

# Becoming Human

*The Holy Spirit and the Rhetoric of Race*

Luke A. Powery

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*For the Rev. Dr. William C. Turner Jr.,  
a human gift of the Spirit*

# *Contents*

<b>Foreword by Willie James Jennings</b>	<b>ix</b>
<b>Prelude: Let Us Break Bread Together</b>	<b>xv</b>
<b>Introduction: Wade in the Water</b>	<b>1</b>
A Story of Being Raced	1
Inhabiting a Raced World and Church	3
Invoking the Spirit into This Race(d) Conversation	7
Overview of Content and Movement of the Book	11
Sighs of Hope beneath the Words	13
<b>1. Many Thousand Gone:</b>	
<b>A (Perpetual) History of Inhumanity</b>	<b>15</b>
Introduction	15
Historical Inhumanity	16
Institutional Inhumanity	24
Homiletical-Liturgical Inhumanity	30
Personal Inhumanity	34
<b>2. Oh Freedom: A Biology of Race?</b>	<b>37</b>
Introduction	37
Racialization of the Science of “Race”	38
Faulty Biology of Race	42
The Social Reality of Race	45
Race Involves Spirit	48
<b>3. Every Time I Feel the Spirit:</b>	
<b>A Pneumatology for Particularity</b>	<b>51</b>
Introduction	51
The Pentecost Narrative	52
Gift of Breath	55

Gift and Power to Speak and Understand	57
Affirmation of Diversity	59
God-Centered Community	65
Embrace of Human Bodies	69
Loosening of Human Tongues	71
Toward the “World House” of God	73
<b>4. There’s Room for Many-a More: A Homiletic for Humanity</b>	<b>77</b>
Introduction	77
Typical Approaches to Preaching and Race in Homiletical Literature	78
Toward a Human (Sermon) Form	81
Human Enfleshment of the Word	85
Human Message	95
<b>5. There Is a Balm: A Ministry with Humanity</b>	<b>105</b>
Introduction	105
Howard Thurman on the Human	106
Follow Jesus, the Human	109
Attend to Suffering Bodies	111
Strive for Community	115
Embrace Mortality	119
A Final Call to Togetherness	121
<b>Deep River: A Coda on Humility, Mystery, and the Holy Spirit</b>	<b>125</b>
<b>Index</b>	<b>129</b>

## *Foreword*

“Where can I go from Your spirit, and where from before You flee?” So says the psalmist in Psalm 139, indicating an eternal truth: not simply that the Spirit of the living God is everywhere, but that the Spirit is inescapable. The scholastic designation that God is omnipresent is much too sterile a design to capture what is at stake in this declaration. God travels the journey with each individual creature. God is there at the beginning of the journey, God is in the journey’s middle, and God meets us where we arrive. God meets us where we run, where we hide, and where we believe we are hidden beyond sight. Divine presence is therefore not a noun but a verb—the constant being here and there with us. But the psalmist’s question must be placed alongside another question, more urgent and poignant: why do we resist the Spirit of the living God?

The fact that we resist the Spirit of the living God is the fundamental conundrum of human existence. That fact sits between the mystery of sin and the mystery of a God who cannot be thwarted in God’s willingness to be thwarted. We could speak of this as the thorns of human freedom that God feels, even as Jesus had them pressed down on his head. But the question of resistance is not a matter of the complexities of God’s providence. Our resisting God points to the stubbornness in our hearts, even as we stare into the face of God. We meet that face in Jesus Christ and then, through the light cast by his face, we see God’s image in the faces of other human creatures. It is precisely that image in the faces of other human creatures and our resistance to it that concern Luke Powery.

Powery is bringing together these two questions—where can we hide from the Spirit of God, and how is it that we can resist the Spirit of God?—at the site of race and the racial condition of the Western world. The racial condition of the Western world points to a resistance to the Spirit of God, a resistance that has come to be canonized. In one way we could discern that resistance as ancient, even primordial. But in another it is new in the sense of being launched at a particular moment,

the colonial moment from the fifteenth century forward, and from a particular region of this planet, which will come to be called Europe by people who will eventually map an entire planet from their particular geographic, philosophical, and theological perspective.

Yet that resistance is also new in the sense of its ongoing generation, each day and each minute that people grasp more tightly the racial logics that continue to dominate the lives of so many. Where we lodge its beginning is less important than from where we see it and how we experience it. Powery examines that resistance from the position of the pulpit, from the work of the pastor, and from the lifeworld of a preacher.

