60* (Saint Louis: Christian Publishing Co., 1867), 248-249.

spirituality.”⁴¹ Instead of attempting to persuade listeners to accept his beliefs and interpretations, he “left the results with God.”⁴² Another such preacher was K. C. Moser who opposed legalism as “the father of the denial of the personal indwelling of the Holy Spirit.”⁴³ Preachers such as Moser and Larimore were conversionists; they believed that preaching focused on Jesus, love, and grace “could transform culture, not merely oppose and attack.”⁴⁴ They came to perceive that combative methods may have previously worked but were no longer most effective as the culture had changed. Although truth-oriented preaching in the Churches of Christ focused on content, conversion-oriented preaching, and spiritually-oriented preaching focused on the audience. Instead of assuming truth to be easily acknowledged in agreement by all rational hearers, conversion/spiritually-oriented preachers agreed with an assumption they received from the speech discipline, “that rhetoric made the truth effective.”⁴⁵ Batsell Barrett Baxter’s teaching and practice of preaching were person-centered but did not completely abandon the rational, truth-centered approach, selecting “a thesis that would be developed by three or four points or propositions” and using “stories or narratives as simply the means to shed light on otherwise difficult points or propositions.”⁴⁶

⁴¹ Casey, 63.

⁴² Ibid., 64-65.

⁴³ Ibid., 67.

⁴⁴ Ibid., 71.

⁴⁵ Ibid., 115.

⁴⁶ Ibid., 119.

Fourth is ethics-oriented preaching. Casey considers only the first three of Hill's four categories helpful in the study of preaching in the Churches of Christ. However, two chapters in his book provide material for considering ethics in that story. Chapter Seven, "The Kingdoms of This World: The Rise of the Political Pulpit," and Chapter Ten, "Say Amen, Brother! The African-American Tradition," consider preaching at the intersection of ecclesial and public life, including race and other controversies. Chapter Seven points out that until World War I the "Churches of Christ were mostly apolitical and pacifist," influenced by their intellectual ancestor David Lipscomb's teaching that Christians should not participate in "worldly institutions, especially political and moral" ones because they belonged to another kingdom.⁴⁷ After that, however, preachers in the Churches of Christ followed broader Southern trends by discussing public issues, such as evolution and alcohol. Chapter Ten establishes Jim Crow's stronghold on the Churches of Christ in the middle of the twentieth century. For example, popular author Foy E. Wallace Jr. objected to a friendship between a black preacher, R. N. Hogan, and a white one, Ira Rice Jr. Wallace preferred Marshall Keeble, "a black accommodationist," over Hogan.⁴⁸ Keeble and Hogan "stood in the tradition of" Booker T. Washington and W. E. B. DuBois, respectively. In the story of African American preaching in the Churches of Christ, Hogan and Keeble represent "two streams of thought."⁴⁹ Keeble's accommodationism will appear again in Chapter 4 of this dissertation.

⁴⁷ Casey, 91.

⁴⁸ Ibid., 138.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

To the truth-oriented, conversion-oriented, spiritually-oriented, and ethics-oriented categories mentioned thus far, I add a fifth one—text-oriented preaching. Casey’s chapter on the scholarly tradition provides a beginning for consideration of such preaching, and I pull the Reforming Center of Protestant Christianity into the discussion. Frank Pack and LeMoine Lewis, Bible professors at Abilene Christian College, “introduced the methods of historical criticism and exegesis into preaching” in the Churches of Christ; and Pack “insisted that preaching be based on the text of scripture.”⁵⁰ Exegesis was controlled by “textual, linguistic, grammatical, and syntactical [issues and] the contextual, historical backgrounds.”⁵¹ According to Pack, preachers “must not allow [their] prejudices to impose upon the biblical text a foreign element. [They] must clear [their minds] from preconceptions so that [they] may be able to hear what the Lord said through the writer.”⁵² In addition to this text-centered approach to preaching, Pack mentioned that a sermon must be related to the audience in its situation and taught sermon construction such as illustrations without specifying how the preacher should move from exegesis of the text to relating to the audience.⁵³ Lewis did not fill that gap but did prescribe broad knowledge in various fields such as history, sociology, and literature, disciplines that might empower preachers to relate exegetical information to listeners.⁵⁴ About three decades after Lewis and Pack, from 1999 to 2010, David Fleer

⁵⁰ Ibid., 130.

⁵¹ Ibid.

⁵² Frank Pack, “One Man’s Way of Working,” in Frank Pack and Prentice Meador, *Preaching to Modern Man* (Abilene, TX: Biblical Research Press, 1969), 110; quoted in Casey, 130.

⁵³ Casey, 131.

⁵⁴ Ibid., 133; LeMoine Lewis, “Training Young Men to Preach,” in *Abilene Christian College Lectures*, 1964 (Abilene, TX: ACU Student Exchange, 1964), 88-89.

and Dave Bland provided needed explorations of the text-audience relationship. They introduced postliberal preaching to the Churches of Christ through a series of seminars and publications in interdenominational partnership with other preachers and scholars. Their approach to preaching emphasized ushering audiences into the “world” of the biblical texts.

Prophetic Rhetoric and Whiteness

In this investigation of how white church leaders speak and write from positions of leadership at such tumultuous times, my primary interpretive lens is prophetic rhetoric. Although the above overview of preaching in the Churches of Christ provides historical context for this study, insights from literature about prophetic rhetoric and whiteness, especially white fragility, can increase understanding of how leaders in that predominately white tradition have challenged racism. Much has been written about whiteness and prophetic rhetoric. However, white fragility has received less scholarly attention.

Prophetic Rhetoric

Much religious communication literature anchors discussions of prophetic rhetoric in the Hebrew Bible.⁵⁵ Kristen Lynn Majocha dates the study of the topic to the eighteenth century and writes, “Before then, Christian prophetic rhetoric, if considered at all, was regarded as self-evident via the Christian Bible and through Christian

⁵⁵ Kristen Lynn Majocha, “Prophetic Rhetoric: A Gap between the Field of Study and the Real World,” *Journal of Communication and Religion* 39:4 (2017): 6-10; Amos Kiewe, “Theodore Herzl’s *The Jewish State*: Prophetic Rhetoric in the Service of Political Objectives,” *Journal of Communication and Religion* 26:2 (2003): 210, 214; Margaret D. Zulick, “Prophecy and Providence: The Anxiety over Prophetic Authority,” *Journal of Communication and Religion* 26:2 (2003): 197-202; David Bobbitt and Harold Mixon, “Prophecy and Apocalypse in the Rhetoric of Martin Luther King, Jr.,” *Journal of Communication and Religion* 17:1 (1994): 28-29.

authorities.”⁵⁶ She surveys the field’s subsequent development and writes that a turning point in the story was when James Muilenberg performed rhetorical criticism of biblical texts in his Society of Biblical Literature address in 1968, “a shift from focusing on historical background to working with the prophetic rhetoric itself.”⁵⁷

Prophetic rhetoric has changed since ancient Israel, and definitions of prophetic rhetoric abound. Brian Jackson writes, “*Prophecy* is a flexible term that can be used to describe different patterns of speech and different appeals.”⁵⁸ Majocha dislikes that definitional diversity and calls for a consensus grounded in the Hebrew Bible.⁵⁹ That consensus, however, is impossible for at least two reasons.

First, scholars who discuss the topic primarily in biblical terms do not have access to information sufficient to answer several questions about prophetic rhetoric in ancient Israel. In *A History of Prophecy in Israel*, Joseph Blenkinsopp asks:

To what extent was the self-awareness and behavior of the prophet determined by the expectations of the society in which the prophet functioned? What were these expectations, and to what extent did the prophet fulfill them and thus fill a socially supportive and corroborative role? What resources did the society dispose of to discourage role deviance on the part of the prophet? . . . How did one

⁵⁶ Majocha, 6; c.f. Claus Westermann, *Basic Forms of Prophetic Speech*, trans. Hugh Clayton White (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1991), 13. Although Majocha writes about “Christian prophetic rhetoric,” her discussion of prophetic rhetoric does not contain a clear distinction between Christian prophetic rhetoric and more general prophetic rhetoric or other specific (e.g. Jewish) prophetic rhetoric.

⁵⁷ Majocha, 6.

⁵⁸ Brian Jackson, “The Prophetic Alchemy of Jim Wallis,” *Rhetoric Review* 29:1 (2010): 51.

⁵⁹ Majocha, 14-15.

become a prophet? From what social classes were prophets recruited? . . . [What] difference did the social variable of gender make to role performance?⁶⁰

To those and other questions, Blenkinsopp responds, “The likelihood of arriving at satisfactory answers is obviously restricted by the nature of sources at our disposal, none of which was designed to impart the kind of information we are seeking.”⁶¹ In other words, expecting the Hebrew Bible to prescribe guidelines for the contemporary study of prophetic rhetoric is anachronistic thinking.

Second, scholars tend to use the terms “prophecy” and “prophetic rhetoric” interchangeably, assuming they refer to what prophets say and do. However, the “prophetic” in the phrase “prophetic rhetoric” is an adjective instead of a noun and refers to the rhetoric’s function or nature instead of the rhetor’s identity, inspiration, character, calling, or title. Prophetic rhetoric does not require a communicator to hold any specific office in a religious community; such a speaker or writer may be granted the title of pastor, preacher, professor, prophet, or anything else or may hold no official title.⁶²

Although definitions of prophetic rhetoric are numerous, few are substantial.

Andre E. Johnson provides a helpful one:

discourse grounded in the sacred and rooted in a community experience that offers a critique of existing communities and traditions by charging and challenging society to live up to the ideals espoused while offering celebration and hope for a brighter future.⁶³

⁶⁰ Joseph Blenkinsopp, *A History of Prophecy in Israel*, rev. ed. (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 1996), 31-32.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 32.

⁶² *Ibid.*, 70.

⁶³ Andre E. Johnson, *The Forgotten Prophet: Bishop Henry McNeal Turner and the African American Prophetic Tradition* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2012): 7.

Prophetic rhetoric occurs in a four-part structure. “First, speakers must ground prophetic discourse in what the speaker[s] and the audience[s] deem as sacred. . . . People who adopt prophetic personas cannot do so as rugged individuals, but must root their “prophecy” within communal traditions, beliefs, and expectations.”⁶⁴ “Second, there is an element of consciousness-raising through a sharing or an announcement of the real situation. . . . Thus, instead of unveiling the hidden, the prophet reveals the hidden in plain sight” to state “the obvious that others might be afraid to speak.”⁶⁵ In this consciousness-raising, a prophetic communicator wants the audience to reflect on the revealed “situation with the hope of changing its ways.”⁶⁶ The third part of the structure, “is the charge, challenge, critique, judgment, or warning of the audience(s) . . . The prophet usually does this by offering reinterpretations of what is sacred and casting a vision of the world not as it is, but as it could and should be.”⁶⁷ Fourth “is the offer of encouragement and hope.”⁶⁸ Johnson notes two kinds of hope in this kind of rhetoric. The first is “an eschatological hope . . . a hope that things will get better in some afterlife or some other spiritual transformation to some other world.” The second is “a ‘pragmatic hope’ . . . a more ‘this-worldly’ and earthly type . . . that grounds itself in the prophet’s

⁶⁴ Andre E. Johnson, “‘To Make the World So Damn Uncomfortable’: W.E.B. Du Bois and the African American Prophetic Tradition,” *Carolinas Communication Annual* 32 (2016): 19.

⁶⁵ Ibid. Johnson, *The Forgotten Prophet*, 8.

⁶⁶ Ibid.

⁶⁷ Johnson, “‘To Make the World So Damn Uncomfortable,’” 19.

⁶⁸ Ibid.

belief in the Divine to make right order in this world . . . a hope that sees a new day coming.”⁶⁹

Any study of prophetic rhetoric should draw from and build upon a tradition of the study and practice. As earlier stated in this chapter, the exercise of prophetic rhetoric stretches back at least to the eighth century BCE in ancient Israel; and the study of prophetic rhetoric is more recent but also aged, dating back at least to the eighteenth-century CE. However, in addition to considering the diversity of definitions of the subject, scholars of prophetic rhetoric also should work with a recognition and appreciation of different traditions, paths in which the practice and study of prophetic rhetoric have developed.

Whiteness and White Fragility

Scholarly literature about prophetic rhetoric exists primarily in two categories; some of the literature addresses prophetic rhetoric in general, and some scholars focus on African American prophetic rhetoric. As in many fields of discussion in the United States of America, the public discussion is not general; it is white. Whiteness functions as a largely invisible, unrecognized, and unacknowledged cultural norm.⁷⁰ Because of its naturalization and normalization, “white hegemony permeates American political, regional, and national identity resulting in the manifestation of marginalization and hierarchy.”⁷¹ The lack of consideration of whiteness in the general discussion of

⁶⁹ Ibid., 19-20. This paragraph de-italicizes some words that Johnson italicizes.

⁷⁰ Douglas Hartmann, Joseph Gerteis, and Paul R. Croll, “An Empirical Assessment of Whiteness Theory: Hidden from How Many?” *Social Problems* 56 (2009): 407.

⁷¹ Christina Moss, “A Nation Divided: Regional Identity, National Narratives, and Senator Zell Miller in the 2004 Presidential Election,” *Southern Communication Journal* 76 (2011): 78.

prophetic rhetoric is evident in a foundation of the field's contemporary scholarship, Darsey's *The Prophetic Tradition and Radical Rhetoric in America*, which falls prey to the tendency to treat white examples as normative.⁷²

In synthesizing scholarly literature about whiteness, Monica McDermott and Frank Samson present three highlights. First, whiteness “is often invisible or taken for granted.”⁷³ It normatively operates as “an unexamined default racial category.”⁷⁴ Second, whiteness “is rooted in social and economic privilege.”⁷⁵ Whites mostly “fail to see the connection between their opportunities in life and their racial identity;” and that failure may lead to “colorblind racism . . . emptying whiteness of its privileged content rather than . . . transforming whiteness from an identity of social superiority to one of social responsibility.”⁷⁶ Third, the “meaning and import [of whiteness] are highly situational.”⁷⁷ Research has revealed that whiteness varies: “marginalized whites are likely to have a different experience of their privileged racial identity” than how whites at the central

⁷² James Darsey, *The Prophetic Tradition and Radical Rhetoric in America* (New York, NY: New York University Press, 1997); c.f. Kerith M. Woodyard, “Depatriarchalizing in Rhetorical Theory: Toward a Feminist Prophetic Tradition,” *Ohio Communication Journal* 48 (2010): 27-28; Steven Tramel Gaines, “No Half Savior: Jarena Lee’s Autobiography as Prophetic Rhetoric,” *Carolinas Communication Annual* 33 (2017): 62.

⁷³ Monica McDermott and Frank L. Samson, “White Racial and Ethnic Identity in the United States,” *Annual Review of Sociology* 31 (2005): 247.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 248; c.f. Cheryl Hyde, “The Meaning of Whiteness,” *Qualitative Sociology* 18:1 (1995): 87-95.

⁷⁵ McDermott and Samson, 247.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 248-249; c.f. Eduardo Bonilla-Silva, “The Structure of Racism in Color-Blind, ‘Post-Racial’ America,” *American Behavioral Scientist* 59:11 (2015): 1358-1376; David R. Roediger, ed., *Black on White: Black Writers on What It Means to Be White* (New York, NY: Schocken, 1998).

⁷⁷ McDermott and Samson, 247.

norm of culture experience privilege in ignorance or denial.⁷⁸ In addition to marginalization by socioeconomic class, sexual orientation, and other identifying markers, involvement in interracial communication also increases some whites' acknowledgment of the connection between whiteness and privilege.⁷⁹ Additionally, people whom society racializes as white experience whiteness differently.⁸⁰

Due to the diversity of whiteness, Thomas Nakayama and Robert Krizek write, "The risk for critical researchers who choose to interrogate whiteness, including those in ethnography and cultural studies, is the risk of essentialism."⁸¹ That statement applies not only to scholars who locate their work in ethnography or cultural studies but to all scholars of whiteness. For scholars who want to study whiteness without essentializing, rhetorical analysis has heuristic value: "Whatever 'whiteness' really means is constituted through the rhetoric of whiteness."⁸² The warning against essentializing applies not only to the study of white rhetoric but also to the study of rhetoric in other racial experiences.

Although some recent scholarly literature about prophetic rhetoric has mainly focused on discourse in public spheres beyond the ecclesial level, prophetic rhetoric "is based on the relationship between an individual and his or her community."⁸³ Rhetoric

⁷⁸ Ibid., 249; c.f. Bergit Brander Rasmussen, Eric Klineberg, Irene J. Nexica, and Matt Wray, eds., *The Making and Unmaking of Whiteness* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2001).

⁷⁹ McDermott and Samson, 249.

⁸⁰ Amanda E. Lewis, "'What Group?': Studying Whites and Whiteness in the Era of 'Color-Blindness,'" *Sociological Theory* 22:4 (2004): 623-646.

⁸¹ Thomas K. Nakayama and Robert L. Krizek, "Whiteness: A Strategic Rhetoric," *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 81 (1995): 293.

⁸² Ibid.

⁸³ Susan J. Hubert, "Testimony and Prophecy in *The Life and Religious Experience of Jarena Lee*," *Journal of Religious Thought* 55 (1998): 51.

may function prophetically in diverse situations, including one in which a rhetor communicates inter-systemically (i.e., from within one community to call for change in another system) as well as a situation in which someone communicates intra-systemically (i.e., from within a community to call for change in that system). This dissertation will explore intra-systemic prophetic rhetoric.

Conclusion and Preview

As previously stated, this dissertation will explore seven sermons and public letters in the Churches of Christ that exemplify antiracist preaching as rhetorical leadership of change and conflict. My goal here is not to present those rhetorical events as examples of admirable rhetoric but rather to allow them to teach us something about the challenge-nurture combination of goals in rhetorical leadership. Literature about prophetic rhetoric provides the primary interpretive lens for this investigation.

After this introduction, Chapter 2 will study an April 1968 sermon in which white fragility blunts prophetic punch. That chapter will point out that prophetic rhetoric functions differently in white churches than it does in black churches. If white preachers do not consider their congregations' discomfort with discussion about racial conflict, sermons may destroy congregations instead of strengthening them. However, if white preachers use both prophetic rhetoric to call for change and priestly rhetoric to nurture congregations, the result may be pastoral rhetoric that challenges the status quo while also practicing pastoral sensitivity.

Chapter 3 will analyze four June 1968 radio addresses that contain constrained challenges to racism. Those sermons challenge racism in interpersonal relationships but do not highlight systemic racism; they also do not mention Martin Luther King Jr. I will propose

that white fragility and apolitical theology are factors contributing to those omissions. Chapter 4 will jump ahead a few decades, revealing white fragility's continuing function as a constraint of prophetic rhetoric when leaders of white Christianity confront racism. In conclusion, Chapter 5 will summarize the dissertation's findings and claims and will suggest implications for scholars and practitioners. That chapter will analyze public letters shaped by readers' white fragility, most obviously in the opening disclaimers catering to apolitical theology and in the letters' focus on change in the church and not in larger society.

CHAPTER TWO: PRIVILEGED REPENTANCE IN MEMPHIS

Half a century after the assassination of civil rights leader Martin Luther King Jr., social crises still plague this nation. Public demonstrations protest systemic inequalities, and opponents of such cries deny social problems and condemn activists' strategies. Preachers must choose how to communicate in this chaos and can learn from past preachers who spoke prophetically while not ignoring the necessity of pastoral sensitivity.

In April 1968, responding to King's assassination, John A. Scott Sr. preached a sermon, "The Mind of Christ," for the Church of Christ at White Station in Memphis. He had a doctoral degree in Hebrew Bible and, in addition to working with the White Station church, taught psychology at Harding School of Theology, a seminary in Memphis.¹ His experience in the field of psychology likely contributed to his awareness of his congregation revealed later in this chapter and also to his decision to give his audience citations of the New Testament instead of the Hebrew Bible, recognizing that his listeners granted more authority to the Greek texts.