Only from the embodied irony of being a preacher may one feel the thorns of this fundamental contradiction: Christians sometimes resisting the Spirit by refusing to see the full humanity of Black people and sometimes resisting the Spirit by resting comfortably in racial logics that nurture segregation, hierarchy, and white supremacy. A common theological mistake avoids considering our resistance to the Spirit of God by quickly and sloppily universalizing that resistance under the important theological rubric of sin and the sinful condition. Resistance is indeed sin, but its particularities are what matter not only to God but also to how we perceive divine presence working with us even in our resistance. The preaching life shows us that working and that resistance in slow motion, capturing its details inside the dual exegesis of texts and lives.

The Spirit of the living God flows through both—texts and lives—offering an interpretive and somatic intervention that might turn us not only toward the depth of our shared humanity, but also toward our new humanity in Christ. The Spirit can move through us and move us toward the new, if we are willing to yield. This is what Luke Powery is convinced of in this text; he has staked his argument on this pneumatological conviction.

Some would argue that at this moment in history this is a fool's errand. For many people, the racial antagonism of the Western world, the antiblackness embedded in Western institutional life and institutionalizing activities, the ease with which violence is perpetuated against Black flesh, and the lack of white mourning for that violence, do not point to resistance, even impenetrable resistance, but to the failure of a Christian God and of a faith formed in that God's name. For some people, resistance means a renunciation or a rejection of it all.

It takes faith to see resistance. This is what the experience of the

Spirit teaches us. Powery is drawing deeply on that pneumatological pedagogy because he understands what every serious preacher and every teacher of preachers knows: yielding to the Spirit of God is dangerous and sometimes frightening work. To yield is to reach into the depths of one's own humanity in recognition that God sees through every stragem of concealment, every lie we tell ourselves, every denial and deceit that we believe protects our reputation, as well as the fears and wounds that hold us back from full living.

To yield to the Spirit of the living God is to live always on the edge of surprise, dangling in the holy wind, knowing that our life is not our own: we belong soul and body to God. Yet preaching must aim to move from the yielding of the one to the yielding of the many, from one preaching the word to many living the word, from asking, "Who will believe our report?" to seeing belief in action, embodied in the quotidian realities of Christians. This is the bridge—long and narrow, suspended over the rapid racial currents of our times—that must be crossed.

The first task is to get Christians to take seriously the Holy Spirit. It is well over one hundred years since the atomic bomb of the Azusa Street Mission, and we have seen decades of charismatic renewal permeating churches Catholic and Protestant, rich and poor, high and low, white and nonwhite. But in many church communities we have yet to see a yielding that shows the belief that the Spirit of God is flowing in and through us, thereby answering definitively the first question we asked; we cannot hide, nor do we wish to hide, from the Spirit of God.

Such embodied belief would mean rejecting the spells, incantations, and alchemies of our modern racecraft, and moving from acknowledging the humanity of Black folks to a full-throated advocacy for justice and thriving life for them and with them. Living into our confession of the full divinity of the Spirit is the unfinished business of Christian theology and life in the Western world, especially the global North. This is due in large measure to the idolatrous worship of the image of the white self-sufficient man that constantly subverts such Spirit-filled living.

The worship of that man holds out for many the hope of being like God, what Dietrich Bonhoeffer termed *sicut deus* life, life that aims to image God without listening to God, without acknowledging God, and certainly without communion with God and with our neighbors, both human and more than human. The formation of a healthy

pneumatological vision of life continues to be thwarted, because we yet live in the age of that man where we are told to envision the Spirit through very limited options. The Spirit is either a hidden energy in us, vivifying our own designs and efforts, or the Spirit is a liturgical lapdog who comes when called, enlivening our worship, and turning Spirit-filled life into spectacle. This white self-sufficient man greets us daily with its inexhaustible stubbornness to accept the invitation to yield to the Spirit of the living God. How do we overcome that racialized stubbornness? Luke Powery would bring us back to the rough ground, back to Pentecost and the new humanity inaugurated there.

In fact, the first people Powery brings back to this rough ground are preachers caught in the racial now, tussling with a Christianity yet submerged in the historical trajectory of the racial imaginary with its intertwining of racism, capitalism, misogyny, and planetary exploitation. Preaching is difficult, and no preaching today—with the possible exception of preaching about sexuality—is more difficult or more demanding than preaching at the intersection of faith and race.

The tragedy at this moment is not only that ministers are refusing to preach about race (or sex), but also that when they do, they very often say absolutely nothing; that is, they say absolutely nothing that has to do with the new humanity established by the Holy Spirit. This is less a criticism and more a recognition that in the age of the white self-sufficient man, preaching struggles to turn us toward the Spirit. That turn returns us to the frightening reality of yielding to the Spirit, opening ourselves to hearing the Spirit through the lives of others, including our siblings in Christ, especially those of Black flesh.

Luke Powery knows this with a depth that few can match. As the dean of Duke University Chapel, he stands in the legacy of those who offer a gospel word in the space where town and gown meet, where powerful universities meet humble cities, where the academy meets the blue collar and the working poor, where the towering heights of intellectual life meet the streets—those who walk them and those who clean them. From that space, the deans of university chapels dance a rhetorical dance, asking the question: is there a word from the Lord, for places like this, for a time like this, for a situation like this, from a person like me?

The modern university is a strange preaching space, even in those universities born of Christianizing mission, because they seek to be secular spaces free of religious intoxications and provocations and yet open to all voices to speak their truth while being seekers of truth.

These are lofty aims that often avoid the truth of the racial situation. In many ways, the university chapel pulpit is a more intense reality of the American pulpit in this time of racial reckoning, where the urgent prophetic pull to speak out against racial violence and white supremacy can be quickly felt and easily resisted. To step into any pulpit today is to enter that urgency and the shrinking space for avoidance. Powery wants to erase completely that space, because he knows it does not exist for any Black man who preaches in predominantly and historically white spaces. Equally importantly, he wants to erase that space for the sake of the gospel that must be preached in alignment with the speaking Spirit.

In truth, the theory and practice of preaching has avoided taking seriously the racial situation. Homiletics has danced around this situation, much like a newly ordained preacher staring out pastoring in a predominately white congregation and watching their half-smiles turn into half-frowns as she mentions the words “race” and “racism” and “white supremacy.” She then slowly backs away from the heat of that pulpit by escaping through a safe universal firewall: “we have all sinned,” “we should love everyone,” “we should fight injustice wherever it appears,” and so forth. Powery aims to cut off every escape route for preachers and preaching, leaving all of us inside the work of truth-telling and dreaming. This is the doing of the Spirit, who gives us marvelous eyes to see.

Luke Powery wants us to see differently, to see the new humanity born of the Spirit. In this regard, this text enacts another crucial question, one asked by the wealthy man, Nicodemus: “Can a person be born again?” Is it possible to be reconceived in a more intense reality of eros, formed in loving expectation of life together, and joyfully received by a family not made by vain hands, not born of the desire of any man for the eternality of his name or his legacy, but a family formed of a multitude of different peoples with different tongues and different names? Preaching that is worth anything answers this question in the affirmative and in this way will dream Pentecostal dreams.

Everyone dreams, but not enough of us have the courage to constantly declare our dreams and expose the imagination that gives birth to such dreaming. Yet this courage is precisely what is needed for preaching at this moment. It is the courage to preach inside the dream and preach toward the dream. We must hear again Mahalia Jackson’s advice to Martin Luther King Jr. at the march on Washington in 1963, as he stood on the podium: “Tell them about the dream, Martin!” But

we must hear that command for us at this moment, spoken to us by the same Holy Spirit who sang through Mahalia Jackson, saying now to us, "Tell them about the dream."

These are not the same dreams. King's dream was a progeny of Pentecostal dreaming, a shoot from its massive tree. Pentecostal dreaming reaches beyond the hopes of any nation-state, and grasps a more radical belonging, one that joins us in a shared vision of God made flesh, and at work in our flesh, reflecting divine glory between us and binding us together in common cause for creating thriving life. King's dream has gone unanswered because we live in a racial world that resists the Spirit's calling. Yet such resistance can never be the last word for those who breathe in Pentecostal wind and breathe out hope.

Hopeless preaching is an oxymoron, but those who refuse to preach into the racial crisis, through to the hope of a new humanity beyond the racial condition, engage in such oxymoronic speech. They resist the Spirit and have lost sight of their own humanity. The Spirit, however, will not be thwarted by our resistance, because there are always those who yield to the flow of God and thereby become sources for streams of living water. Indeed, there is no better definition of an anti-racist preaching life than this: to become a source for streams of living water. This is the doing of the Spirit, who gives us marvelous eyes to see.