This chapter claims that the sermon prophetically called for repentance and was shaped by social privilege; that the sermon reminded listeners of their privilege and challenged them to repent of their contributions to inequalities; and that Scott, despite the blunting of his prophetic rhetoric, challenged his congregation's practice of ignoring racial and economic privileges and injustices. Those claims develop through three sections. The first one provides a few details about Scott's rhetorical situation. The

¹ These details came from Dave Bland, Professor of Homiletics at Harding School of Theology and a member of both the Church of Christ at White Station and my dissertation committee.

second, using the interpretive lenses of prophetic rhetoric and white fragility analyzes the sermon through close textual analysis or close reading.² The final section, based on that analysis and homiletical literature, presents pastoral preaching as a combination of prophetic and priestly rhetoric.

In rhetorical analysis, I must critique an artifact's elements that might seem admirable as well as those that might seem less than ideal. I do so here with the utmost respect for Scott's willingness to speak prophetically when tempted to remain silent. Also, I acknowledge that we and our word choices are unavoidably influenced by our chronological and cultural locations.

Memphis in 1968

Most sanitation workers in 1968 Memphis were black, and their bosses were white. The workers, who labored long hours in filthy and unsafe situations with flawed equipment and inadequate pay and were not allowed in the office building to drink water or wash their hands, had complained about the conditions for about five years but had been ignored by city officials. Michael Honey writes, "These workers lived below the poverty level while working fulltime jobs, and 40 percent of them qualified for welfare to supplement their meager salaries," and explains that "They received virtually no health care benefits, pensions, or vacations, worked in filthy conditions, and lacked such simple amenities as a place to eat and shower;" he continues, "They carried leaky garbage tubs which spilled maggots and refuse on them, while white supervisors called grown men

² Barry Brummett, *Techniques of Close Reading* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 2010).

“boy” and sent them home without pay for the slightest infraction.”³ Keith Miller details the filth of the sanitation workers’ work:

Homeowners in Memphis positioned fifty-gallon drums in their backyards and routinely placed their garbage into the drums. Sanitation laborers lifted and set these barrels of debris into tubs before shouldering, carrying, and emptying the tubs into garbage trucks. Because garbage disposals had yet to invade the underside of kitchen sinks, household trash regularly included scraps of unwrapped, half-eaten, rotting vegetables and meat. As the workers hauled their loads, they battled flies and sweltering humidity in the summer, daylong rain in the fall, and cold in the winter.⁴

On February 1, 1968, a defective garbage compacting truck killed two workers seeking shelter from the rain.⁵ More than a thousand of their colleagues went on strike, and the mayor condemned the strike as illegal.⁶

King traveled to Memphis to assist the striking sanitation workers. After a few marchers damaged property during an otherwise peaceful demonstration, he encouraged his listeners to “keep the issues where they are” and explained:

³ Michael Honey, “Memphis Sanitation Strike,” *Tennessee Encyclopedia*, October 8, 2017, 2009, updated March 1, 2018, <https://tennesseencyclopedia.net/entries/memphis-sanitation-strike/>. Accessed March 15, 2019.

⁴ Keith D. Miller, *Martin Luther King’s Biblical Epic: His Final, Great Speech* (Jackson, MS: University Press of Mississippi, 2012), 4-5.

⁵ Miller, 5.

⁶ David Appleby, Allison Graham, and Steven John Ross, directors. *At the River I Stand*. California Newsreel, 1993.

The issue is injustice. The issue is the refusal of Memphis to be fair and honest in its dealings with its public servants, who happen to be sanitation workers. Now, we've got to keep attention on that. That's always the problem with a little violence. You know what happened the other day, and the press dealt only with the window-breaking. I read the articles. They very seldom got around to mentioning the fact that one thousand, three hundred sanitation workers are on strike, and that Memphis is not being fair to them, and that Mayor Loeb is in dire need of a doctor. They didn't get around to that.⁷

King died the next day after being shot by an assassin. The details of that event are debated and uncertain; unanswered questions remain. Who shot King? Did a bullet or something else kill him? What was the killer's (or killers') motive? To what extent was the federal government involved? (The Federal Bureau of Investigation had identified King as the "most notorious liar in the country" and "the most dangerous Negro in America."⁸)

Journalists were not the only people remembering the violence by a few rather than the systemic injustice, the striking sanitation workers, or the city's refusal to consider their concerns. Churches also tended to perceive the recent events as random violence instead of cries of injustice. Scott challenged that perception.

⁷ Martin Luther King Jr., "I've Been to the Mountaintop," *American Rhetoric*, 3 Apr. 1968, <http://www.americanrhetoric.com/speeches/mlkivebeentothemountaintop.htm>. Accessed March 15, 2019.

⁸ John Herbers, "Dr. King Rebutts Hoover Charges; Offers to Discuss Criticisms—He Is Supported by Negro Rights Leaders," *New York Times* (November 20, 1964): 1. Michael Eric Dyson. *I May Not Get There with You: The True Martin Luther King Jr.* (New York, NY: Simon and Schuster, 2000), 80. Johnson, Andre E., and Anthony J. Stone Jr. "'The Most Dangerous Negro in America': Rhetoric, Race and the Prophetic Pessimism of Martin Luther King Jr." *Journal of Communication and Religion* 41:1 (2018): 9.

Prophetic Rhetoric and White Fragility

Prophetic preaching is a subcategory of prophetic rhetoric, and scholars variously define and describe prophetic rhetoric and prophetic preaching.⁹ Some discussions of prophetic preaching treat OT prophetic rhetoric as a blueprint.¹⁰ Others perceive prophetic ministry in the OT as a precursor of, not a design for, more recent prophetic proclamation.¹¹ This analysis of Scott's sermon accepts the second option because interpreting the OT prophetic literature as a blueprint misses subsequent historical development of the prophetic tradition(s). Criticism of twentieth-century prophetic rhetoric requires a grounding in analysis based on more recent artifacts.

Based on his close reading of nineteenth-century discourse, Andre E. Johnson defines prophetic rhetoric as “discourse grounded in the sacred and rooted in a community experience that offers a critique of existing communities and traditions by charging and challenging society to live up to the ideals espoused while offering celebration and hope for a brighter future.”¹² In other words, prophetic rhetoric, grounded

⁹ David Schnasa Jacobsen, “*Schola Prophetarum*: Prophetic Preaching Toward a Public, Prophetic Church,” *Homiletic* 34:1 (2009): 12-21. That article's second footnote overviews diverse perspectives in scholarship about prophetic preaching.

¹⁰ Ronald J. Allen, “The Relationship Between the Pastoral and the Prophetic in Preaching,” *Encounter* 49:3 (1988): 173-89; Timothy Sensing, “A Call to Prophetic Preaching,” *ResQ* 41:3 (1999): 139-54.

¹¹ Michael A. Smith, “Through Much Tribulation: Prophetic Preaching in an Age of Hopelessness,” *Review and Expositor* 109 (Summer 2012): 349-63; Christopher Z. Hobson, *The Mount of Vision: African American Prophetic Tradition, 1800-1950* (New York: Oxford, 2012).

¹² Andre E. Johnson, *The Forgotten Prophet: Bishop Henry McNeal Turner and the African American Prophetic Tradition* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2012), 7. This section's information about prophetic rhetoric is modified Steven Tramel Gaines, “No Half Savior: Jarena Lee's Autobiography as Prophetic Rhetoric,” *Carolinas Communication Annual* 33 (2017): 62-76.

in sacred foundations, calls for change.¹³ This section further explains prophetic rhetoric by identifying its structure and responding to possible confusion. In preparation for an analysis of prophetic rhetoric by a white preacher, the section also presents whiteness and white fragility.

Prophetic rhetoric occurs in a four-part structure. “First, speakers must ground prophetic discourse in what the speaker[s] and the audience[s] deem as sacred. . . . People who adopt prophetic personas cannot do so as rugged individuals, but must root their ‘prophecy’ within communal traditions, beliefs, and expectations.”¹⁴ The second element of the structure is “consciousness-raising through a sharing or an announcement of the real situation. . . . Thus, instead of unveiling the hidden, the prophet reveals the hidden in plain sight” to state “the obvious that others might be afraid to speak.”¹⁵ In this consciousness-raising, a prophetic communicator wants the audience to reflect on the revealed “situation with the hope of changing its ways.”¹⁶ The third part of the structure “is the charge, challenge, critique, judgment, or warning of the audience(s) . . . usually . . . by offering reinterpretations of what is sacred and casting a vision of the world not as it is, but as it could and should be.”¹⁷ Fourth “is the offer of encouragement and hope.”¹⁸

¹³ A prescriptive chapter similarly states that “the prophetic sermon disorients the status quo by addressing present issues with a Word of God so that a new orientation (reality) can be created in the lives of the people.” Timothy Sensing, “Re-imagining the Future: Past Tense Words in a Present Tense World,” in *Preaching the Eighth Century Prophets*, ed. David Fleer and Dave Bland (Abilene, TX: ACU Press, 2004), 122.

¹⁴ Andre E. Johnson, “‘To Make the World So Damn Uncomfortable’: W.E.B. Du Bois and the African American Prophetic Tradition,” *Carolinas Communication Annual* 32 (2016): 19.

¹⁵ Ibid. Johnson, *The Forgotten Prophet*, 8.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Johnson, “To Make the World,” 19.

¹⁸ Ibid.

Johnson notes two kinds of hope in this kind of rhetoric. The first is “an eschatological hope . . . a hope that things will get better in some afterlife or some other spiritual transformation to some other world,” and the second is “a ‘pragmatic hope’ . . . a more ‘this-worldly’ and earthly type . . . that grounds itself in the prophet’s belief in the Divine to make right order in this world . . . a hope that sees a new day coming.”¹⁹

In a previously published essay, I responded to a couple of areas of possible confusion about prophetic rhetoric.²⁰ First is the assumption that prophetic rhetoric foretells coming events. Johnson’s definition, however, states that prophetic rhetoric calls for change and does not mention prediction. Study of prophetic rhetoric today has roots in ancient Hebrew literature, in which prophetic communicators predicted at times but not always. Their focus was change, and change remains the focus in prophetic rhetoric today.²¹ The other possible confusion is the assumption that prophetic rhetoric requires a specific position or title. However, rhetoric may be prophetic even if the rhetor does not fill any official role. According to rhetoric scholar Christopher Hobson, prophetic rhetoric “a kind of speech or writing that occurred to its practitioners as they turned to questions that arose in community life.”²² Similarly, this chapter does not attempt to determine whether Scott was a prophet. Instead, it reveals ways in which he communicated prophetically.

¹⁹ Ibid., 19-20. This paragraph de-italicizes some words that Johnson italicizes.

²⁰ Gaines, “No Half Savior,” 69-70.

²¹ For related comments about prophetic preaching, a form of prophetic rhetoric: Leonora Tubbs Tisdale, *Prophetic Preaching: A Pastoral Approach* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2010).

²² Hobson, 30.

Because a white preacher spoke the prophetic rhetoric in Scott's sermon in a white congregation, my analysis of that sermon draws from literature about whiteness, especially white fragility. Communication scholars Thomas Nakayama and Robert Krizek write that “the ‘white’ social practice of not discussing whiteness is especially disturbing.”²³ Multicultural education scholar Robin DiAngelo explains:

White people in North America live in a social environment that protects and insulates them from race-based stress. This insulated environment of racial protection builds white expectations for racial comfort while at the same time lowering the ability to tolerate racial stress, leading to what I call White Fragility. White Fragility is a state in which even a minimum amount of racial stress becomes intolerable, triggering a range of defensive moves.²⁴

White fragility is a tendency to experience difficulty in tolerating discomfort related to racial conflict. This fragility can result in a denial of racial identities. Whiteness “is often invisible or taken for granted, it is rooted in social and economic privilege, and its meaning and import are highly situational.”²⁵ White identity “is more taken-for-granted, more naturalized and normalized than other racial identities.”²⁶ Because of that naturalization and normalization, “white hegemony permeates American political,

²³ Thomas K. Nakayama and Robert L. Krizek, “Whiteness: A Strategic Rhetoric,” *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 81 (1995): 303. This section’s information about whiteness and white fragility is modified from my forthcoming book chapter about John Allen Chalk’s antiracist sermons in the summer of 1968.

²⁴ Robin DiAngelo, “White Fragility,” *International Journal of Critical Pedagogy* 3 (2011): 54.

²⁵ Monica McDermott and Frank L. Samson, “White Racial and Ethnic Identity in the United States,” *Annual Review of Sociology* 31 (2005): 247. Also consult David R. Roediger, *Colored White: Transcending the Racial Past* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2002), 23-24.

²⁶ Douglas Hartmann, Joseph Gerteis, and Paul R. Croll, “An Empirical Assessment of Whiteness Theory: Hidden from How Many?” *Social Problems* 56 (2009): 407.

regional, and national identity resulting in the manifestation of marginalization and hierarchy.”²⁷ Due to white hegemony’s pervasiveness, white people tend not to recognize their racial group’s identity and privilege and to resist communication about racial conflict. Sociologist Amanda Lewis notes the absence of a singular whiteness experienced identically by all people racialized as white.²⁸ In line with that observation, this chapter does not attempt to force Scott’s rhetoric into a preconceived model but instead seeks what his words reveal about his own experience of whiteness and his understanding of his listeners’ experiences of whiteness.

Response to Social Crisis: A Close Textual Analysis

Scott’s sermon quickly mentioned the historical, cultural, and geographical context in which he spoke: “The last few weeks we have, here in Memphis, undergone great upheavals. Emotions have been wrought up, and tragedies of one sort or another have occurred that have had far-reaching consequences in our lives and in the lives of our fellow countrymen.”²⁹ Memphis had experienced chaos since King’s death on April 4. Riots had rocked the city. Properties had been damaged and destroyed. Interracial relations had become even more tense than they had previously been. Accusations were flying in multiple directions, and many Memphians were confused about what had happened and what would happen.

²⁷ Christina Moss, “A Nation Divided: Regional Identity, National Narratives, and Senator Zell Miller in the 2004 Presidential Election,” *Southern Communication Journal* 76 (2011): 78.

²⁸ Amanda E. Lewis, “‘What Group?’ Studying Whites and Whiteness in the Era of ‘Color-Blindness,’” *Sociological Theory* 22 (2004): 623-646.

²⁹ All quotations of this sermon are from John A. Scott, Sr., “The Mind of Christ,” April 14, 1968, <http://www.cocws.org/filerequest/2124>. Accessed March 15, 2019.

The confusion and chaos tried Scott's soul through a bewildering combination of obligation and hesitancy to speak:

It is during times like these when one who preaches must be reminded of the tradition in which he speaks. It is the tradition of the prophets, a tradition of the apostles, to speak where one is tempted to remain silent, but it is not easy to do so. Whether it be to speak or to remain silent when people are asking questions about Christian attitudes in times that are troubled like these. It is difficult to remain silent; in fact it is impossible. . . . It's hard to speak and it's hard to remain silent.

His experience of this obligation-hesitancy dilemma had deep roots in biblical literature. Moses and Jonah had hesitated but fulfilled, in different ways, their obligations to speak. Immediately following the crucifixion of Jesus, his closest followers had hidden because of their hesitancy, fear, and doubt but eventually spoken. Scott grounded his rhetoric in that tradition of prophets and apostles, and he concluded that refusing to speak was infeasible. A national crisis with a Memphis center had interrupted this preacher's ministry, and he could not resist a frightening call to preach prophetically.

Scott anticipated objections to his prophetic call to repentance, knowing that some members of his congregation might frown or even flee in reaction to his talking about race. He responded in advance to that possible resistance by anchoring his message in words of Jesus: "Whosoever shall be ashamed of me and my words, his father shall be ashamed of him in the Day of Judgment" (Mark 8:38). Despite his pastoral experience, ecclesial office, and doctoral degree, Scott drew from the credibility that his listeners assigned to Jesus. By citing Jesus, Scott indirectly told the congregation that he had

chosen to respond to King's assassination because words of Jesus had convinced him to do so, not because he was trying to cause trouble based on his own opinions.

Scott also prepared his audience for the call for change, saying that following Jesus "means that we constantly have to be adjusting our life so that we do not drift off course." Scott illustrated that claim with a metaphor: "There is an instrument in an airplane, which will help the pilot keep on course to his destination even when the winds or other factors may blow him off his course." Then he explained:

And so with Christian people, there are times when, due to the forces of society, due to the emotions of upheaval, due to the problems that men face from day to day, it's easy to get off course. It's easy to drift ever so slightly and never be aware of being off course. So the pilot has to keep a constant check to stay on course. . . . we need constantly to go back to the Word, constantly go back to the message of Christ and adjust our lives accordingly. Everyone who is a follower of Christ is compelled to take his position behind Christ and let Christ lead the way wherever that may go.

Scott anchored his anti-status-quo sermon in the religious establishment's sacred foundations.

Although he had drawn credibility from Jesus, Scott also spoke of his own competence: "And certainly one must do this with all humility. I feel I stand on secure ground when it comes to studying the Bible and making comments and practical applications to the everyday, work-a-day world." He appealed to his congregation's assumption that a preacher should combine competent biblical interpretation and application with humility—claiming that blend of competence and character was crucial

for preparing the listeners for a message that had potential to bring accusations of sloppy exegesis and perhaps even a “holier than thou” attitude.

Following the introduction, Scott spoke of Jesus to establish a foundation for teachings in later parts of the sermon. He claimed that Jesus was a servant to all people and that he was a person of compassion. This section presented the sermon’s guiding question: “Whom did Christ serve?” Scott clearly stated his method for answering the question: “I made an effort to select the passages and the lessons and the examples and the parables and the words of Christ that would give me some guidance and more detail.” Instead of leaving listeners to assume that he was speaking only his own opinions, Scott added to his claim of credibility, indicating yet again that what he was about to say would be difficult for his audience to accept.

In response to the guiding question, Scott presented two answers. First, Jesus served people experiencing various diseases. Second, he served marginalized, despised outcasts. Summarizing the answers, Scott mentioned “Christ’s concern for the underdog, for the poor, halt, maimed and the blind” and said, “We are told He came to preach the Gospel to the poor, to heal the broken-hearted, to deliver the captives, to set up liberty for those that were bruised . . . the lower classes in society.” That statement set the stage for reflecting on the cultural situation following the assassination of a man who, because of his Christian faith, had pursued the mission of caring for people suffering poverty, pain, and various types of captivity.

Scott presented three hindrances to Christians’ willingness to follow Jesus in caring for those despised by the establishment. First was pride and its close relative, self-righteousness. Scott did not speak of pride and self-righteousness in terms only of their

historical, biblical manifestations. Instead, he contemporized them, stating that, if physically present in 1968, Jesus would have spoken against those vices. The contemporizing pushed the audience to consider their own self-righteousness and pride, especially in connection to racial and economic inequalities in Memphis. In response to the vices, Scott prescribed self-denial, citing Matthew 16:24: “Whoever will come after Me . . . let him deny himself, take up his cross and follow me.” Scott identified two meanings of self-denial: (1) “that we sacrifice and that we do without things” and (2) “that we deny the existence of the self and put Christ in ourselves and we no longer stand independently and so proud in our own right. But rather that we as individuals, have been put to death in Christ, in the character of Christ, and that the thinking of Christ rules in the place of the ego.” Then Scott quoted Luke 1:52 and referenced Luke 20:41-47, condemning rich people who enjoyed their luxuries at the expense of people suffering poverty. His words invited his listeners to think of King’s work on behalf of sanitation workers protesting unjust wages.