Willie James Jennings  
Hamden, Connecticut

## *Prelude*

### Let Us Break Bread Together

During the spring semester of 2020, I was on sabbatical from Duke University and gave the Thomas White Currie Lectures at Austin Presbyterian Theological Seminary in Austin, Texas, in February of that year. The theme of my three lectures was “Searching for Common Ground.” This book is the expanded fruit from those three literary-theological branches, and I am forever grateful to President Ted Wardlaw for his invitation and to the Austin Seminary community for their hospitality. Only a little more than a month later, a global pandemic—COVID-19—would strike the world, changing the way of life as we know it. If that was not enough, a couple of months later, a Black man, George Floyd, was tragically killed in police custody, sparking protests all over the nation and world. It was a reminder of the pandemic of racism that had long infected US society. This older pandemic raised its head in Minneapolis for all the world to see as we watched Floyd’s head being pinned to the ground by a knee. That knee on a neck kneed the spirit, the breath of life, out of another human being. It was a horrific visual reminder that being born in the USA does not mean belonging in the USA. The convergence of a health and racial pandemic created a kind of pandemonium, a word rightly reserved for the name of the capital of hell in John Milton’s epic poem *Paradise Lost*.

All of the physical and social death, all of the hell, of 2020 up to now is the context for this writing endeavor, a time at which many are stripped of the usual accoutrements and perhaps realize for the first time the naked reality of our mortality and humanity. But at the same time, there is an irony of the human condition at play. It can seem that we are closer to technology than one another. We can go to space and not make space for each other. Maybe this is the real pandemonium of our time and why this book yearns, sighs, for human togetherness and a different way of thinking of and engaging one another with the help of the Spirit, such that “racing” ends and embracing begins.

I have been helped by the Spirit all throughout my life’s journey, but I have also been accompanied by human beings who have chosen to

walk alongside me, professionally and personally. In many ways, even if they do not use this language, their presence has been a “ministry with humanity” toward me. I am particularly grateful to Duke University president Vincent Price, who approved the sabbatical that enabled me to have focused research and writing time. But the truth is that I would not have taken a sabbatical in the first place if my Duke Chapel colleagues, Amanda Hughes and Bruce Puckett, were not willing to take on more leadership responsibilities during my absence. I want to commend the amazing job they did guiding the chapel community as a whole through the onset of COVID-19.

I would be remiss if I did not thank the entire Duke Chapel community and my divinity school colleagues and students who raise probing questions and are willing to wrestle with God until a blessing comes. It is true as one of my colleagues has said of the chapel—it is an “odd assortment” of people, but it is this oddity that reflects the profundity of the gospel for all flesh.

To be honest, it may also seem odd—as a Duke Blue Devil—that on my sabbatical I had an appointment as a visiting associate professor in Carolina Tarheel land at UNC–Chapel Hill in the African, African American, and Diaspora Studies Department in the College of Arts and Sciences. Eunice Sahle, chair of the department at the time, welcomed me so warmly, even though my time was cut short due to the onset of the pandemic. Despite the brevity of my time there, we were able to share with one another our mutual admiration for Howard Thurman.

Of course, no book is written in a vacuum. There are so many intellectual influences, guides, and interlocutors, whether in the academy, church, or the broader society. Yet this work in particular is better because of the heads and hearts of two specific homiletics colleagues and friends: Kenyatta Gilbert and Paul Scott Wilson, who read chapter drafts and whose insights and questions helped the ideas in this book to be more cohesive, clear, and generative. The editorial genius of Bob Ratcliff, editor-in-chief at Westminster John Knox, also made this book more fruitful and useful for the church and theological education; I thank him for his ongoing support throughout the years. In addition, my assistant, Ava West, provided tremendous support and work on footnote details; without her, this book would not have been completed on time. For the grace, poise, and kindness with which she coordinates much of my communication and schedule, I am deeply grateful.

My heartfelt thanks continue as I lift praises for the foreword by Yale professor and former Duke colleague Willie Jennings, who, by writing, gave a generous gift of time, energy, mind, and heart; his words are linguistic icons to the deep wellspring of God's wisdom and presence.

Furthermore, my gratitude overflows into song as I remember the kindness, commitment, love, and faith of my family that has shaped my humanity, specifically my wife, Gail, and our two children, Moriah and Zachary. They make space for the Spirit that I might have space to write in the Spirit on such topics as the one in this book.