The second hindrance was hypocrisy. Instead of hypocrisy in general, Scott spoke of hypocrisy connected to self-righteousness and pride:

These commandments are difficult to obey, “He that hath two coats, let him impart to him that hath none. He that hath meat, likewise” (Luke 3:11). What does this mean? Oh it’s an easy matter to rationalize and give excuses, and say, “Lord, we don’t like to face up to these issues. Our way of life is different. We don’t like to face up to pride, and hypocrisy, or we don’t like to have to deny ourselves in certain ways.”

Scott continued:

Another parable to influence our character: the rich man and his barns (Luke 12). The contrast here is obvious. This is a well-known parable to all concerned. After this Jesus talked about another rich man who made a great supper and the guests didn't come to the supper as he had invited them. And so the master told his servants to "Go into the streets and into the lanes and you bring in the poor and the maimed, the halt, and the blind." And they went and brought in these people. And then he said, "Well, the house is not full yet. We're going to eat the feast, but first go into the hedge ways and into the by-paths and you bring in, as it were, dregs from society and they can eat, too."

By citing these sacred foundations, Scott spurred his listeners to think about the reign of the rich in their own city, with a racially created economic inequality that contributed to the turmoil that had led to King's death.

The third hindrance to having compassion on "lower classes" was the supremacy of one social group over another:

Jesus, one time said those on His right hand would be saved. And those on the right hand will be those who, He said "Have seen me when I was hungry, when I was thirsty, and when I was a stranger, when I was naked, when I was sick, when I was in prison, and they attended me when I was in these conditions" (Matthew 25:35[-36]). But people fail to see Christ in the lowliest and so seek out a rationale in resisting the Gospel saying, "Lord, this doesn't apply to me". So we speak out and say, "Lord, we don't understand. When did we see you in these circumstances?" And He says "Inasmuch as you did it not unto the least of these...the very least..." Pick out the least in society then, and we'll see where we

have an obligation, where we've been passing over an obligation and a responsibility. God is our Judge.

These words revealed white fragility's influence on hermeneutics and ethics. Although the term "white fragility" did not exist in 1968, the human thought and behavior the term describes were in full force. White people's discomfort in hearing, reading, and talking about racial conflict produced their refusal, or perhaps inability, to acknowledge their contributions to social inequalities. That ignorance, or ignoring, shaped the listeners' interpretation and personal application of biblical words and produced in those interpreters an assumption that the call to care for the "hungry . . . thirsty . . . stranger . . . naked . . . sick" and imprisoned did not apply to them. In response to that way of reading and living sacred texts, Scott boldly asserted that the congregation had failed to live up to "an obligation and a responsibility" to care for people in need. Scott even claimed that caring for people lacking food, clothes, belonging, and freedom was the core of Christian doctrine. By not speaking or acting in support of under-resourced Memphians, the congregation had resisted the gospel. In reminding his listeners that "God is our Judge," Scott added an eschatological dimension to his prophetic accusation that his people had abandoned a divine mandate.

Resistance to care for those considered low, according to Scott, was resistance to the gospel. He quoted words of Jesus in Luke 6:24, "But woe unto you who are rich," and indicated that the listeners tended not to perceive themselves as rich. Scott countered that tendency: "We have to talk to ourselves if we are honest. We have to talk to old number one." Scott was careful not to condemn his congregation without condemning himself: "In Christ's category of the rich I have to talk to myself." The preacher and the

congregation were wealthy compared to the sanitation workers for whom King had traveled to Memphis. Revealing the economic animosity between races in Memphis in 1968, Scott cited more words of Jesus:

“Woe unto you that are full now for ye shall hunger” (Luke 6:25). “Woe unto you that laugh now, for you shall mourn and weep. Woe unto you when all men shall speak well of you, for in the same manner did their fathers speak of the false prophets. But I say unto you that hear, ‘Love your enemies, do good to them that hate you’” (Matthew 5:44).

Pushing his congregation to localize their ethics of love instead of hate and of caring for the poor and hungry, Scott asked:

Does this mean that we do it only from a distance? Does it mean that we can show concern for those of the Negro race by sending two men to Africa as missionaries and spend 11, 12, or \$13,000 to reach those, but have no obligation to those in our own city or in our own block or who are working for us in our homes? . . . or in our own church building?

He indicted his audience with those words, specifying both the population and the location of his call to action. He did not speak only about an abstract love or a universalized compassion. Instead, he localized the topic, disallowing his listeners to ignore the challenge as inapplicable to them and forcing them to acknowledge, even if only privately, their participation in the current discord in Memphis and their responsibility to respond as agents of mercy:

“Be ye merciful even as your Father is merciful.” Look at the standard of mercy that Jesus gave to us. This is the standard of mercy that God had toward us and

that He has toward all the world, including the garbage men of Memphis. . . . This is mercy to the nth degree and it's a deeper mercy than I have, but I will have to work for it, I have to strive for it and I have to keep that as an end and a goal in view.

The mercy was an ideal, not yet achieved by the preacher or the congregation. The sermon called them to live out their biblical commitments. With those words, the preacher again attempted to avoid accusations of being "holier than thou." He placed himself with his congregation, sharing the condemnation and challenge.

Then Scott referenced the Golden Rule, a sacred foundation that the congregation deeply knew but did not widely practice:

All of the children in the lower grades can give you that from memory in one form or another. We can live all of our lives and fall short of the applications of this Golden Rule as Christ intended it. It's simple. It means we have to put ourselves in the other fellow's shoes. Now it's an easy [matter] to put ourselves in the shoes of those standing beside us, those that are our closest friends. It's an easy [matter] to love those who love us; it's an easy [matter] to attend to those that already have been showing an inclination to help us. But it's more difficult, isn't it, to love one's enemies. It's more difficult to put ourselves in the shoes of others--the downtrodden and the outcast--but we have to, we have to.

In short, Scott highlighted how a white, middle-class congregation struggled to live out the Golden Rule with less-resourced Memphians who differed from the congregation's majority not only in economic status but also in racial identity.

Recognizing the deeply connected problems of economic and racial inequality was complicated and required social awareness. Scott said, “I have neither the skill nor the knowledge to be able to determine and to explain the involvements of a situation like this. But I think that because of the very position that Christians occupy, they need to have their fingers on the pulse of society.” He acknowledged that white Memphians tended to ignore cultural conflict and social inequality but needed to be more attentive.

After mentioning the widespread hatred in the nation, Scott spoke of a moral problem. Specifically, he referenced conflict about the Vietnam War: “The hawks complain that we are not killing enough Viet Cong, while doves say that we are killing the women and children and babies needlessly.” Maybe his listeners noticed that he, even if unknowingly, called King a dove, a symbol of the Holy Spirit.³⁰

Then Scott said three times that “something is wrong” with a form of Christianity unable to foster peace in a culture of conflict and violence. With an idealized understanding of history, he said about the closest followers of Jesus, “A long time ago only 12 men, certainly a minority in society, were able to turn the world upside down for Christ,” and continued that “when there are hundreds of thousands of people who wear the name of Christ and are unable to exercise something to stop this kind of hatred that is abroad in our world, SOMETHING IS WRONG WITH THOSE [WHO] WEAR THAT NAME.” Scott then said:

The power is in the Gospel. The power is in Jesus Christ, but it gets watered down, and if we fail to bear witness and we fail to use our influence as Christians,

³⁰ In his last year, King spoke strongly against the Vietnam War. For example, read his “Beyond Vietnam” speech, presented one year before his death and accessible on multiple websites.

to have our society a law-abiding society, then something is wrong. There is something dreadfully wrong with our policemen still having to wear their riot hats in the streets even after the upheaval is all over. It means that it isn't all over. Scott nobly noted that Christians should positively influence society amid ongoing hatred, but his perception of policing was less than ideal. He neither questioned the necessity of police riot gear in a situation that had not endangered lives nor led his listeners to ask who had created the laws or for what purpose those laws had been made.³¹

Scott responded to something other than the assassination; he returned to the upheaval that had continued since the civil rights leader's death: "I can't condemn our Mayor, though he has a part to play. I can't condemn our Council, though they had a part to play, because they represent us. Each plays a part." Scott did not condemn local authorities for the upheaval, but he claimed that he and his congregation shared responsibility for the city's turmoil. He said, "We can't condemn the labor union per se, but they have a part to play also with outside leaders coming in." However, he did not address why the union needed to call in outsiders.

Nevertheless, he did not let his listeners blame others for the city's chaos: "In my opinion, we have a responsibility. If we did not object, we have a responsibility, if we have not spoken out clearly and specifically. I had more than one opportunity to object, and I didn't do it. And I don't mind telling you I feel, in part, guilty." Here Scott revealed

³¹ Michelle Alexander, *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness* (New York, NY: The New Press, 2010).

the significant issue that prompted his sermon, and that issue was his own guilt. His guilt arose from his failure to object to racial and economic injustice.

Shortly after that statement, however, Scott remembered the Memphis Massacre of 1866: “The north end of town and the south end of town had it out and scores of people were killed.” That deracialized memory failed to note that white Memphians had slaughtered black Memphians and destroyed their property.³² Because Scott was well educated, he may have known of the massacre’s racial imbalance. His audience, however, experienced white fragility, a discomfort with discussions of racial conflict. Simultaneously he challenged the listeners’ racism and probably catered to their white fragility.

The catering did not disarm the challenge. After retelling the story of people around the year 1900 who had combatted alcoholism and prostitution with morality, Scott asserted, “But the city of churches has been washing the pot and the platter on the outside, and has left contamination on the inside.” He continued, “We’ve cheerfully washed and garnished the sepulchers on the outside and they are gleaming white in the sun, but inwardly they are filled with dead men’s bones (Matthew 23:29).” In the Memphian context, the dead men’s bones were both figurative and literal. Between those two statements, Scott quoted Jeremiah 6:14 to indicate that white Christians in Memphis had claimed peace when peace had not existed; they had ignored racial and economic inequalities.

³² Steven Tramel Gaines, “Speaking Reconstruction: Moving Beyond the Silence,” *Memphis Massacre 1866: The Official Blog of the Memories of a Massacre: Memphis in 1866 Project*, February 22, 2016, <https://blogs.memphis.edu/memphismassacre1866/2016/02/22/speaking-reconstruction-moving-beyond-the-silence/>. Accessed March 15, 2019.

Scott's next statement confronted the practice of ignoring injustice and revealed more about the issue that primarily prompted the sermon. He challenged:

And we can deny this and deny it, but the sooner we face up to it and say "Lord, forgive us for our inactivity, for our complacency, for keeping quiet on the principles of Jesus Christ," the sooner we can go to God on our knees.

As Scott completed that statement, he mentioned the sermon's core concern: "the sooner we can go to God on our knees and ask Him to help us. That much sooner, then, we can have the guilt off our shoulders." Dealing with the preacher's and the congregation's guilt was the sermon's primary purpose.

The beginning of Scott's healing from guilt had been an experience in which the Golden Rule had come "out of the darker resources of my mind into the light of day and hit me" after he had claimed that King and other outsiders had "had no business being here." The sermon applied the Golden Rule to facilitate a similar conviction in the listeners:

Suppose my people were abused and subjugated. The only way at their disposal to show their objection and to be heard would be to march in a mass meeting. I would go to be with them. If you were those people, I would be with you. Before God, I believe I would have to admit that. I think the Golden Rule requires me to say what I would do if the situation were reversed. I'd be with you and you know that. To stand or fall I would go down with you.

Then he voiced an objection that his audience may have been thinking: "Of course, people say,—and there's a technicality here—that the strike is against the law." Although Scott did not address the formation or purpose of "the law" that had underpaid and even

killed sanitation workers and then condemned them for striking, he equated those claiming the strike's illegality and the Pharisees in the New Testament:

The Pharisees were masters at quoting a law for what they wanted to do. They were masters at giving an excuse, at laying heavy burdens and laws and technicalities upon the people. So Jesus one time came to the Pharisees and said, "You are careful to tithe mint and anise and cumin, and have left undone the weightier matters of the law, justice, and mercy, and faith: but these you ought to have done and not to have left the other undone" (Matthew 23:23). I think it is analogous. I think it applies. I believe it. I may be wrong, yes, but I believe this to be true.

Here the conviction-hesitancy dilemma voiced in the sermon's introduction began to send Scott into a rhetorical swirl. His words repeatedly shifted between two views—his conviction and his audience's possible resistance to that conviction. After this "I may be wrong, yes, but I believe this to be true," he moved from speaking negatively of the Pharisees' obsession with laws to speaking negatively of riots: "There's wrong on both sides and you know I don't uphold riots. It's wrong before God. It was a riot that took the life of Christ. No, I don't uphold riots." According to Scott's words, riots were wrong not because they were against the law but because they were contrary to God's will. That claim's data was that a riot had taken Jesus Christ's life, but the warrant was absent.³³ In other words, an explanatory bridge was missing between the claim and its evidence. Then

³³ Stephen E. Toulmin, *The Uses of Argument* (Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 1969).

Scott shifted again, this time from challenging privileged Memphians who had ignored racial and economic inequality to defending himself:

I'm not presenting what could be termed by some, perhaps, a Yankee point of view. When I was a child, I can remember my mother taught me in Oklahoma in the 1930s to always use the term "colored people" when referring to the Negro race. She was from a strong southern tradition but she was a faithful sincere Christian and my father followed through and taught me respect.

Scott anticipated the audience's accusation that he did not understand the South. In response to that, he shared that he had grown up in Oklahoma and had learned to respect people different from himself. Then he said, "I'm not presenting a biased sectarian viewpoint. I believe this is the attitude of Christ. So in concluding, I would say we have to repent." He imagined John the Baptist and Jesus Christ preaching repentance and love in Memphis. In doing so, Scott anchored the call for change not in himself but in his community's sacred foundations, Jesus and the Bible, citing Matthew 3:8.

He continued that "it's hard to say, 'Lord, forgive me. Lord, I repent.' It's difficult, but the commands of Christ have not always been that easy." In the sermon's earlier words about hypocrisy, Scott had asked who had called Christianity easy and indicated that no one had. Here, near the sermon's end, he quoted John 6:60 about people complaining about the difficulty of a teaching by Jesus. Scott challenged that potential complaint among his listeners:

But if we as Christians have not been made to feel uncomfortable very often in our lives, then something may be wrong with our brand of Christianity. It may mean that we are marching with the world. It may mean that the natural man has

taken over. It may mean that the natural man and the world about us has influenced us to such an extent that there is no longer any difference between the Christian and the man in the world with whom he rubs elbows day by day. If we don't feel uncomfortable at times, if we don't feel a little different from the rest of society, then something may be wrong.

Then he moved away from hypothetical speech: "We're not bearing our witness properly." He cited related words from the Bible:

Jesus said "Woe be unto you when all men speak well of you." (Luke 6:26)

"Except your righteousness exceed the righteousness of the Scribes and the Pharisees, ye shall in no wise enter into the Kingdom of Heaven." (Matthew 5:20)

He said it again and again. "What do ye more than others?" (Matthew 5:47) He

said, "Ye shall be hated of all men of the world for my sake," (Matthew 10:22 . .

.) . . . Romans 12:1 "Be ye transformed by the renewing of your minds." What

does it mean to be different from the world? Not to be conformed to the world,

said Paul. You have got to be transformed from the world and that is by the

renewing of the mind. We can't think as the world thinks. We can't think as other people in society think if we're going to follow in the steps of Christ.

Scott called his people to repent and indicated that such action, including an admission of guilt and a commitment to seek the welfare of under-resourced Memphians, might cause other white Memphians to hate them. In Scott's perspective, cooperating with racial and economic injustice was contrary to the Christian life.

The sermon ended with a prayer that functioned as a conclusion and began with a whitened history of privilege:

OUR HEAVENLY FATHER, Thou hast been good to us in so many ways; Thou hast given us a land of plenty; Thou hast given us freedom; Thou hast kept us from persecution that many people in foreign countries endure because of their persuasion of Jesus Christ; Thou hast delivered us from the tormentors; Thou hast given us periods of comfort and ease with which we may serve Thee and we may go about our way without fear or molestation and for this, our Father, we are thankful.

Not all residents of Scott's city and nation had received "a land of plenty" or the kind of "freedom" that white Christians enjoyed. Not all had escaped persecution and torment.

Not all had experienced "comfort and ease . . . without fear of molestation."

Nevertheless, Scott called his audience to "call out for peace" and "love . . . tolerance and understanding." He led the congregation in asking for "the ability to apply the Golden Rule" and in asking for forgiveness and for "the fruits of repentance." Perhaps the "fruits of repentance" were healings of guilt, but the prayer continued:

Help us to see our responsibility for our society, that we cannot stand aloof and at a distance and let the rest of the world go by without concern, without being willing to do something to help the world and contribute something to the welfare of the betterment of mankind.

Scott's prayer did not specify what he or the congregation should do. Instead, he left the request vague.

The prayer powerfully concluded the sermon by asking God to "be with our Mayor, be with our Councilmen, be with our policemen, be with those in high places, give them wisdom and judgment. Help them that they may bring the strife in our city to

an abrupt end.” This prayer did not intercede on behalf of the under-resourced and undervalued lives suffering racial and economic injustice. The prayer did not mention the dead sanitation workers or their striking colleagues or the assassinated civil rights leader who had traveled to Memphis to speak for people to whom “those in high places” had refused to listen. The expressed purpose of the prayer’s requests was “that *we* are not threatened with death, injustice, pillaging, and rioting and war.”³⁴ The prayer ended “in the name of Jesus Christ, Who set the standard for the world” but did not call the listeners to follow Jesus by laying down their lives for people in need.

Conclusion: Pastoral Preaching

Prophetic rhetoric calls for social change, and that call is anchored in deeply treasured foundations. Scholarly literature, such as that by Andre E. Johnson and Christopher Hobson cited in this chapter, has studied prophetic rhetoric in messages from religious leaders to governmental authorities beyond religious systems. In comparison to such intersystemic communication, priestly rhetoric is intrasystemic, sustaining religious organizations. Pastoral rhetoric combines prophetic and priestly rhetoric to call for change while nurturing faith communities and therefore tends to be less radical and more constrained than prophetic rhetoric may be when congregational leadership is not a concern. Pastoral preaching, a subcategory of pastoral rhetoric, is rhetorical leadership of religious communities and frequently occurs in those communities’ worship assemblies.

In this chapter, an April 1968 sermon preached by John A. Scott Sr. in Memphis, Tennessee, has served as a case study of pastoral preaching as constrained prophetic rhetoric. Responding to Martin Luther King Jr.’s assassination, the sermon prophetically

³⁴ Emphasis added.

called for repentance and was shaped by social privilege, reminded listeners of their privilege, challenged them to repent of their contributions to inequalities, and challenged his congregation's practice of ignoring racial and economic privileges and injustices. Although a study of such a sermon may reasonably note that white fragility limited Scott's rhetoric, something more must be observed.

In the past few years, prophetic rhetoric scholar and black church leader Andre E. Johnson has facilitated a social media campaign using the hashtag #WhiteChurchQuiet to challenge white evangelical churches' failure to speak publically against systemic injustice, especially racial inequalities. I respectfully point out that prophetic rhetoric must function differently in white churches than it does in black churches. If white preachers do not consider their congregations' discomfort with a discussion about racial conflict, sermons may destroy congregations instead of strengthening them. However, if white preachers use both prophetic rhetoric to call for change and priestly rhetoric to nurture congregations, the result may be pastoral rhetoric that challenges the status quo while also practicing pastoral sensitivity. Pastoral rhetoric will be developed more in Chapter 5.

CHAPTER THREE: CONSTRAINED RHETORIC ON THE RADIO

How do white citizens of the United States of America speak to white listeners to counter racism? Scholars have not sufficiently addressed this question. They have explored African Americans' responses to racism enacted by whites,¹ but much anti-racism rhetoric by whites to whites has not yet been considered in rhetorical studies. Consequently this chapter analyzes a series of four sermons² in which a white preacher, John Allen Chalk, addresses a predominately white audience to counter racism in July 1968, in the aftermath of the assassination of Martin Luther King, Jr. After introducing the broadcasting ministry in which Chalk spoke, this chapter provides a close reading of Chalk's "Race Revolution" sermon series. The following analysis draws literature about communication and race to critique more deeply Chalk's prophetic etoric, constrained by white fragility.

The Herald of Truth

Preachers in the Churches of Christ started utilizing the radio to broadcast religious messages close to the birth of that technology's widespread availability.³ Whereas the Churches of Christ reached regional audiences at least twenty years before the Herald of Truth's first sermon, the latter was the first program in that denomination to

¹ Example: Mark Lawrence McPhail, "Revisiting the Rhetoric of Racism," *Rhetoric Review* 20:1/2 (2001): 43-46.

² The sermon manuscripts were provided by McGarvey Ice, Archives Specialist, Callie Faye Milliken Special Collections, Brown Library, Abilene Christian University, Abilene, Texas.

³ C. J. Dull and Thomas H. Olbricht, "Radio and Television," in *The Encyclopedia of the Stone-Campbell Movement: Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), Christian Churches/Churches of Christ, Churches of Christ*, ed. Douglas A. Foster, Paul M. Blowers, Anthony L. Dunnivant, and D. Newell Williams, eds. (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2004), 624.

have a national focus and was “the first program sponsored by this body to be heard nationally on network radio and television.”⁴ James Walter Nichols and James D. Willeford, wanting to begin a national radio ministry after having produced local radio programs, initiated the Herald of Truth, which first aired on February 10, 1952, on the ABC Radio Network.⁵ The number of ABC stations broadcasting the Herald of Truth sermons increased from thirty-one in February 1952 to eighty-five that summer and two hundred fifty in January 1953. “At its peak, 578 stations carried the broadcast” (Sensing, 2004, p. 383).⁶

By the 2004 publication of *The Encyclopedia of the Stone-Campbell Movement*, the Herald of Truth had “never solicited funds from its listeners. When Highland [Church of Christ in Abilene, Texas] launched the program, it took the stance that if God were behind the effort other churches would support it. . . . about 5,000 different churches and 150,000 individuals have supported Herald of Truth through the years.”⁷ In the radio ministry’s early days, Highland elders “signed personal bank notes” to support it.⁸ Highland functioned as the “sponsoring church” of this ministry, and that triggered controversy with congregations of the Churches of Christ that rejected such practice.⁹

⁴ Ibid. Due to the autonomous nature of congregations in the Churches of Christ, some members of the denomination disagree about whether that network of congregations is a denomination. This dissertation uses the term simply to refer to a specific part of Christianity and not to indicate any organizational style.

⁵ Tim Sensing, “Herald of Truth,” in Foster, Blowers, Dunnivant, and Williams, 383.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Ibid., 383-384.

⁸ Ibid., 383.

⁹ Ibid., 384.

The Herald of Truth in some ways followed in its predecessors' footsteps and in other ways followed examples in other denominations. Like its predecessors, the Herald of Truth produced approximately half-hour messages, including introductory and closing comments and music, and structured its sermons "rationally" (i.e., in a linear and propositional manner influenced by modern logic).¹⁰ Earlier radio programs in the Churches of Christ "in contrast to other religious groups . . . focused upon what were perceived to be the basics, namely, the gospel plan of salvation and the principal features of the New Testament church."¹¹ The Herald of Truth initially included that "'plan of salvation' . . . in every broadcast,"¹² but Chalk's sermons also contained rhetoric that was popular in wider evangelical Christianity.¹³ Although Chalk, both a preacher and an attorney, obeyed his elders by including the five-step "plan of salvation" (i.e., hear, believe, repent, confess, and be baptized) in his sermons, he did not emphasize it or the traditionally stressed "principal features of the New Testament church" (e.g., music without instrumental accompaniment, weekly observance of the Lord's Supper, and congregational autonomy instead of denominational hierarchy beyond the level of the local congregation). Chalk's openness to broader evangelical Christianity may be seen in his involvement with Campus Evangelism, a college ministry movement influenced by

¹⁰ Dull and Olbricht, 624.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Sensing, "Herald of Truth," 384.

¹³ I do not mean to indicate that the Churches of Christ are part of evangelical Christianity, but some of them and their leaders and preachers speak and write as if they were.

evangelical ministries like Campus Crusade for Christ and InterVarsity Fellowship.¹⁴ He preached sermons that targeted a larger audience instead of primarily arguing that the Churches of Christ were exclusively right in contrast with other denominations. Shaped by earlier radio ministries in the Churches of Christ, the Herald of Truth sermons by Chalk blended rhetoric common in that denomination with rhetoric that had the potential to communicate effectively with a larger audience.

Chalk's Sermons

The four radio sermons of John Allen Chalk's "Race Revolution" series are the middle set of a larger, three-set series, "Three American Revolutions," preached in the summer of 1968. Chalk preached "Hatred Is Only Skin Deep" on July 7. "Is Jehovah God a Racist?" aired on July 14. On July 21 Chalk preached "Some of My Best Friends," and he concluded the race sermons on July 28 with "Are You a Respector of Persons?"

Sermon One: "Hatred is Only Skin Deep"

Chalk begins the first sermon with a quotation from the *Report on the National Advisory Commission of Civil Disorders* (1968, pp. 1-2), recently submitted to President Lyndon B. Johnson:

Our nation is moving toward two societies, one black, one white—separate and unequal.

. . . Discrimination and segregation have long permeated much of American life; they now threaten the future of every American. . . . Segregation and poverty have created in the racial ghetto a destructive environment totally unknown to most

¹⁴ For reference to evangelical influence on the Campus Evangelism movement, see Jim Bevis, "Letter to Campus Evangelism Steering Committee," June 27, 1966, available at the Abilene Christian University library in Abilene, TX.

white Americans. What white Americans have never fully understood—but what the Negro can never forget—is that white society is deeply implicated in the ghetto. White institutions created it, white institutions maintain it, and white society condones it.¹⁵

Chalk advises his audience “to think twice before we, for any reason, dismiss their grave indictment of racism in America.”

Then the second half of the sermon’s introduction begins to indicate the intended audience.

If you are listening to me in a Philadelphia ghetto you probably are incensed that the Commission didn’t speak more plainly. Didn’t “tell it like it is.” If you are a listener in a comfortable Southern California suburb you probably have already started for the radio dial to turn off this program because you think the commission’s report is not an accurate picture of either America or Americans.¹⁶

These words indicate a wide audience in various places in the USA—in Philadelphia, Southern California, and surely others; his mentioning of two locations likely is representative instead of exhaustive.¹⁷

Whereas the statement seems to indicate that Chalk’s intended audience may include some demographic diversity, the next section, “White Racism,” shows that his

¹⁵ Chalk cites the *Report of the National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders* (New York: Bantam Book, 1968), 1-2.

¹⁶ Although the terms “America” and “Americans” refer to more than the USA and its people, Chalk’s quotations in this chapter retain their original language. I acknowledge that language usage changes over time.

¹⁷ A brief browse of the letters Chalk received in response to the series reveals that his listeners indeed lived in diverse places. The letters are in the Meredith Restoration History Archive in the library of Harding School of Theology in Memphis, TN.

audience is mostly white. He issues a test to listeners who claim they are not racists. According to Chalk, “white racism . . . says that the Negro belongs to a distinct race,” “that the Negro race has no common ancestry with other human beings,” “that the black man is a distinct biological species that falls somewhere between white men and apes,” “that all white men in America are part of one common racial group” that is “superior,” and “that regardless of personal ability and achievement, every Negro is more similar to all other Negroes than to a person of comparable skills and intelligence who happens to be a member of the white race.” Although Chalk does not overtly say it, his intention seems to be that people who agree with these statements are racists. He then tacks on a brief statement about “black racism,” saying that the “same ideas we have just mentioned are turned in the opposite direction, some strange religious ideas are added, and the white man becomes a ‘devil’ who has a unique kinship to ‘monkeys, apes and swine.’”¹⁸ Chalk’s statement about “black racism” is much smaller than his treatment of “white racism,” indicating that his primary audience is white.

The sermon then begins a theological middle section that contrasts racism and Christianity. It begins with these words: “I have detailed these idolatrous tenets because racism threatens the very heart of Christianity, strikes at the root of all Biblical truth, and directly violates Christian faith.” Chalk is speaking primarily to listeners who are not only white but also Christian; they are Christians who hold a high view of the Bible as authoritative for theology and practice. Since Herald of Truth, the ministry Chalk represents, has an evangelistic mission, the intended audience likely also included

¹⁸ Chalk cites Elijah Muhammad, *Message to the Blackman in America* (Chicago, IL: Muhammad Mosque of Islam 3, 1965), 103.

potential members of such evangelical Christianity. To strengthen the emotional impact of this claim that racism is idolatrous, Chalk cites words by Hitler that illustrate the view presented as idolatry. Quoting Hitler surely spurs an emotional response in the listeners, bringing to their minds tragedies of World War II. Chalk concludes this first section of the speech's body by stating, "Tenets of racism . . . conflict with the teachings of the God of the Bible." (Those words conflict with segregationists' perspectives, which were more common among Chalk's intended audience.)

The body of the sermon presents ten observations about racism and Christianity, making the case that the two are incompatible. First, citing the creation of humanity in the divine image (Genesis 1:27), Chalk claims, "Racism attacks the wisdom and goodness of God, the Father." Building on the biblical motif of "the fall," according to which humans sinned and hurt their relationship with God and with each other (Genesis 3:1-8), the preacher says, "Racism calls for 'a second fall.'" Second, Chalk claims that racism relies on a supposed superiority of one race's blood instead of the blood of Jesus through which humanity finds hope (Ephesians 1:7).¹⁹ Third, the "Racist makes all his value judgments on a fleshly, physical basis," neglecting the value that the Holy Spirit places on "the heart" (First Samuel 16:7; Second Corinthians 5:10).

Chalk divides the ten observations into three sections, perhaps influenced by the Christian belief in the Trinity. The concept of the Trinity is more obvious in the first three observations, which mention each member thereof. The preacher's dependence on this theology is apparent in his transition to his next set of observations: "As surely as racism

¹⁹ This claim assumes a now-outdated biological understanding of race. Whether the assumption is Chalk's or his listeners' is unclear.

openly flaunts God, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, so this idolatry also affects and corrupts our relationship with each other. Instead of ‘loving our neighbors,’ racism invariably promotes human pride, arrogance, and the disruption of any meaningful communication and association with those who differ with us.” With “loving our neighbors,” Chalk references the words of Jesus in Mark 12:31 and Matthew 22:39 and his source, Leviticus 19:18.²⁰ The fact that Chalk does not mention those biblical references further indicates that his intended audience has knowledge of the Bible. The Mark and Matthew texts follow words about loving God, so Chalk’s “loving our neighbors” connects the previous section about God with the following section about humanity.

In the body’s middle section about racism’s negative impact on relationships between people, Chalk presents his fourth, fifth, sixth, and seventh observations. Fourth, Chalk claims that racism counters the biblical view of the church as including “all kinds of men . . . all nations” (Ephesians 2:11-22; Isaiah 2:2-3).²¹ Fifth, the preacher plays on the Great Commission of Mark 16:15. He states, “Racism would modify Christ’s words to mean, ‘Go ye therefore and teach your own kind,’ or even worse, ‘Go ye therefore and teach all nations, making sure to keep them in their place.’”²² Chalk indicates that the

²⁰ In these four sermons, Chalk tends to favor the Matthew text over the ones in Mark and Leviticus.

²¹ Although my own writing does not include masculine pronouns for God, for humanity in general, or for a person whose is not identified, Chalk uses masculine pronouns in such ways in these sermons. When I quote him in this chapter, I quote his words and keep in mind that language usage changes over time.

²² This word play is on Matthew 28:19 in the King James Version (“Go ye therefore, and teach all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost”) instead of Mark 16:15 (“Go ye into all the world, and preach the gospel to every creature”).

Great Commission calls Christians to share the message of Jesus with all people without discrepancy based on race. The preacher returns to the theme of idolatry and criticizes Christians who “set out to evangelize Africa” but segregate congregations in their own country.²³ Sixth, Chalk challenges his listeners’ tendency to let the message of Jesus shape one day of each week (i.e., Sunday) but not to let it shape the rest of their week: “The Christian, the one whose life is under the Lordly direction of Jesus Christ, can not talk about ‘loving his neighbor’ on Sunday and then keep from being a neighbor to all men the rest of the week.” The speaker calls Christians to remain in “racially changing” neighborhoods to live out the gospel. Seventh, the preacher speaks against in-group bias and “the animal principle of survival of the fittest.” Here he apparently references the scientific theory of evolution but does not overtly mention it. Instead he cites Hitler again: “Those who want to live, let them fight, and those who do not want to fight in this world of eternal struggle do not deserve to live.”²⁴

Following this second major section of the sermon’s body, Chalk includes another transition: “Our first three observations exposed racism’s attacks on God. We also have just looked at three ways racism distorts our relationship with others. Racism further threatens man’s understanding of himself.” Although Chalk miscounts the observations in the body’s second section, his transition is effective. He then presents three observations about the negative impact of racism on individuals.

²³ The prevalence of racial segregation in Christianity in the USA in the 1960s appears in these sources: Barclay Key, *Race and Restoration: Churches of Christ and the African American Freedom Struggle*, PhD dissertation (University of Florida, 2007), 191; Edward J. Robinson, *Show Us How You Do It: Marshall Keeble and the Rise of Black Churches of Christ in the United States, 1914-1968* (Tuscaloosa, AL: University of Alabama Press, 2008), 98.

²⁴ Chalk cites Adolf Hitler, *Mein Kampf* (Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin, 1943), 189.

Eighth, Chalk claims, “Racism destroys a proper Biblical view of one’s self.” After referencing John 3:16 to say that God loves all the world, the preacher’s reasoning gets murky: “Christianity is individual. Racism is collective.” This statement seems contrary to the communal nature of Christianity, as seen in Paul’s body metaphor (e.g., First Corinthians 12) and in Susan Hubert’s words about this in African American Christianity.²⁵ Ninth, “Racism destroys the universal character of Christianity.” In making this point, Chalk mentions the sovereignty of God over all people (Isaiah 2:2-3; 42:1-4; Jeremiah 31:31-33) and the unity of all people in Christ (Galatians 3:27). Tenth, the speaker moves toward a call to action: “Racism’s future depends on my attitudes and yours. Will you oppose racism in a loving, courageous manner?” Apparently assuming that the answer to that question is not certain, Chalk continues, “One thing is certain: A day of judgment has dawned on America as a nation.” In addition to this communal judgment, Chalk foresees an individual judgment: “a day of judgment is coming to every man, when Christ returns to execute God’s judgment of the contributions you and I have made to humanity.” The preacher then moves into his conclusion without detailing either “day of judgment.”

That conclusion prophetically proclaims, “Traditional Christianity has failed to answer the challenge of racism. It is continually charged from all quarters, ‘The eleven o’clock hour on Sunday morning is the most segregated hour of the week.’” Here the speaker refers to the typical time of the weekly worship assembly in his tradition. He says, “Where racism flourishes Christianity dies. And where Christ rules the hearts and

²⁵ Susan J. Hubert, “Testimony and Prophecy in *The Life and Religious Experience of Jarena Lee*,” *Journal of Religious Thought* 54/55:2/1 (1998): 45.

lives of men racism is destroyed.” Then he calls for an ideal form of humanity shaped by several biblical passages, a kind of humanity that admits and repents of racism.

Sermon Two: “Is Jehovah God a Racist?”

Chalk starts the second sermon of this series with an attempt to get his audience to feel racism’s harmful effects:

Have you ever hated the color of your own skin? Have you ever cursed the day you were born? Has the scorn and rejection of your fellow man ever blurred your sense of personal worth? Have you ever thought, “Man, I’m a nobody, a worthless nobody?” Have you ever been in a large crowd of people for a long period of time without being noticed, without ever being given a glance by anybody in the crowd? Have you ever had someone say to you with a stare of contempt: “What are you doing here?”

He follows that series of questions with a story about an experiment conducted by a teacher who divides her students into two groups based on eye color. One group is treated with respect; the other group is oppressed. The experiment teaches students the harm of prejudice. After sharing that one student wants to change the color of his eyes, Chalk says, “Multiply this student’s reaction by three hundred fifty years and at least twenty million people and you have an idea of racism’s impact on American minority groups.” His multiplication is based on his country’s history of racial injustice.

From this beginning Chalk moves into an exposition of racism, which has “defrauded the non-white man of his personal identity . . . destroyed his sense of personal worth . . . crushed his expectations . . . created deep, continual frustration . . . encouraged destructive futility and rebellion . . . continually confronted him with the ‘lie’ of

inferiority.” The preacher then implicates his intended audience in this tragedy: “Such havoc often has been worked by so-called Christians” and “has caused many people . . . to reject Christianity.” He ties this observation to one by Malcolm X: “The black man in North America was spiritually sick because for centuries he had accepted the white man’s Christianity—which asked the black so-called Christian to expect no true Brotherhood of Man, but to endure the cruelties of the white so-called Christians.”²⁶ Behind these words by John Allen Chalk and Malcolm X is an assumption that people who claim to be Christians but mistreat people because of the color of their skin, do not genuinely follow Christ.

Chalk then presents two tragedies for which racism is responsible, first of which is idolatry: “another god, a false idol, has been added to America’s pantheon. That God is racism.” He specifies his understanding of idolatry with words from George Kelsey, a Baptist minister and professor of Christian ethics: “When men elevate any human or historical factor (like blood and genes, jac) to so great a height that it has the power to give substance and direction to all cultural institutions . . . that human or historical factor has become a god.”²⁷ Chalk follows this quotation with an observation of how racism influences life decisions, such as buying and selling buildings and land and choosing friends and employees. Then, removing an ancient text from its historical context, Chalk

²⁶ Chalk cites Malcolm X, *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* (New York: Grove Press, 1964), 313.

²⁷ The parenthetical explanation is from Chalk. He quotes George D. Kelsey, *Racism and the Christian Understanding of Man* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1965), 27. In his sermon manuscripts, Chalk used “jac” (for John Allen Chalk) to indicate his explanatory insertion in a quotation.

quotes the First Commandment (Exodus 20:3-4) as God's direct address to Chalk's listeners.²⁸

The second tragedy caused by racism is "the rejection of Jehovah God by those who are the victims of racism." Even though Chalk already established credibility by citing diverse sources, here he reveals his personal involvement with victims of racism: "I have talked with black youth in two big-city ghettos in recent weeks. Their conversations were regularly punctuated with phrases like 'the white man's Bible,' 'the white man's God,' 'the white man's Christ,' 'the white man's church.'" He reflects, "These angry young people have seen too much racism in so-called Christian lives to accept the Christianity of those they saw, heard, and knew." He then uses various biblical verses to portray God as reconciliatory and as calling people to love each other.