The mention of these names (and there are more) is like a genealogy that speaks of the origins of this work while indicating that I am not alone in life nor in this endeavor. Rather, I am surrounded by a great cloud of witnesses who cheer me on in scholarship, ministry, and life. These human beings make me more fully human.

However, none of this is possible without the gracious God who became human in Jesus Christ and breathes the life of the Spirit on us that we may live more abundantly and humanly. And thus I say, like J. S. Bach, *Soli Deo Gloria*.

Luke A. Powery

# *Introduction*

## Wade in the Water

Wade in the water, God's a-gonna trouble the water.  
—Spiritual

For in the one Spirit we were all baptized into one body—Jews or Greeks, slaves or free—and we were all made to drink of one Spirit.  
—1 Corinthians 12:13

[E]very human being is an unprecedented miracle. One tries to treat them as the miracles they are, while trying to protect oneself against the disasters they've become.

—James Baldwin<sup>1</sup>

### A STORY OF BEING RACED

I was born in the Bronx, New York, and grew up in Miami, Florida, both cosmopolitan cities with a wide range of human hues and life situations. But even with the makeup of a mosaic of sorts in these cities, a type of cosmos on earth, there was often a concern with skin color, and sometimes one was on the right side of the racial tracks, and at other times, the wrong. In this context, over the years an explicit question was often posed to other family members and me: What color are you?

Where I grew up in Miami during my adolescent years, there were particular school days focused informally on certain races or colors of people, and depending on the designated day, one had to be careful. There were specific days to exert violence on white people and other days to pound the flesh of Black people. One afternoon, I was on the middle school basketball court outside, waiting for baseball practice to begin. I was by myself. Three older high school students approached me as I stood on the court. I sensed what was up: it was the day to fight white people—but I did not see myself as white! I was “red bone” or “milk bone,” for sure, as some of my friends playfully called me. I was a lighter hue of a blackness that ranges from vanilla to chocolate skin

1. James Baldwin, *The Price of the Ticket: Collected Nonfiction, 1948–1985* (Boston: Beacon, 1985), 453.

tones. Yet these three older teenagers did not see what I knew; they judged a human book by its cover. They were ready for a fight although “no one ever wins a fight.”<sup>2</sup> They surrounded me as I watched their slow, intentional movement. One of them raised a question: “What color is your mother?” I responded, “Black.” That same older student replied, “Ding, ding, ding. Saved by the bell.” And they walked away. My answer satisfied their racialized query but also reminded me of what the elders have taught: skin folk are not always kinfolk.

What color is your mother? What color are you? Why did that matter? Why was this so important to these three high schoolers? What sort of psychic trauma immersed them into this type of thinking? Underneath the question of color is the long, tortured history of race and racism in the world, a colonial inheritance and framework of a racialized human hierarchy in which white color is at the top, while black color is at the bottom. It is a raced question, one in which a human is viewed as object, a color, rather than a human being, bolstering and reflecting our “encasement in racial logics.”<sup>3</sup> This encasement is a form of mental and spiritual enslavement. The social construction of race is a constriction of our humanity. Because of this logic, some are not considered human—only colors to be categorized, controlled, or cursed. “What color are you?” is an expression of psychological imprisonment that either enthrones color or kills it; this is how colonial racialization works. It destroys humanity, through either praise or rage, regardless of your skin color. There really is no human when the powers of racism prevail.

When Howard Thurman eulogized Martin Luther King Jr. in 1968 after Dr. King’s assassination, he said this: “[Dr. King] was killed in one sense because [hu]mankind is not quite human yet. May he live because all of us in America are closer to becoming human than ever before.”<sup>4</sup> Thurman suggests that being human has something to do with nonviolence and nurturing and affirming the life of others, because racism and racialization dehumanize people and destroy them, as in the case of Dr. King. We are “not quite human yet” because of ongoing racialized violence against each other. We get “closer to becoming human” when

2. Howard Thurman’s grandmother Nancy Ambrose told this to him after he had a fight with a classmate. See Howard Thurman, *With Head and Heart: The Autobiography of Howard Thurman* (Orlando, FL: Harvest, 1979), 12.

3. Willie James Jennings, *The Christian Imagination: Theology and the Origins of Race* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2010), 8.