Chalk next voices what he wants his audience to ask: "The question you probably want to ask at this point is, 'How can I love a God who appears to hate some people and love others?' 'How can I worship a God in whose name so many terrible things have been done?' This is really what you are asking: 'Is Jehovah God a Racist?'" Then, departing from his typical homiletical method of collecting diverse Bible verses into a topical message, he presents Paul's sermon at the Areopagus (Acts 17:22-31) from which to draw ten responses to the question: God "created all men . . . rules all men alike, in every age and in every race . . . cares for all His creatures . . . unifies all men . . . ennobles

²⁸ Such proof texting was a popular preaching technique in the Churches of Christ in the 1960s and continues among some of the denomination's preachers today. Also, the practice of reading the Bible as direct address from God to current readers is common in evangelical and similar Christianity, despite contrary views.

all men . . . fulfills all men . . . dignified all men . . . confronts all men . . . will judge all men . . . warned us of that coming judgment.”²⁹

The sermon nears its end with a stinging application of words by Jesus in Matthew 7:21 to racist Christians: “Not everyone that saith unto me, Lord, Lord, shall enter into the kingdom of heaven: but he that doeth the will of my Father who is in heaven.” By applying that text thusly, Chalk communicates that Christians who claim to follow Christ but enact hatred toward other humans based on race are doomed to separation from God, whom Chalks states twice in this conclusion “is not a racist.” The preacher, however, does not conclude the sermon by calling Christians to social action that might decrease racism in their cultural contexts. Instead, he leaves his listeners with an individualized message: “The Bible is every man’s book. Jesus is every man’s savior. The church is that family of God in which all men as God’s physical creatures can, by surrender to Christ, become God’s spiritual creatures.”

Sermon Three: “Some of My Best Friends”

Like the previous sermon, this one starts with a question that invites listeners’ introspection:

Have you ever noticed how an otherwise calm, peaceful conversation among good friends can suddenly become a tense battle of words when the race question is raised? . . . Almost invariably these discussions end with the person who got the most excited saying, “Well I just want you to know that some of my best friends . . .” You know the old saw well, don’t you? Just leave the last part of the sentence

²⁹ In his explanation of the ten answers based on Acts 17, Chalk reverts to his default method of proof texting but keeps the sermon standing mostly on a single text.

blank, fill in the name of a stereotyped minority group . . . and the picture of an almost identical reaction from all kinds of people in every section of the nation is complete.³⁰

Then, assuming his listeners value their freedom to choose their friends and associates and to do whatever they wish with and in their homes, the preacher counters, “The Christian, however, looks at home differently.” Citing Hebrews 13:2-3 he reminds his audience of the biblical instruction, “Forget not to show love unto strangers. For thereby some have entertained angels unawares. Remember them that are in bonds, as bound with them; them that are ill-treated, as being yourselves also in the body.” Chalk challenges the listeners to answer the questions, “How do you go about choosing your friends? What method do you employ in deciding with whom to associate socially?” He observes that people tend to make these decisions based on what people can do for them, and he utilizes self-disclosure: “I personally find myself associating with people who think like I do. . . . Do you ever get the feeling, like I do, that your friends tend to confirm or harden what you are already, rather than honestly exposing weakness that, when corrected, would make you a stronger person?” The sting of this introduction deepens: “How many interracial friendships do you have? Are these friends what I would call ‘hyphenated friends’? In conversations do you refer to such persons as ‘my Negro friends’, ‘my Mexican friends,’ ‘my Cuban friends,’ ‘my Puerto Rican friends, ‘my white friends?’”

After a few questions about the listeners’ motives for forming interracial friendships, this sermon provides “five threats to friendship.” In preparation for the delivery of those threats, Chalk defines racism:

³⁰ The second of the three ellipses is in the sermon manuscript.

Racism in America is a great destroyer of genuine personal relationships. By racism I mean the alienation and division of human beings as human beings on the basis of the flesh. By racism I mean the arrogant claim by one group of men that all other creatures of God are ‘inferior’ due to historical and social differences. By racism I mean the imposition of certain ‘places’ for certain men and the refusal to recognize certain ‘capabilities’ and ‘potentialities’ in certain racial groups. Racism segregates men, dishonors God, and creates hostility in the human family.

According to Chalk, genuine friendships that cross socially constructed boundaries can “aid better understanding and interracial harmony.” Racism threatens the formation of genuine interracial friendships, and there are five reasons for this. The first reason is that “the attitudes prompted by racism divert a man’s attention from the one source of all human worth and dignity.” Referencing Psalm 139:14 Chalk states that human identity should be found in humanity’s creation by God rather than in skin color, and he again cites Kelsey: “Man must know God before he can know himself.”³¹ The second reason is that racism prevents “its devotees from finding any self-identity.” Reflecting on Matthew 22:39 (“Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself”), the preacher says, “The Christian . . . looks to God for the full realization and identity of his being, rather than looking to some allegedly ‘inferior’ person on whom to build his own delusion of ‘superiority.’” The third reason is that racism blots out “all recognition of people as individuals. . . . This explains why so many whites do so much talking about what the black man really thinks, what the Indian really wants, and how the Mexican-American really feels. All the while never

³¹ Kelsey, 57.

seeing a man hurting, hurting, hurting.” This is followed by the “Golden Rule:” “All things therefore whatsoever ye would that men should do unto you, even so ye also unto them” (Matthew 7:12). The fourth reason is that “racism destroys the full humanity of those in other racial groups. Vicious attitudes of contempt and disregard destroy those with whom we refuse to communicate. Such attitudes and conduct openly violate Jesus’ charge: ‘Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself.’” The fifth reason is that “people caught up in delusions of racial and cultural superiority never find any real meaning and wholeness in their lives.” Chalk states that, instead of looking to their own racial superiority in contrast to the inferiority of others, people should find their identities in their Creator. “We approach the God of creation with a common need that destroys all ‘superior’ and ‘inferior’ categories of the human family.”

Following those observations that racism causes relational harm, the sermon reflects on the theme further with more biblical references and quotations. This section reveals Chalk’s hermeneutical key that impacts all four sermons: “The Bible is a book about our relationships with God as well as our relationships with men.” Reading scripture through that interpretive lens shapes the speaker’s understanding of human nature and responsibility. That way of reading leads the preacher to this conviction: “For Christians, friendship is a powerful way to break down cultural, racial, and personal discrimination.” Chalk perceives faith in God as the key to interracial reconciliation: “You and I will never properly appreciate other men without a deep faith in the God who created all men and made them in His image.” Acknowledging all humans as created in the divine image involves applying that recognition to self; seeing the self as created in the divine image is a prerequisite for perceiving the other as such: “We will not reach out

to others until we have come to grips with ourselves.” Chalk then presents a double fear: “The white man’s fear of the black man discourages the two of them from knowing each other as full, dignified human beings. The black man’s deeply rooted fear of the white man today prevents him from trusting anything the white man says, and little that the white man does.” The preacher endorses love as an “attitude of heart and life [that] makes brotherhood possible in our time.” Furthermore, because “God never qualified His love . . . those of us who know Him in Jesus Christ cannot qualify the objects of our love.”

The sermon’s conclusion repeats the introduction’s “some of my best friends” line, “that little catch-phrase that seems to pop out in so many conversations about people of other races.” Chalk proceeds to “complete the thought” in a way that is at least close to doing what he negatively criticizes, and he does so with more self-disclosure:

Some of my best friends refuse to feed my superiority delusion. . . . Some of my best friends are the kind of people about whom I am often criticized. . . . Some of my best friends are not able, so far as I know, to help my business, build my professional reputation, or make me more popular in the community . . . Some of my best friends will remain my friends even though they do not respond favorably to my concern.

In explaining that last line, Chalk responds to history:

Centuries of oppression from men of my skin color have all but convinced some of my best friends never to trust a man who looks like me. Centuries of ignorance and myth have tried to teach me to believe that those who are not of my ethnic group are not capable of lasting human relationships and permanent contributions to mankind. But I repudiate that; risk the scorn of my racial group; reach out to

those whom I have never truly understood and who have never understood me, even if my sincere efforts are rejected, misunderstood, and scorned.

He anchors that commitment in the other-centered love of Jesus and continues with another “some of my best friends” statement. It is one of deep self-disclosure: “some of my best friends have made me extremely uncomfortable with their honest appraisals of my life and its weaknesses.” After citing the biblical account of Paul’s rebuke of Peter when the latter “allowed social pressures in the early church to cause him to refuse to fellowship Gentile Christians” (Galatians 2:11), Chalk extends his self-disclosure: “I have experienced that kind of loving, Christian rebuke from those who saw through my superficial pretensions to love and my thinly-veiled prejudices, and I am a better man for their honest treatment of my sin.” Then, as usual, he ends the sermon on a note of individual rather than social change, calling people to obey biblical commands of confession, repentance, and baptism.

Sermon Four: “Are You a Respector of Persons?”

Instead of beginning with a quotation of a governmental document as in the first sermon or with questions as in the second and third, the speaker opens this speech by leading listeners’ minds to Jesus and his “greatest commands” in Matthew 22:37-40 (e.g., “You shall love the Lord your God . . . You shall love your neighbor as yourself”).³² The introduction reviews the main ideas of the previous three sermons. After further developing the previously mentioned theme of self-knowledge through relationship with

³² Chalk here uses the Revised Standard Version of the Bible. Previous biblical quotations have come from the King James Version.

God through Christ, Chalk presents “seven deadly wounds that racism inflicts on” African Americans.

First, he says, “The superiority-inferiority complex in America steals the Negro’s sense of personal identity.” In explaining this he contrasts statements by Leon Watts and Ralph Ellison. Watts writes, “It is difficult for the white liberal to understand the need for self-identity—sense of meaning, purpose in life, and dignity . . . As black men we must gain the power whereby we, too, can determine some of the rules of the game.”³³ A college president in a novel by Ellison presents another perspective; the administrator tells a student, “You let the white folk worry about pride and dignity—you learn where you are and get yourself power, influence, contacts with powerful and influential people—then stay in the dark and use it!”³⁴

“A second wound inflicted on black men in America is the attempted destruction of his sense of worth.” This injustice is “the least obvious but the most heinous of all race crimes, for it kills the spirit and the will to live.”³⁵ Chalk explains, “This is the kind of murder Jesus warns us about, when he says: ‘And be not afraid of them that kill the body, but are not able to kill the soul’” (Matthew 10:28). The bodily death in that verse, however, is because the victims follow Jesus, not because they are of an oppressed racial group despised by murderers. Furthermore, the verse recognizes only God with the power to kill the soul; and the following three verses present God as caring. The verse says

³³ Chalk quotes Leon Watts, “A Modern Black Looks at His Outdated Church,” *Renewal* (December 1967): 6.

³⁴ Chalk quotes Ralph Ellison, *Invisible Man* (New York, NY: Signet Books, 1947), 129.

³⁵ Chalk cites John Howard Griffin, *Black Like Me* (New York, NY: Signet Books, 1960), 111.

nothing about racial injustice. Nevertheless, Chalk's quoting of it might have been effective in arousing an emotional response from uncritical listeners.

The third wound is that "all expectations of the oppressed are crushed." Out of such crushing, according to Chalk, "the early life of Malcolm X arose." Chalk quotes Malcolm X ("in those days only three things in the world scared me: jail, a job, and the Army")³⁶ but does not connect the quotation with the claim. The fourth wound is that "prejudice against the Negro in America also causes a powerful, unremitting frustration." He illustrates this by sharing what an African American told him: "If I am rejected because I am uneducated, just tell me, and I'll go back to school. If you want nothing to do with me because of the way I dress, just tell me, and I will try to change that. If you don't like the place I live, I could move. But if I am rejected because of my color, then there's nothing I can do about that." The person who spoke those words "was well-educated, nicely-dressed, and lived in a good house." Perhaps Chalk, when saying this, does not notice that white supremacy has shaped his understanding of what education, dress style, and housing are respectable.

Another wound is that "the Negro often comes to a sense of futility." The preacher again quotes the *Report of the National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders*: "The frustrations of powerlessness have led some to the conviction that there is no effective alternative to violence as a means of expression and redress, as a way of 'moving the system'. More generally, the result is alienation and hostility toward the institutions of law and government and the white society which controls them."³⁷ Chalk

³⁶ Chalk cites Malcolm X, 104.

³⁷ *Report*, 205.

connects this to the “form of social rejection and discrimination” experienced by early (i.e., first-century) Christians. However, as mentioned above, the persecution endured by early followers of Jesus was a response to their religious affiliation, not a response to their membership in any racialized group.

The sixth wound of racism is that the “domination of the black man . . . encourages destructive rebellion. . . . When one cannot see himself as a man, made in God’s likeness, he becomes capable of all kinds of inhuman acts.” Of course, that statement can apply to members of all racial groups.

In each of the first six wounds of racism, according to Chalk, racially oppressed people ask a question. The questions associated with the wounds are, respectively, as follows: “Who am I?” “What am I?” “What can I ever become?” “What can I do?” “What difference does it make?” “Who cares?”

The last wound mentioned by Chalk is that “the Negro in America is continually confronted with his alleged ‘inferiority.’ Wasn’t it Hitler who said tell the lie big enough and long enough and people will believe it?” The preacher also portrays Malcolm X as responding to the struggle for identity: “My black brothers and sisters—*no* one will know *who* we are . . . until *we* know who we are! We never will be able to *go* anywhere until we know *where* we are!”³⁸

Chalk ends the sermon by testifying to the transformation he experienced in the process of preparing and presenting the four-part series: “I come to this concluding discussion on the racial revolution in America with great seriousness, deep conviction of

³⁸ Chalk does not cite sources for the Hitler and Malcolm X references in this section. I include the original italicization in this quotation. In most of the quotations in this chapter, I do not.

my personal sin, and a genuine willingness to make the contributions Christ enables me to make to the troubled world in which you and I live.” In response to the lack of “dignity and purpose” in “perpetrator and receiver of racial hostility,” the speaker presents four answers: “First, we must recognize God, the Creator of all men . . . Second, Christ must be obeyed as Lord and Savior. . . . Third, God’s Spirit must be respected as the author of my new sense of identity and worthwhileness as well as the source of life for the Church of the New Testament which welcomes all men regardless of either past life or physical origin. . . . Fourth, all men must be respected as men rather than used as things.” The idea of the Trinity that appeared near the beginning of this series of four sermons here leads to human behavior; the divine relationality influences human relationships. Chalk, however, does not end with that. Instead, he presents the “plan of salvation” again and ends on a spiritualized and individualized note: “You may make your greatest contribution to the destruction of racial injustice and prejudice by becoming a Christian.” Instead of ending with a call to social action, he issues a call for individual religious conversion.

Constrained Prophetic Rhetoric

Each week in the summer immediately following King’s assassination, Chalk spoke nationally against racism. To white listeners likely comfortable with blatant racism and perhaps more subtle segregationist perspectives, Chalk went further to present racism and Christianity as mutually exclusive opponents. Although he knew that Christianity had been friendly with racism, he was casting a vision of another reality and explaining it in biblical language expected by the audience. Instead of focusing much on racist perspectives that had used language from the Bible, he kept his focus on the alternative reality he was (re)inventing with language from the same source. In addition to this

linguistic strategy, Chalk also invited his listeners into introspection, especially in the second and third sermons. One example is “Have you ever had someone say to you with a stare of contempt: ‘What are you doing here?’”

Chalk’s sermons fit Andre E. Johnson’s definition of prophetic rhetoric as “discourse grounded in the sacred and rooted in a community experience that offers a critique of existing communities and traditions by charging and challenging society to live up to the ideals espoused while offering celebration and hope for a brighter future.”³⁹ The sacred for some prophetic speakers is religious and for some is political; some appeal to scripture while others stand on national documents such as the Constitution. Chalk stands firmly on the Bible, citing it repeatedly. Furthermore, he is “rooted in a community experience,” the Churches of Christ, a religious tradition that exerts rhetorical constraints on the speaker.⁴⁰ He “offers a critique of existing communities and traditions by charging and challenging society to live up to the ideals espoused,” calling listeners to live out biblical principles in which they believe. Chalk also offers “celebration and hope for a brighter future,” leading his audience to work toward a better reality in their interracial relationships. He does not prescribe specific actions for systemic change beyond the religious community, but he calls for change in individual lives. Consider my earlier paragraph about the end of the second speech:

The sermon nears its end with a stinging application of words by Jesus in Matthew 7:21 to racist Christians: “Not everyone that saith unto me, Lord, Lord,

³⁹ Andre E. Johnson, *The Forgotten Prophet: Bishop Henry McNeal Turner and the African American Prophetic Tradition* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2012), 7.

⁴⁰ Lloyd F. Bitzer, “The Rhetorical Situation,” *Philosophy and Rhetoric* 1:1 (1968): 8.

shall enter into the kingdom of heaven: but he that doeth the will of my Father who is in heaven.” By applying that text thusly, Chalk communicates that Christians who claim to follow Christ but enact hatred toward other humans based on race are doomed to separation from God, whom Chalks states twice in this conclusion “is not a racist.” The preacher, however, does not conclude the sermon by calling Christians to social action that might decrease racism in their cultural contexts. Instead, he leaves his listeners with an individualized message: “The Bible is every man’s book. Jesus is every man’s savior. The church is that family of God in which all men as God’s physical creatures can, by surrender to Christ, become God’s spiritual creatures.”

That change is one of behavior and, primarily, one of religious commitment, which Chalk presents as having social effects. His mission-oriented rhetoric contains two of the three characteristics identified by Darsey: “a sense of mission” and “a desire to bring the practice of the people in accord with a sacred principle.” The sermons do not have “an uncompromising, often excoriating stance toward a reluctant audience.”⁴¹

The absence of that stance results from white fragility. Some of his intended listeners do not tend to acknowledge the material privileges that accompany their racialized identities. At least some of the intended listeners contribute to racial inequality without countering it. Several apparently experience white fragility, a phenomenon that blunts Chalk’s prophetic edge. Instead of condemning his listeners’ participation in their society’s structural injustices, Chalk speaks boldly but shifts to individualized and

⁴¹ James Darsey, *The Prophetic Tradition and Radical Rhetoric in America* (New York, NY: New York University Press, 1997), 16.

spiritualized conclusions. Although, as seen in the opening quotation from the *Report of the National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders*, Chalk does not hide the structural nature of racism, his sermons' calls to action are individual. Because his target audience is uncomfortable in thinking, speaking, and hearing about racial conflict, the preacher softens the punch of each sermon before its end. This softening might also result from Herald of Truth's emphasis of an individualized and nonmaterial "plan of salvation," so whether the speaker or the organization softens the blow is a blurry matter. Either way, the sermons challenge listeners in their interpersonal interactions but do not push the audience to act for social (i.e., structural, systemic) justice.

White fragility might also explain Chalk's omission of any reference to Martin Luther King, Jr. In the month-long, four-part series, approximately three months after King's assassination, Chalk never mentions King. Other African American leaders, such as Malcolm X and George Kelsey, appear in the sermons; but King is absent. A reason is that several members of the Churches of Christ preferred preaching to avoid topics that seemed political.⁴² White churches in the 1960s tended to embrace racial separation, which of course entails inequality; they largely "failed to recognize a Christian 'social ethic.'"⁴³ Any mention of King at such a volatile time for race relations in the nation could have decreased Chalk's listeners, shrunk the Herald of Truth's financial support,

⁴² Key, 191. Although Chalk speaks about social issues, he is encouraging changes in individuals, not in a government. His rhetoric combines religious and social topics but remains distant from any political system.

⁴³ Douglas A. Foster, "Justice, Racism and Churches of Christ," in *Unfinished reconciliation: Justice, racism, and Churches of Christ*, ed. Gary Holloway and John York (Abilene, TX: Abilene Christian University Press, 2003), 131-151; Robinson, 98. Robinson gets the phrase "social ethic" from Samuel S. Hill Jr., *Southern Churches in Crisis* (Tuscaloosa, AL: University of Alabama Press, 1999 [1966]), 112.

and brought the speaker more hate mail than he received. Unwillingness to acknowledge the pains of racial injustice left listeners unequipped to receive biblical messages of prophetic strength and social consequence.

In these sermons Chalk pushes for change but lets his listeners' discomfort with acknowledging racism limit his rhetoric's prophetic punch. White fragility becomes a rhetorical constraint, determining what the preacher says and omits. Chalk's rhetoric in this sermon series is prophetic, but it is constrained prophetic rhetoric. As the rest of this dissertation will show, that constraint applies to more white church leaders than just Chalk.

CHAPTER FOUR: CHANNELING KING IN PUBLIC LETTERS

Previous chapters of this dissertation have explored five speeches, one sermon in a congregation and four radio addresses, and revealed that white fragility functioned as a rhetorical constraint when two leaders in white Christianity spoke against racism. This chapter advances that claim to show that it not only applied in 1968 during the Civil Rights Movement but also applies in more recent rhetoric. This analysis of public letters, which function as written preaching to a denomination, finds white fragility constraining prophetic rhetoric in the era of the Black Lives Matter Movement.

Race and the Churches of Christ

The hashtag #BlackLivesMatter has facilitated a multimedia movement studied by communication scholars. For example, Catherine Langford and Montené Speight explain that the hashtag carries “a positive message about the individual and communal worth of Black lives” and “teaches auditors the Black persons have a positive presence, that violence against the Black body is news, that white privilege exists, and that colorblind rhetoric does not help bring about equality or justice.”¹ Julius Bailey and David Leonard write that the words “Black Lives Matter” represent “the struggle against persistent violence and unmitigated racial terror,” and that “‘Black Lives Matter’ imagines a future that exists apart and beyond white supremacy.”² Christopher A. House explains:

¹ Catherine L. Langford and Montené Speight, “#BlackLivesMatter: Epistemic Positioning, Challenges, and Possibilities,” *Journal of Contemporary Rhetoric* 5:3/4 (2015): 78.

² Julius Bailey and David J. Leonard, “Black Lives Matter: Post-Nihilistic Freedom Dreams,” *Journal of Contemporary Rhetoric* 5:3/4 (2015): 67.

The “Black Lives Matter” rally cry began as a response to the 2014 acquittal of George Zimmerman in the murder trial of 17-year old Trayvon Martin and has gone beyond the focus of extrajudicial murders of Black bodies by police.

Informed by twelve guiding principles, BLM is a call to action against anti-Black racism, state violence against Black bodies through poverty and genocide, mass incarceration, the protection of undocumented immigrants, gender specific violence against Black women and children, the marginalization of Black people living with disabilities, and the liberation of Black Queer and Trans communities.³

In this essay, #BlackLivesMatter means both the hashtag and the movement it serves.

Much research remains to be done on the rhetoric(s) of (by, to, about, and otherwise related to) this significant movement, and one such area for study is public communication by and to members of religious communities. Therefore, this essay contributes to the discussion a consideration of church leaders’ responses to racism. More specifically, the essay analyzes two public letters published in August 2016 by *The Christian Chronicle*, an international newspaper of the Churches of Christ, a branch of the Stone-Campbell Movement. *The Christian Chronicle*’s website reports that the paper “reaches over 330,000 readers every month,”⁴ and the letters were authored and signed by approximately 80 leaders in church ministry and higher education. Both letters quoted

³ House, Christopher A. “Crying for Justice: The #BLACKLIVESMATTER Religious Rhetoric of Bishop T.D. Jakes.” *Southern Communication Journal* 83:1 (2018): 14-15.

⁴ *The Christian Chronicle*, <http://christianchronicle.org>, accessed March 16, 2019.

Martin Luther King Jr. as a historical foundation for their prophetic rhetoric, and the first one overtly supported #BlackLivesMatter.

By the time of King's assassination, the Churches of Christ had inherited a mixture of beliefs and practices regarding race relations. Alexander Campbell (1788-1866), one of the founders of the Stone-Campbell Movement, had taught that slavery was situationally appropriate; and other early white members of that religious tradition had freed slaves but had avoided influencing larger society through political action.⁵ David Lipscomb (1831-1917), the namesake of today's Lipscomb University in Nashville, had said "that all human government and political activity belonged to the realm of Satan."⁶ Shaped by that heritage, the Churches of Christ in the 1960s largely tended to avoid discourse about events deemed political and did not "recognize a Christian 'social ethic,'"⁷ even though a few members of the denomination spoke and wrote about topics of civil rights.⁸ That apolitical theology functioned even in the black Churches of Christ, as revealed in the life and work of Marshall Keeble, who died in the month of King's assassination. King, a product of African American religion and education, spoke religiously and politically, understanding the two spheres to be inseparable. Keeble ministered in the Churches of Christ, a largely white denomination. Likely because of the

⁵ Richard T. Hughes, *Reviving the Ancient Faith: The Story of Churches of Christ in America* (Abilene, TX: Abilene Christian University Press, 2008), 270-275.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 276-277.

⁷ Edward J. Robinson, *Show Us How You Do It: Marshall Keeble and the Rise of Black Churches of Christ in the United States, 1914-1968* (Tuscaloosa, AL: University of Alabama Press, 2008), 98; c.f. Samuel S. Hill Jr., *Southern Churches in Crisis* (Tuscaloosa, AL: University of Alabama Press, 1999 [1966]), 112.

⁸ John Allen Chalk, *Three American Revolutions* (New York, NY: Carlton Press, 1970); Fred D. Gray, *Bus Ride to Justice: Changing the System by the System: The Life and Works of Fred D. Gray* (Montgomery, AL: Black Belt Press, 1995).

white theology that had formed Keeble's religious identity and because of his dependence on white financial support, he focused his efforts on evangelical messages of individual conversion and avoided speaking about social problems that might have offended his constituency.

Apolitical theology continued in the Churches of Christ and complicated discussions of race relations. In two public letters published in August 2016, however, approximately 80 leaders in the Churches of Christ challenged the apolitical approach to social concerns. In doing so, they relied on the rhetoric of King instead of Keeble, even though Keeble was (and still is) the most widely known evangelist in the history of the black Churches of Christ. Whereas King publicly challenged systemic inequality, Keeble followed an apolitical approach anchored deeply in his religious heritage, a tradition shaped by and financed by white men.⁹

Those letters appeared not only in that religious context but also in a larger cultural context of racial controversy. Niraj Chokshi of *The New York Times* reported in August 2016, "Every day last year, Twitter users turned to social media to talk about race."¹⁰ Something similar probably could have been stated about Facebook. Social media had changed race-related rhetoric. No longer was such rhetoric housed primarily in ivory towers of academia, largely unknown meetings of clergy, or demonstrations by social justice activists. For example, according to Chokshi, on June 18, 2015, over four million tweets mentioned race following the Charleston church shooting; other events

⁹ A colleague and I are now researching such whitening of black religion.

¹⁰ Niraj Chokshi, "The Top News Events that Got America Talking about Race," *The New York Times*, August 15, 2016, <http://www.nytimes.com/2016/08/16/us/pew-study-race-twitter-news-events.html>, accessed March 16, 2019.

that spiked social media's mentions of race included the deaths of Sandra Bland and Freddie Gray, a BET Awards speech by Michael B. Jordan, and the Grammy Awards winnings by Kendrick Lamar. Also worthy of note is the Grammy acceptance speech by Viola Davis. All these events were complicated by the racist rhetoric of the 2016 presidential campaign.¹¹ Social media had allowed rhetoric about race to function rapidly and widely.

In addition to those events, two books, *Unfinished Reconciliation* and *Reconciliation Reconsidered*, had prepared the church leaders to write public statements related to race.¹² Also, at least since 2012, the Christian Scholars' Conference, a national event hosted annually by universities affiliated with the Churches of Christ, had provided sessions related to racism and civil rights. This chapter provides close readings of those public letters, draws from concepts of prophetic rhetoric, and leads to a reflection on whiteness, especially white fragility.

Letter One

The Christian Chronicle published "An Open Letter to Member of the Churches of Christ" on August 30, 2016. The identified authors were William Lofton Turner, Tanya Brice, Sandra Parham, and David Fleeer. Seventy-three other leaders in church ministry and church-related higher education joined the authors in signing the document.

¹¹ Nia-Malika Henderson, "Race and Racism in the 2016 Campaign," *CNN Politics*, September 1, 2016, <http://www.cnn.com/2016/08/31/politics/2016-election-donald-trump-hillary-clinton-race/index.html>, accessed March 16, 2019.

¹² Gary Holloway and John York, eds., *Unfinished Reconciliation: Justice, Racism, and Churches of Christ* (Abilene, TX: Abilene Christian University Press, 2003); Tanya Smith Brice, ed., *Reconciliation Reconsidered: Advancing the National Conversation on Race in Churches of Christ* (Abilene, TX: Abilene Christian University Press, 2016).

The letter began by catering to the apolitical theology so popular in the Churches of Christ: “We write this letter not as Democrats or Republicans or as partisans of any political philosophy, but as Christians who are partisans of the kingdom of God described in the biblical text.”¹³ This apolitical approach arose not only from theology but also from the white fragility of the largely white denomination, for separation from topics deemed political allows the privileged to ignore social injustice. Although the letter’s authors were not all white, they wrote to a predominately white denomination whose white founders had extensively influenced the tradition’s beliefs and actions. Because white fragility had caused white churches to resist political rhetoric, the writers of this letter started with a disclaimer, assuring readers that their goal was spiritual instead of social, as if the denomination’s apolitical theology were not a political philosophy.

Despite that fragility, the letter continued, “We write because of the racial tensions that now engulf our nation—racism against blacks, Hispanics, Asians, and other ethnic minorities.

But what has triggered our concern at this particular time is the tension that surrounds black/white relations—an extension of America’s original sin, the sin of slavery.” That admission of sin counteracted white fragility, risked rejection, denounced any separation between the spiritual and the social/political, and served negatively as a foundation of prophetic rhetoric.

¹³ William Lofton Turner, Tanya Brice, Sandra Parham, and David Fleer, “An Open Letter to Members of the Churches of Christ,” *The Christian Chronicle*, August 30, 2016, <http://christianchronicle.org/an-open-letter-to-members-of-the-churches-of-christ>, accessed March 16, 2019. For more about kingdom theology in the Churches of Christ, consult John Mark Hicks and Bobby Valentine, *Kingdom Come: Embracing the Spiritual Legacy of David Lipscomb and James Harding* (Abilene, TX: Leafwood), 2006.

The mention of “America’s original sin” surely challenged readers, tempting them to stop reading; for white fragility has no tolerance for such an accusation. However, the letter continued, “The question begs for an answer: how will we who claim the name Christian respond?” The question drew offended readers back into the discussion, appealing to shared religious identity.

The authors wrote, “The choice before us is clear. We can allow the racism that abounds in America’s popular culture to set the agenda for the church. Or we can allow the biblical vision of the kingdom of God to determine what we believe, how we feel, and how we act.” The Churches of Christ had long believed that the Bible should be the primary or only authority for faith and action. This culture-scripture contrast, therefore, invited resistant readers to continue reading.

Then the letter mentioned two ways of interpreting biblical texts: “The biblical text is clear: racism is a sin. It violates Jesus’ command to love our neighbors as ourselves. But here we have another choice. We can read the biblical text through the lens of American culture or we can read the culture through the lens of the biblical text.” The authors wrote that “we can acknowledge that racism is a sin and behave accordingly, or we can act as if racism is only a minor problem or, even worse, participate in the racism that scars such large segments of this nation.” With these words, the letter challenged a historically racist denomination, indicating that the only appropriate response was behavioral change.

The letter then referenced history. The authors wrote, “Half a century ago, Churches of Christ faced a similar crossroads with respect to race and we did not respond well.” They explained, “Between 1955, when black Americans launched the Freedom

Movement, and Martin Luther King, Jr.'s death in 1968, the leading publications serving white Churches of Christ simply ignored what was clearly the greatest moral crisis that had faced this nation since slavery and the Civil War." The writers specified, "*The Gospel Advocate* and *The Firm Foundation* were as silent as the tomb." (*The Gospel Advocate* and *The Firm Foundation* are widely read publications in the Churches of Christ.) Although their denomination's historical publications, surely due to white fragility instead of ignorance, had refused to communicate about racial inequality, the authors of this letter tried to correct the problem.

The letter's next section is where the King-Keeble difference becomes most obvious. The writers stated, "The Advocate spoke first with a back-handed slap at King. Keeble, the paper said, 'never led a march or demonstration . . . [and] was never connected with a riot.'" The letter authors explained that "the *Advocate* trivialized the sin of racism by calling it just one more example of the generic problem of prejudice—rich against poor, educated against uneducated, young against old, etc., that had existed throughout 'the history of the world.'" The letter then reported that "*The Firm Foundation* quickly followed suit, writing that Keeble 'never led a riot; he never burned out a block of buildings; he never marched on Washington. But he marched toward heaven from the day he obeyed the gospel.'" (Of course, King also did not lead violence; some of the people involved in his activities did violent acts.) The letter also remembered that *The Firm Foundation* had "made an astounding claim: 'There has been an infinitesimally small amount of racial prejudice in the Church of Christ.'" That perspective, however, had not been without opposition.

In the memory of the letter's writers, that opposition appeared most clearly in the words of Carl Spain, a Bible professor at Abilene Christian University, affiliated with the Churches of Christ. The authors wrote, "In 1960, Spain delivered a prophetic oration at the Abilene Christian Bible Lectures that indicted Churches of Christ and Church of Christ-related colleges over their complicity in racial discrimination."¹⁴ They explained, "The Supreme Court had ruled in 1954 that segregation in America's public schools was unconstitutional. Spain took that argument in an entirely different direction. He claimed that segregation on the basis of the color of one's skin was unbiblical and fundamentally anti-Christian." However, by the time of Spain's address in 1960, colleges affiliated with the Churches of Christ were still segregated racially.

Colleges were not alone in racial segregation. Congregations in the Churches of Christ also were segregated. The letter's authors cited Spain's recollection:

A few law-abiding, humble-hearted Negroes wanted to attend a service of the church of Christ. They had listened to me preach on the radio. . . . I made the mistake of telling them that they would be more than welcome. And they trusted me. They came in . . . and took the seats that were as far back as they could get and still be inside. I shall never forget the agony on their faces when white Christians made it very plain to them that they were out of place and glared at them . . . The Negroes left the assembly of the saints.

Because of that experience, Spain had "felt compelled to speak." He had said, "God forbid that churches of Christ, and schools operated by Christians, shall be the last stronghold of refuge for socially sick people who have Nazi illusions about the Master

¹⁴ Lectureships are national events hosted by universities affiliated with the Churches of Christ and function similarly to general conferences of other denominations.

Race. Political naturalism, in the cloak of the Christian priesthood, must not be the ethical code in the kingdom of Jesus Christ.” Spain had called for change. Based on that historical foundation, the authors of this letter called for change.

They wrote, “Both as a nation and as a church, we have come a long way since Carl Spain delivered that address in 1960. And yet in other ways we have not come far at all.” They continued, “Once again the nation finds itself in racial turmoil based, in turn, on persistent segregation patterns. And Churches of Christ reflect the same patterns of segregation that prevail in the larger culture.” The racial turmoil of the 1960s continued in 2016.

That observation led the letter’s authors to a question: “How will we respond?” They presented a choice: “The choice is the same one that faced Churches of Christ over half a century ago.” Nearing a repetition of their earlier words, they explained, “We can acknowledge that racism is a sin and behave accordingly, or we can act as if racism is only a minor problem or, even worse, participate in the racism that characterizes such large segments of this nation, regardless of political affiliation.” Based on the historical foundation of Spain, the authors called for behavioral change.

Because many readers might have objected to the letter’s “political correctness,” the letter’s authors wrote, “Those who criticize political correctness are right in at least one sense, for while political correctness encourages ‘correct’ behavior, it masks the hatred and bigotry that continue to lurk in the hearts of many Americans, including many Christians.” They contemporized that statement: “Nothing exposed that hatred more than the election in 2008—and again in 2012—of a black man to the Presidency of the United States.” They explained, “During President Obama’s first year in office there was a 400

percent increase in death threats, compared to those received by George W. Bush,” and continued, “These actions of the deranged were followed by elected public officials who, via social media, depicted President Obama as a chimpanzee and called him the ‘n’ word while others questioned his citizenship and religion.” Then the authors’ rhetoric became more specific.

They wrote, “But racial bigotry is only half of our problem. The other half is widespread misunderstanding on the part of many white Americans—including many white Christians—of the unique set of challenges that faces American citizens if the color of their skin happens to be black.” This statement called white readers to consider experiences different from their own.

Here Martin Luther King Jr.’s influence on contemporary rhetoric becomes clear. The letter writers stated, “Nothing has reflected that reality more clearly than the popular response to the Black Lives Matter movement.” They continued, “Today most white Americans—including most white Christians—celebrate Martin Luther King, Jr. and the Freedom Movement that he led. But many fail to see that Black Lives Matter is only the most recent incarnation of the Civil Rights Movement of the 1950s and 1960s.” Furthermore, channeling the civil rights martyr, they wrote, “If King were here today, he would stand in complete solidarity with Black Lives Matter in their desire to talk about the ways in which black lives are deprived of basic human rights and dignity. Those who doubt that truth only reveal the extent to which so much of white culture in this country has trivialized the legacy of Dr. King.” That statement moved beyond the tradition’s apolitical theology and, based on the historical foundation of King, called for action in partnership with #BlackLivesMatter despite white fragility.

The authors clarified, “Black Lives Matter seeks to communicate one simple truth—that black lives matter, TOO. It goes without saying that white lives matter. Everyone understands that and agrees with it.” They continued, “The message the black community wants to communicate is that black lives matter, TOO! But many whites—including whites in large segments of American Evangelicalism and many whites in Churches of Christ—trivialize the Black Lives Matter movement with the slogan, ‘All lives matter.’”¹⁵ Here history and theology came into dialogue with contemporary events.

The letter writers employed an analogy: “Let’s suppose that a black family’s house is on fire, but when the fire fighters arrive to save their house, white neighbors protest the concentration of attention on just one house because, ‘All houses matter!’” The analogy is explained: “Inner city black communities have been on fire, metaphorically speaking at least, for a very long time. In city after city, whites deserted these neighborhoods, leaving communities with a tax base entirely inadequate to support a variety of services, including the public schools.” The analogy concluded, “Plagued with poverty, crime, and failing schools, children grow up with essentially no hope. Black brothers and sisters are crying out to our white brothers and sisters, ‘we matter, too!’” This general call was strong, and it became more specific.

According to the authors, members of the Churches of Christ tended to acknowledge the claim that “black lives matter,” but the acknowledgement was limited. The letter writers stated, “Of course we value the lives of the black and white men and women who protect and serve our cities and neighborhoods. Law enforcement institutions have persons of strong character in an honorable and difficult work.” The

¹⁵ Pastors and scholars in the Churches of Christ disagree about the extent to which the denomination is evangelical.

authors continued, “However, when police kill black men, women and children on America’s streets without a trial, without a jury, and without a court-rendered verdict, black people plead with our white brothers and sisters, ‘we matter, too!’”

The letter writers clarified, “The problem is that so many whites refuse to hear this cry and continue to trivialize the message that black brothers and sisters so desperately want whites to hear.” They continued, “After President Obama has attempted time and again to help the nation understand the real issues that face black Americans on a daily basis, a leading politician accused him of using ‘the pulpit of the presidency to divide us by race and color.’” Furthermore, the authors wrote, “It is a tragedy when politicians of any political party accuse those who point out these problems of seeking to ‘divide us by race and color.’ The very opposite is true. We can only solve problems by naming them.” This was the political problem.

There also was a church problem: “It is even more tragic when the church marches to the siren song of racial discrimination. But the terrible truth is this—that the church in America—the church at large—has done that for a very long time.” The letter writers did not stop with those words but enlisted history. They drew from Frederick Douglass:

Between the Christianity of this land, and the Christianity of Christ, I recognize the widest possible difference—so wide, that to receive the one as good, pure, and holy, is of necessity to reject the other as bad, corrupt, and wicked. To be the friend of the one, is of necessity to be the enemy of the other. I love the pure, peaceable, and impartial Christianity of Christ: I therefore hate the corrupt, slaveholding, women-whipping, cradle-plundering, partial and hypocritical

Christianity of this land. Indeed, I can see no reason, but the most deceitful one, for calling the religion of this land Christianity. I look upon it as the climax of all misnomers, the boldest of all frauds, and the grossest of all libels.

The authors also quoted Martin Luther King Jr., who “discovered that the church at large throughout the South was a bastion of resistance to freedom and equality for blacks.”

This claim was supported by words of King:

I have traveled the length and breadth of Alabama, Mississippi and all the other southern states. On sweltering summer days and crisp autumn mornings I have looked at her beautiful churches with their lofty spires pointing heavenward. I have beheld the impressive outlay of her massive religious education buildings. Over and over again I have found myself asking: “What kind of people worship here? Who is their God?”

The letter writers continued, “And in the 1950s and 1960s when colleges related to the Churches of Christ refused to admit black students simply because of the color of their skin, R. N. Hogan, a well-known preacher among black Churches of Christ and editor of the most widely read publication among black churches, *The Christian Echo*, picked up that same refrain.” They continued, “Those who ran those schools, Hogan demanded, should ‘stop calling themselves Christians, stop calling their schools Christian schools, and stop calling their churches, churches of Christ.’” These historical foundations of Douglass, Hogan, and King led the letter writers to call for change.

Hogan’s challenge continued in 2016. The letter writers stated, “And to the extent that members of Churches of Christ today join with their secular counterparts—and in many instances, their evangelical counterparts—and trivialize the cry of their black

brothers and sisters who insist that ‘black lives matter,’ we can hear the voice of Carl Spain pleading from the grave that ‘political naturalism, in the cloak of the Christian priesthood, must not be the ethical code in the kingdom of Jesus Christ.’” The historical foundation of Spain lent support.

The authors noticed positive steps. They wrote, “Today there are movements closely connected with Churches of Christ where thoughtful and honest dialogue occurs, like the Racial Unity Leadership Summits (RULS) and Advancing the National Conversation on Race (connected to this year’s Christian Scholars’ Conference).” They continued, “These and other regional grassroots meetings need to multiply, where black and white Christians sit together to talk toward understanding so that a common voice for systemic change can emerge.” Systemic change is crucial in a denomination that traditionally has communicated an other-worldly, individualistic message above social change.

They concluded by citing a civil rights lawyer in the Churches of Christ. They wrote, “We have come a long way, but we have a long way to go. As the distinguished Civil Rights Attorney, Fred Gray, continues to warn, ‘Racism is still a major problem in our country and it is not going away by itself.’” They stated, “Above all other loyalties, we are Christians, citizens in the kingdom of God, and as Christians we can—and must—do better.” That conclusion, based on the historical foundation of Gray, led to the signatures.

Letter Two

On August 31, 2016, *The Christian Chronicle* published a letter by Harold Shank and Robert Solomon, long-time ministers in the Churches of Christ and administrators of

higher education, under the title, “Speaking Up on the Issue of Race in America.”¹⁶ By “America,” the newspaper meant the United States of America, even though the term “America” refers to North and South America instead of a single nation. The authors of the letter made the same mistake.

Like the writers of the previous letter, the authors of this one also began with a disclaimer. They wrote, “First, we do not have all the answers. Although flawed souls, we search the scriptures seeking to do God’s Will.” They secondly claimed that they did “not speak for all black people or all white people and certainly not all Christians” and recognized “that we speak from groups that hold a wide range of views.” Third, they stated, “we make general statements about race in America and the church knowing about numerous exceptions.” This humility should be admired.

The disclaimer continued, “Everyone experiences a sense of life not being fair. Whether it’s being a victim of identity theft, getting bumped from an airplane, being lied to by a superior, catching a cold from a friend, or enduring an unfair referee; we’ve all experienced the inequities of life in varying degrees.” With these words, the authors apparently attempted to lessen white people’s responsibility for racial injustice. Like the *Gospel Advocate* mentioned in the previous letter, these authors treated racism as simply one form of inequality, like a cold’s spread.

They wrote, “We have witnessed Americans respond positively to those experiencing tragedies. Donations and help seem to flow freely after a fire or a catastrophic storm. Many people come to the aid of those in peril and chaos.” They

¹⁶ Harold Shank and Robert Solomon, “Speaking Up on the Issue of Race in America,” *The Christian Chronicle*, August 31, 2016, <http://christianchronicle.org/speaking-up-on-the-issue-of-race-in-america>, accessed March 16, 2019.

proceeded, “However, we all seem to experience selective blindness with regard to inequality. It’s easier to see the injustices we experience in our own lives than to see it in the lives of others. Sometimes whole societies ignore systemic injustices.” The letter authors, in these words, leaned more closely to an acknowledgement of racial injustice.

Drawing from biblical foundations, the writers stated, “Isaiah, Amos, Micah and Jeremiah made that accusation against Israel. God sent these prophets because the people were unaware of what they were doing.” The authors explained, “So caught up in their own lives, in maintaining their own lifestyle and standard of living; they lived unaware of the way their actions hurt others.” In other words, “The music of their lives drowned out the cries of the hurting. The money clanging in the cash register made such a commotion that the pleas of the vulnerable were not heard.” The writers concluded, “Fortunately, God heard. God hears these cries even when we do not.” The theological rhetoric continued:

We can easily identify a number of groups whose cries tend not to be heard in our time. Unwanted children, the isolated elderly, and neglected minorities come to mind. Jesus and his followers paid special attention to such groups. When Jesus went to his hometown synagogue in Luke 4 to inaugurate his earthly ministry, He read from Isaiah and transformed the prophet’s words into his mission: I’ve come to preach to the poor, proclaim release to the captives, help the blind see and set the oppressed free (Luke 4:18).

As King had used the Bible to call for racial justice, so did these authors, even though they treated racial injustice as one of many prejudices.

The writers emphasized religious identity over social inequality: “We share a common allegiance to Christ, reflect on a lifetime of preaching and serving in churches of Christ, and have a shared vision of building a better America.” However, they also wrote, “As followers of Jesus who came to set the oppressed free, the two of us have come together to address an issue that drives people apart.” They continued, “We join to write this letter because of powers around us that tend to force us apart,” and explained, “Recent days and events have magnified the strained relationship between the black and white races that has existed in our nation for generations. That strain draws us together.” Drawing on the historical foundation of King, they wrote, “We refuse to turn to violence. We refuse to withdraw. We refuse to make inflammatory accusations. We refuse to remain silent.” They clarified, “Dr. Martin Luther King once said, ‘In the end we will not remember the words of our enemies but the silence of our friends.’” Related to this essay’s introductory comments about social media, the letter writers said, “The constant stream of reports and articles in social media and the network news of black men being murdered while in police custody have made King’s quote resonate today.” Furthermore, “Even in unprecedented progress for racial and ethnic minorities and the poor, America continues to struggle with injustice and inequality.” Then they wrote these powerful words: “the silence of many of our brothers and sisters in Christ . . . has become most troubling.” Although the letter had begun generically, the rhetoric became more specific, challenging the writers’ denomination.

Drawing from the historical foundation of the early church, the authors wrote that “we seek to follow Jesus in the twenty-first century just as the early Christians followed Him in the first century.” Because of the apolitical theology of the Churches of Christ,

the authors wrote that “Like the early church, we desire to be more influenced by what we hear from Jesus, rather than by what we hear in our American culture, traditions and the media.” The apolitical theology, however, did not prohibit direct rhetoric about social injustice: “Just as he came to preach good news to the poor, proclaim release to the captives and to set the oppressed free, we aspire to join Him in that cause.” The letter writers used apparently apolitical rhetoric to call for change in the church’s response to social injustice.

Although the religious rhetoric of their denomination had functioned apolitically, the authors used it to challenge their system: “We believe that the cause of Christ that joins us is more powerful than the ugly racism in our land that seeks to divide us.” They stated that the biblical foundations of their rhetorical tradition lead to social action: “As we study the Holy Scriptures and the ministry of Jesus, we see a story of love, compassion, inclusion, mercy, equity and equality.” They explained, “We see a story of serving those on the margins of society and reaching the forgotten with the Gospel of truth. It makes perfect sense that Christians should be champions of equality and fairness, rather than passive observers.” The letter writers drew from their apolitical denomination’s biblical foundations to call their people to social engagement.

They mentioned that “Robert’s father had the ‘talk’ with him about how to navigate racism in America, especially how to respond to the police” and that “Harold’s father had no such ‘talk.’” (Robert is black. Harold is white.) Then the authors told about their interracial experiences in college: “Harold roomed with an African American and Robert roomed with an Anglo American. Both of us benefited and grew from those experiences.” By not stopping with these words, they did not let their readers assume that

racism had been experienced identically by black and white people. Instead, they continued:

Both of us grew up in racially segregated America. We are heirs of a nation where the first African slaves arrived in Virginia in 1619 and were subjected to sub-human treatment and brutality. Even after slavery, black Americans suffered government sanctioned terror visited upon them through lynching, rapes and bombings. It escalated in reconstruction and lasted through Jim Crow laws and government sponsored segregation. As Christian brothers we both lament that, in the past, people in our own fellowship did not lead the way to justice, equality and mercy; but had to be dragged along by others.

Instead of remaining vague, the letter specified:

By every measure of opportunity: education, health care, housing, economic gain, the criminal justice system, etc., black Americans lag significantly behind whites in large part due to our dark past of racial discrimination and racialized structures. We both recognize that far too many in white America ignore the 400 years of brutality, injustice and unequal treatment suffered by black Americans and other minority communities. Moreover, it is a painfully uncomfortable subject to discuss, even for those who are willing to work on racial reconciliation.

That discomfort existed in the white fragility of the white-dominated Churches of Christ, and the authors responded, “Our fears of blame and anger paralyze us, so we tend to choose silence and avoidance, which are enemies of healing and true unity in Christ.” The writers directly acknowledged the “silence and avoidance” that was (and is) so common in white Christianity and the white-shaped black Christianity of Keeble.

Dismissing the accusation of black-on-black crime, noting also white-on-white crime, the authors called for difficult conversations. They wrote, “We must be willing to listen to one another. We must recognize that our black brothers and sisters have deep emotional and spiritual scar tissue created by centuries of abuse, subjugation, violence, hatred and neglect.” They continued, “We must acknowledge that many white brothers and sisters have developed thick and stubborn emotional and spiritual calluses created by years of misinformation, racist traditions, conditioning and inequities.” They acknowledged the difficulty: “Breaking through requires hard and sustained work. It is difficult. It is challenging.” Furthermore, the writers added theological language to their claim: “it is not impossible because God is able and people of God are uniquely situated to move the needle forward. We should be taking the lead! We should not be dragged along like recalcitrant children!” They claimed that the church should lead the society in changes related to racial justice.

The letter concluded with six action steps. First, churches should teach about racial injustice. Second, sermons should address these issues. Third, new church plants should embrace racial diversity. Fourth, colleges, universities, and seminaries affiliated with the Churches of Christ should address topics of racial injustice. Fifth, members of the Churches of Christ should learn about racial inequalities. Sixth, Christians should develop interracial friendships. The authors omit involvement in social justice activism. The letter’s predominately white audience’s fragility likely produced that omission.

Pastoral Constraint

Whiteness shaped both letters. Although the authors were not all white, they wrote in and to a religious culture shaped largely by white theology and experience; and

white fragility functioned as a rhetorical constraint in the public letters. More specifically, the target audience's white fragility (i.e. unwillingness to tolerate discomfort in communication about race) constrains the authors' prophetic rhetoric, shaping and omitting words.

That shaping appears most obviously in the opening disclaimers that cater to apolitical theology, and the omission is most evident in the letters' focus on change in the church and not in larger society. The authors called for change in their religious system but did not specify ways in which church members may contribute to social justice activism in the larger culture(s). As church leaders, the writers' knew their readers well enough to know that pushing for intra-systemic change would be difficult and that further challenge may have killed the readers' willingness to consider the messages.

That limiting of the challenge, however, was not by itself enough to nurture connection between authors and readers. The writers also strategically chose to cite historical foundations for their prophetic rhetoric, and those foundations were both negative and positive. The authors negatively cited historical foundations of racism and positively quoted people who had cried out against racial injustice.

Another function of whiteness in the letters appears through a consideration of blackness. One of the letters endorsed the Black Lives Matter movement (BLM), and the other letter did not mention BLM. According to news reporter Susie Armitage, "2016 was the year Black Lives Matter went truly global. The US-born movement [had] spread as far as Brazil, South Africa, and Australia."¹⁷ These letters appeared in late August

¹⁷ Susie Armitage, "2016 Was the Year Black Lives Matter Went Global," *Buzz Feed News* (December 8, 2016): <https://www.buzzfeednews.com/article/susiearmitage/2016-was-the-year-black-lives-matter-went-global>.

2016, just weeks after police officers had killed Anton Sterling by holding him down and shooting him repeatedly, just weeks after Diamond Reynolds posted on Facebook a live video right after police had shot Philando Castile, just weeks after Micah X. Johnson had killed five police officers at the BLM protest, just weeks after Charles Kinsey had been shot by police while he was trying to help someone experiencing autism and disorientation, and just weeks after participants in a BLM rally in Memphis had shut down a major bridge and thereby led a number of interracial conversations in the Memphis community, calling for “an accounting of funds spent in public works, more money for crime prevention and youth empowerment and cultural sensitivity training for Memphis Police Department officers” and prompting church leaders to organize racial reconciliation efforts.¹⁸ The summer of 2016 was one of the many times in which the exclamation “Black lives matter!” and the related question “Do black lives matter?” resounded loudly and widely because so did “the belief that black lives do not matter. Still.”¹⁹

That belief prompted these letters and is one reason that the second letter did not ally with the BLM cause as strongly as the first letter had done. Since the letters were published online so close to each other in time, they likely were written independently of each other. Therefore, the authors of the second letter probably did not intentionally write

¹⁸ Australian Broadcasting Corporation, “Timeline: The Black Lives Matter Movement,” *ABC News* (February 22, 2018): <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2016-07-14/black-lives-matter-timeline/7585856>. Eric Lee Smith, “Tempers Flare during Next-Stop Public Forum after Bridge Shutdown,” *Tri-State Defender* (July 12, 2016): <https://tri-statedefender.com/tempers-flare-during-next-stop-public-forum-after-bridge-shutdown/07/12/>. Eryn Taylor and Jessica Gertler, “Candlelight Service Brings Bartlett Community Together,” *WREG Memphis*, July 20, 2016, <https://wreg.com/2016/07/20/candlelight-service-brings-bartlett-community-together/>.

¹⁹ Davis W. Houck, “‘Who Are These Nine People?’ #BlackLives[StillDon’t]Matter?” *Rhetoric Review* 36:4 (2017): 281.

more softly than those of the first letter. Instead the fact that the second letter remained silent about BLM whereas the first letter had endorsed the movement may be explained by the theological difference between the authoring groups, theological differences shaped by race.

As I mentioned earlier, apolitical theology has long been an ongoing force in the Churches of Christ. They are not likely to get involved with far-right, Evangelical politics; and they likewise do not tend to discuss public issues considered by some to be political, issues such as racism. I propose that the similarity between apolitical theology and whiteness is no coincidence. Like apolitical theology, white rhetoric has ignored white identity, (systemic) racism, and sometime even the social construction of race itself.²⁰ Furthermore, apolitical theology is a form of white theology, sharing seven “pillars of whiteness:” *disassociation* (“I’m not racist”), *exemption* (“I’m not part of social systems), *individualism* (“racism is ‘discrete acts committed by individual people’”), *entitlement* (in this religious context, “we’re right, so we’ll go to heaven”), *denial* (“systemic racism does not exist—in the nation or in the church”), *defensiveness* (“how dare you accuse me of racism!”), and *objectivity* (“I’m ‘free of all bias’”).²¹ White members of the Churches of Christ, however, typically do not acknowledge their theology’s whiteness. Admitting that they unavoidably participate in racist systems, that

²⁰ Robin DiAngelo, “White Fragility,” *International Journal of Critical Pedagogy* 3 (2011): 54-70; *White Fragility: Why It’s So Hard for White People to Talk about Racism* (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 2018); Patricia G. Davis, “Reversal of Injury in the Obama Era: *Shelby County vs. Holder*, Resentment, Moral Authority, and the Discursive Construction of White Victimhood,” *Rhetoric Review* 36:4 (2017): 320-331.

²¹ DiAngelo, *White Fragility*, 3-4, 9. Single quotation marks indicate DiAngelo’s words.

racism is structural rather than individual, that racial experience shapes epistemology, and that slavery's history is also present would make the whites uncomfortable.

The first letter nurtures that discomfort. Although its audience's white fragility blunts its punch, the letter also challenges white complacency and denial, especially in the forms of "colorblindness" and "All Lives Matter." Amanda Nell Edgar and Andre E. Johnson explore the interactions between BLM and ALM, as well as their influences, including spirituality.²² In that clash, ALM proponents have perceived BLM as a threat to their unacknowledged white identity, privilege, and comfort. BLM activists, on the other hand, go beyond their official principles and challenge the denial and defensiveness of their ALM counterparts, molded—consciously and subconsciously—by white supremacy, a general system of inequality, broader than prejudice and discrimination.²³

The second letter takes a softer approach, disturbing white comfort and challenging white theology, but does not endorse BLM, a political movement—outside the concern of apolitical Christianity. Whereas the first letters' authors are deeply related to Lipscomb University, the Christian Scholars' Conference, and recent racial reconciliation efforts in the Churches of Christ, the second letter seems to address a readership less ready to consider their participation in and contribution to racist systems.

In summary, one letter endorsed BLM; the other did not. Both were constrained by white fragility; both challenged the status quo; both softened the potential edges of

²² Amanda Nell Edgar and Andre E. Johnson, *The Struggle Over Black Lives Matter and All Lives Matter* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2018).

²³ DiAngelo, *White Fragility*, 19-24.

their prophetic rhetoric. Both letters disrupted *and* nurtured the racial status quo. To make some sense of that is the next chapter's primary goal.

CHAPTER FIVE: CONCLUSION

Throughout the writing of this dissertation, I have wondered about the ongoing influence of audiences' white fragility on prophetic rhetoric in organizational leadership in times of racial conflict; and I have wondered if earlier challenges to racism shape later ones. Chapter two's analysis of John Scott's sermon revealed that white fragility in an audience can blunt a speaker's prophetic punch, and that observation continued in Chapter three's analysis of John Allen Chalk's focus on individual and interpersonal change over systemic and social change. Chapter 4 showed that white fragility has functioned as a constraint on prophetic rhetoric when leaders of predominately white Christianity have confronted racism—not only in the time of the Civil Rights Movement, but also in the era of the Black Lives Matter Movement. Furthermore, that chapter revealed that earlier challenges to racism influenced later ones.

In his prophetic preaching, Scott knew his people, their concerns, and what they had been discussing. He spoke as a member of the congregation, not as someone above the people. When he challenged the congregation, he challenged himself as well. When he indicted the congregation, he indicted himself, too. Confronting racism in an organization experiencing white fragility involves identification with the audience.¹

In the “Race Revolution” series of radio sermons in the summer of 1968, in the aftermath of the assassination of King and in the heat of the battle for civil rights, Chalk chose to speak on issues related to racism. He could have spoken more directly, but he also could have chosen a safer subject. Although he did not mention the obvious “elephant in the room,” he challenged his listeners to admit their racism, to make

¹ Kenneth Burke, *A Rhetoric of Motives* (New York: Prentice-Hall, 1950).

friendships across cultural boundaries, and to let their belief in God's universal love shape their attitudes, words, and actions. Consideration of his audience's white fragility, however, limited the challenge to individual and interpersonal concerns.

In the public letters analyzed, approximately eighty leaders in the Churches of Christ encouraged their denomination to think, speak, and act more justly regarding interracial relations. The authors' prophetic rhetoric drew from historical foundations to call for change and was influenced by white fragility. The foundations were negative and positive, and the positive foundations included Martin Luther King Jr. The first letter even channeled King, claiming that, if present today, he would side with #BlackLivesMatter. Because of the apolitical theology so deeply engrained in the Churches of Christ, leaders of that denomination likely will not soon join forces in a public letter challenging any government to change, although leaders in some other denominations lead and participate in efforts to influence governments.

This study of rhetorical leadership of organizational conflict and change has inspected those seven rhetorical events, not to claim that they are admirable or praiseworthy, but to draw implications for scholarship and practice of rhetorical leadership in religious communication, organizational communication, and especially their intersection. Calls for change in that intersection often are examples of intra-systemic prophetic rhetoric, in which speakers and writers communicate in their organizations to call for change in those systems. Those communicators anchor their rhetoric in their communities' sacred texts and do not address any government beyond those communities.

Competing goals to challenge and to nurture combine in intra-systemic prophetic rhetoric in organizational leadership. That form of communication happens as rhetorical leadership of organizational conflict and change in various contexts, including businesses, hospitals, universities, neighborhoods, and more. As the first chapter reports, rhetorical leadership is “the ability to shape a community by defining and reinterpreting meanings,” making “room for their new visions and goals” through the control of historical understanding and the replacement of “old frames of reference” to offer fresh understandings of values and beliefs.² Two principles of rhetorical leadership³ apply to the sermons and letters in this study. First, a sermon or a letter functioning as religious leadership operates as rhetorical leadership in a specific community—a local congregation or a network of congregations, not a nation or government or other organization beyond that religious community in which the sermon or letter acts. Second, rhetorical leadership strategies vary in diverse situations. What works well in one context may not in another; universalization of rhetorical leadership (or any other rhetorical) theory, criticism, or practice is impossible.

With that information in consideration, this dissertation has operated based on two goals: (1) to provide an opportunity for scholars of rhetoric, religious communication, and preaching to think anew about the leadership of organizational change and conflict and (2) to empower practitioners of religious rhetoric in church leadership and

² Catherine L. Riley, “Rhetorical Leadership and the Black Church: Revisiting 1940s’ Durham,” *Howard Journal of Communications* 27:4 (2016): 298; c.f. David Zarefsky, “Lincoln’s 1862 Annual Message: A Paradigm of Rhetorical Leadership,” *Rhetoric and Public Affairs* 3:1 (2000): 5-14; Stephen Skowronek, *The Politics Presidents Make* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993); Edwin C. Hargrove, *The President as Leader: Appealing to the Better Angels of Our Nature* (Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, 1998).

³ Kirk H. Wilson, “The Paradox of Lincoln’s Rhetorical Leadership,” *Rhetoric and Public Affairs* 3:1 (2000): 16.

practitioners of organizational leadership in multiple contexts to consider their navigation of competing goals in rhetorical leadership in times of conflict and change. The claim that white fragility blunts prophetic rhetoric can give the study of prophetic rhetoric, as well as the study and practice of preaching, a step toward acknowledging the need for leaders of white (and predominately white) Christianity, who care enough to practice rhetorical (and pastoral) sensitivity to nurture faith communities, to consider audience's white fragility. This dissertation considers constrained prophetic preaching in the Churches of Christ and from those case studies draws broad implications—white fragility's constraining of prophetic rhetoric also may be found in leadership, conflict, and change in other religions and organizations.

All this being stated, though, my primary scholarly objective in writing this dissertation has been to increase understanding of rhetorical leadership dynamics in intra-systemic calls for change, especially those related to race. In pursuit of that objective, I have found that white fragility is a reality with which leaders of predominately white communities must wrestle when speaking and writing against racism. Due to that reality, communicators in predominately white organizational leadership, especially in times of conflict and change, frequently combine rhetoric of challenge and rhetoric of nurture.

Although white fragility has long been a present reality, it has changed through time, as explained in the third chapter of DiAngelo's *White Fragility*, and varied from place to place; for how whites communicate about race in Memphis is different than how they do so in Boston. Histories of place and chronological situations produce various manifestations of white fragility and call for adaptive responses in rhetorical leadership. In that variation of fragility, audience adaptation seems harder in broader contexts than in

narrower ones. This study included case studies of both. Scott spoke for a singular, local community of people he knew deeply and was therefore able to cater to their specific needs. The radio addresses and public letters, however, were mass communication sent out to both anticipated and unexpected audiences. The speaker and authors could adapt their language somewhat to anticipated audiences but not to unexpected ones.

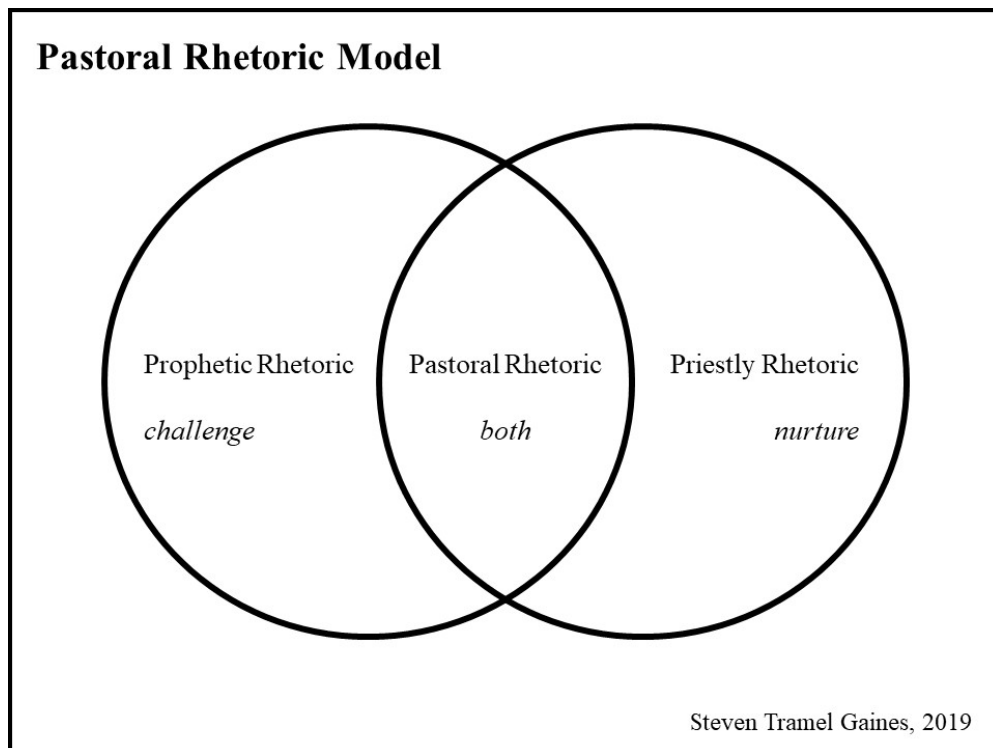
Conceptualizing Pastoral Rhetoric

As I have been writing this dissertation, my advisor, Andre E. Johnson, the leading scholar in the study of prophetic rhetoric, has asked me if the letters and sermons I have been studying really are prophetic rhetoric. I promised him that I would answer in Chapter 5. I wanted the previous chapters to focus on the texts under consideration, and I wanted to save suggestions for rhetorical theory, criticism, and practice for the conclusion. I also did not want the answer to be hidden somewhere in the middle of this work. Rather, I wanted the answer to be a featured conclusion.

That question is important not just because it helps me think more carefully in my analysis, but also because it relates to a current discussion among scholars and church leaders. For example, as I mentioned at the end of Chapter 2, Andre E. Johnson has facilitated a social media campaign using the hashtag #WhiteChurchQuiet to challenge white evangelical churches' failure to speak publicly against systemic injustice, especially racial inequalities. I am not evangelical, so I cannot speak for that segment of Christianity. However, I respectfully point out that prophetic rhetoric must function differently in white churches than it does in black churches. If white preachers (and other leaders of predominately white religious communities) do not consider their congregations' discomfort with discussion about racial conflict, sermons (and letters

functioning similarly) may destroy congregations instead of strengthening them; and dead, nonexistent groups neither experience change in themselves nor contribute to change in larger society.

My answer to his question is both affirmative and negative. Prophetic rhetoric calls for change, and that call is anchored in deeply treasured foundations. Scholarly literature, such as that by Andre E. Johnson and Christopher Z. Hobson cited in this dissertation, has studied prophetic rhetoric in messages from religious leaders to governmental authorities beyond religious systems. In comparison to such inter-systemic communication, priestly rhetoric is intra-systemic, sustaining religious (or other) organizations. Pastoral rhetoric combines prophetic and priestly rhetoric to call for change while nurturing communities and therefore tends to be less radical and more constrained than prophetic rhetoric may be when organizational leadership is not a concern. The following model depicts this relationship:



Pastoral preaching, a subcategory of pastoral rhetoric, is rhetorical leadership of religious communities, frequently occurs in those communities' worship assemblies, and fits the definition of preaching provided in Chapter 1: communication that is by, in, and for a religious community and is anchored in that community's sacred text(s). Preaching that is prophetic invites change, either systemic change in the religious community or participation in broader systemic change in the society. Preaching that is priestly nurtures the status quo. Preaching that is pastoral blends prophetic and priestly approaches in an attempt to practice responsible leadership, to care for the organization in ways that push for improvement without destroying the audience. I recently explained in the *Journal of Communication of Religion*:

Effective church change often happens slowly and requires a strategic balance of prophetic and pastoral rhetoric. (With terminological adjustment, this observation applies to change in other organizations.) Preaching that is too heavily pastoral to the neglect of prophetic rhetoric does not lead to organizational change, and preaching that is prophetic without pastoral sensitivity shocks the congregational system and can lead to division instead of the desired transformation.⁴

Based on that observation, my answer to Johnson's question is both affirmative and negative. Yes, the sermons and letters studied in this dissertation are prophetic rhetoric. No, they are not prophetic rhetoric like that studied by scholars of African American rhetoric. If preachers use prophetic rhetoric to call for change and priestly rhetoric to nurture congregations, the result may be pastoral rhetoric that challenges the status quo

⁴ Steven Tramel Gaines, "Daring to Prophecy: A Challenge to Patriarchy," *Journal of Communication and Religion* 41:4 (2018): 61.

while also practicing pastoral (rhetorical) sensitivity. In such a case, rhetorical adaptation to listeners' fragility is a strategy, not a trap.

Practical Considerations

This study invites rhetorical leaders in religious and other organizations to discern responsible prophetic-priestly combinations in situations of conflict and change. That discernment requires at least four considerations. I will present them here in relation to preaching and then will mention their relevance to other rhetorical leadership.

First is consideration of social context. Preachers contribute to the shaping of congregations' attitudes, beliefs, and actions; and that role of preaching in congregational formation necessitates social awareness. Marvin McMickle, a scholar of African American religion, writes, "Those who seek to speak from the Bible in the twenty-first century must do so with an awareness of the issues of poverty and economic disparity;"⁵ but homiletician John McClure writes that "preachers are theologians, not political theorists, political philosophers, sociologists, or historians."⁶ McMickle's perspective rings truer for this study: preachers responsible enough to stay informed about social concerns may speak prophetically, preaching from sacred texts to call for change and to envision a possible future.

The second consideration is white fragility. It has the power to blunt prophetic rhetoric in white church leadership in situations of racial conflict and other social tension. A preacher may speak from sacred foundations (i.e. biblical stories and teachings),

⁵ Marvin A. McMickle, "Preaching in the Face of Economic Injustice," in *Just Preaching: Prophetic Voices for Economic Justice*, ed. André Resner Jr. (Saint Louis, MO: Chalice, 2003), 3.

⁶ John S. McClure, *Preaching Words: 144 Key Terms in Homiletics* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2007), 118.

encouraging listeners to acknowledge social inequalities and to cease their contributions to injustices. However, the white fragility experienced by the congregation, perhaps the preacher, can lead to an idealized memory and a vague, unspecified call to action, as we noticed in John Scott's deracialized memory of the Memphis Massacre of 1866. In this way, discomfort with discussions about social inequalities may function as a rhetorical constraint, at least partially determining what and how a preacher communicates.⁷ However, that constraint can be a strategy instead of a trap if engaged carefully, intentionally, knowledgeably, and responsibly.

The third consideration is the risk of prophetic rhetoric in preaching. Even constrained prophetic rhetoric can result in congregants' objections and departures (both of which happened in response to Scott's sermon), so a prophetic preacher who allows white fragility to blunt the message might still take a risky stand. According to homiletician Leonora Tubbs Tisdale, prophetic preaching "can 'get ministers in trouble' with their congregations because it often goes against societal norms, pronouncing not only grace but also God's judgment on human action or inaction."⁸ Hebrew Bible scholar Walter Brueggemann writes:

Prophetic preaching, undertaken by working pastors, is profoundly difficult and leaves the preacher in an ambiguous and exposed position. The task is difficult because such a preacher must at the same time "speak the truth" while

⁷ Lloyd F. Bitzer, "The Rhetorical Situation," *Philosophy and Rhetoric* 1 (1968): 8. C.f. Allison J. Tanner, "Unpacking Prophetic Preaching: The Pastor as Cultured Actor," *Review and Expositor* 109 (Summer 2012): 433: "Pastors . . . are culturally situated social actors" who "communicate their messaged of moral exhortation through culturally available tools."

⁸ Leonora Tubbs Tisdale, *Prophetic Preaching: A Pastoral Approach* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2010), 3.

maintaining a budget, a membership, and a program in a context that is often not prepared for such truthfulness.⁹

That risky stand, however, might spark valuable conversations and lead to changes in perspective, conviction, and action. Of course, the message could be stronger. It could call out leaders of oppressive governments and corrupt businesses. It could specify ways in which listeners have contributed to injustice. Such a stronger, more prophetic message might lead to more objections and more departures, increasing congregational conflict and shrinking church membership, possibly even killing the congregation or the preacher's influence therein.

The fourth consideration is the prophetic-priestly combination in pastoral preaching. Sometimes a preacher chooses to say what needs to be said regardless of any threat to congregational peace or job stability, and sometimes a preacher speaks prophetically while also remaining priestly, practicing rhetorical sensitivity for the sake of congregational stability.¹⁰ Prophetic and priestly rhetoric coexist in pastoral rhetoric, for people “are more willing to hear difficult words about justice when they know the preacher cares about them.”¹¹ Homiletician Ronald Allen writes about prophetic preaching as “a special subcategory of pastoral preaching whose aim is to correct some

⁹ Walter Brueggemann, *The Practice of Prophetic Imagination: Preaching an Emancipating Word* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 2012), 1.

¹⁰ Roderick P. Hart and Don M. Burks, “Rhetorical Sensitivity and Social Interaction,” *Speech Monographs* 39:2 (1972): 76. Rhetorical sensitivity in preaching may be called pastoral sensitivity: Sangyil Park, “Speaking of Hope: Prophetic Preaching,” *Review and Expositor* 109 (2012): 413-27.

¹¹ McClure, 118.

aspect of the community's life," and homiletician Tim Sensing states that preachers' prophetic and priestly roles should not be separated.¹²

These considerations apply not only to preaching. They apply also to other rhetorical leadership in organizations. Rhetorical leadership requires awareness of social contexts, consideration of the organizations' discomfort with controversy, willingness to accept risks that accompany calls for change, and balance of prophetic and prophetic rhetoric in pastoral leadership.

Suggestions for Scholarship

I close this work with six suggestions for future scholarship. Two of them are for colleagues in my field of specialization, religious communication. One suggestion is for scholars of religious and organizational communication, and one is for homileticians and communication scholars in general. The last two are for me.

First is a suggestion for scholars of religious communication. Future research should investigate ways in which religious leaders in various faith communities write and speak for and against racial justice, as well as ways in which racial experiences, such as whiteness and white fragility, shape that rhetoric. Much more scholarship can be done on this in various Christian communities as well as other religions.

Second is another suggestion for religious communication scholars. While continuing our ongoing exploration of "communication-through-the-eyes-of-religion," let us not neglect opportunities to study "religion-through-the-eyes-of-communication."¹³

¹² Allen, 181; Sensing, 150; c.f. Park, 423-25. In addition to the pastoral nature of prophetic preaching, "Nobody is being 'pastoral' who is not also being 'prophetic.'" William H. Willimon, "Pastors Who Are Preachers Who Are Prophets," in Fleer and Bland, 19.

¹³ Quentin J. Schultze, "The Nature and Future of Religious Communication Scholarship," *Journal of Communication and Religion* 33:2 (2010): 194, 196.

The integration of communication theories and religious worldviews has its place¹⁴ but certainly should neither discontinue nor disrespect scholarship that functions naturalistically or agnostically rather than theistically.¹⁵

Third, I invite scholars of organizational and religious communication to explore further the concept of pastoral rhetoric presented in this dissertation. Scholars of religious communication may investigate other ways in which prophetic and priestly rhetoric combine in pastoral leadership, and organizational communication scholars may consider how the terminology of my pastoral rhetoric model may apply to or be translated for rhetorical leadership in organizations that are not overtly religious.

Fourth, I offer a suggestion for communication scholars as well as homileticians, scholars who study preaching. When I interviewed for admission to the communication doctoral program at the University of Memphis, a professor commended my research interests and clarified to me that my dissertation would need to be about communication instead of theology. In compliance with that statement, this dissertation has approached its subject primarily through a lens of rhetoric instead of theology. However, this study also has shown that the two fields are not as far apart as some scholars may assume. As I suggested in my first journal article, let us combine our perspectives to reach a greater epistemic potential.¹⁶

¹⁴ Clifford G. Christians, "Christian Scholarship and Academic Pluralism," *Journal of Communication and Religion* 27:1 (2004): 11-24; Kenneth R. Chase, "Christian Rhetorical Theory: A New (Re)Turn," *Journal of Communication and Religion* 36:1 (2013): 25-49.

¹⁵ Mark Ward Sr., "The 'God Problem' in Interfaith Dialogue: Situating Divine Speech in the Seven Traditions of Communication Theory," in *A Communication Perspective on Interfaith Dialogue: Living within the Abrahamic Traditions*, ed. Daniel S. Brown Jr. (Lanham, MD: Lexington, 2013), 195-213.

¹⁶ Steven Tramel Gaines, "Redefining Preaching: A Beginning," *Res Rhetorica* 4:3 (2017): 31-45.

I close with two suggestions for my own research agenda. Moving beyond speeches and letters, my next step is to let this foundation of analysis and theory lead to a consideration of more practical considerations: other communication strategies for churches to deal with white fragility, how change happens through prophetic rhetoric, and the possibility of defining and identifying effective church change. Furthermore, we need a theory of white rhetoric; so I plan to begin with seven characteristics inspired by Robin DiAngelo's work.¹⁷ Some of those characteristics have appeared in the speeches and letters analyzed here, and at least one has constrained my own rhetoric in this writing.

These suggestions for my future research have been outside the scope of this dissertation, and subjects such as white fragility and race have been important but not primary in this study. The focus has been organizational leadership in social chaos. These pages have asked how leaders call for change while also caring for their organizations. Contextual variables such as place, time, and organizational culture prevent any universalization of rhetorical leadership in conflict and change. Although its manifestations vary, the pastoral combination of prophetic and priestly rhetoric is always a possible strategy in such situations; and scholars and practitioners should acknowledge that strategy as a way of caring for the organization and the larger society.

¹⁷ Robin DiAngelo, *White Fragility: Why It's So Hard for White People to Talk about Racism* (Boston, MA: Beacon, 2018).

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