4. Howard Thurman, “Litany and Words in Memoriam: Martin Luther King, Jr.,” April 7, 1968, <https://www.bu.edu/http/files/2017/06/1968-4-07-Litany-Words-in-Memoriam-of-MLK.pdf>.

those who are the racialized other live and do not die because they have been raced. This racialized reality, especially for Black men, leads Imani Perry to write her sons a letter called *Breathe*, in which she says, “I have known from the very first day of each of your lives that I cannot guarantee your safety.”<sup>5</sup>

The threat of violence against someone because of the color of their skin is real. To be raced is often to be erased from the sphere of humanity, to be othered. The other “exist[s] beyond the border of a great ‘belonging.’”<sup>6</sup> By racialization some human beings are made not to belong. They are raced by a lust for power and control, rather than affirmed as human and holy by the Spirit’s breath. To be or become more fully human is a challenge in an inhumane world. But it is a struggle, a wrestling, that is worth it, even in stormy waters. This book wades into these racialized waters because in the Spirit, God’s a-gonna trouble the water.

## INHABITING A RACED WORLD AND CHURCH

Although certain segments of the broader society may argue that racism no longer exists, this project does not engage that debate but functions with the understanding that racism is real in powerful, enfolded ways in the world and the church. Race is an idea, a social construct, not a biological reality, yet it has social power and shapes the world.<sup>7</sup> This ideological construct racializes the world. Remember, “racism precedes race.”<sup>8</sup> Thus, the world and the church are raced because of death-wielding racist ideals. “Race is the structure of death, the dehumanizing and de-creating word a people sought to speak over the world, and violently succeeded.”<sup>9</sup> Colonial powers, including the

5. Imani Perry, *Breathe: A Letter to My Sons* (Boston: Beacon, 2019), 8.

6. Ta-Nehisi Coates, “Foreword,” in Toni Morrison, *The Origin of Others* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2017), xv.

7. There are many works on the history of race and racism in the world. A few examples are Eduardo Bonilla-Silva, *Racism without Racists: Color-Blind Racism and the Persistence of Racial Inequality in the United States* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2010); John Hope Franklin, *From Slavery to Freedom: A History of African Americans*, 8th ed. (New York: Knopf, 2006); George M. Fredrickson, *Racism: A Short History* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2002); and Ibram X. Kendi, *Stamped from the Beginning: The Definitive History of Racist Ideas in America* (New York: Bold Type, 2016).

8. Coates, “Foreword,” xi.

9. Brian Bantum, *The Death of Race: Building a New Christianity in a Racial World* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2016), 14.

United States, enacted racialization as a global imperial project, which causes Duke sociology professor Eduardo Bonilla-Silva to write, “Racial considerations shade almost everything in America.”<sup>10</sup> From slavery to Reconstruction, the Jim Crow era, the civil rights movement, and legalized desegregation, the United States is racialized, and there is no escaping it. It is “in the ‘national’ character.”<sup>11</sup>

But one must acknowledge there is often confusion around terminology and definitions for words such as “race,” “racism,” and “racial,” while others shy away from even using color terms, such as black or white, to describe human beings, because it might feed into the belief that race is biological when it is not. Others prefer to highlight ancestral roots and use “African American” or “European American” or “Latin American,” as examples. There is no one-size-fits-all, linguistically. As the book *How Real Is Race?* asserts about the discourse on race, “it’s a semantic mess.”<sup>12</sup> Terms can be messy and muddy the waters of understanding; however, while race is neither biologically nor ontologically real, it is *socially* real. Thus, throughout this book I will use the term “racialization” predominantly to emphasize how race is something that is performed on another person or group. Racialization is real. A person or group can be raced or racialized. In this way, one uses “race” to objectify and control another. Racialization leading to dehumanization has been the historical manifestation of race.

Tied to this semantic confusion is another term, “whiteness.” People get offended often because they believe it is a biological term, referring to all white-colored people across time. But I adhere to the insightful perspective and teaching of Willie Jennings, who writes that it “does not refer to people of European descent but to a way of being in the world and seeing the world that forms cognitive and affective structures able to seduce people into its habitation and its meaning making.”<sup>13</sup> “It is a way of organizing life,”<sup>14</sup> and as Jemar Tisby points out, it “isn’t

10. Bonilla-Silva, *Racism without Racists*, 2. His sociological work confronts those who might argue racism no longer exists through his research on color-blind racism.

11. Toni Morrison, *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1992), 63.

12. Carol C. Mukhopadhyay, Rosemary Henze, and Yolanda T. Moses, *How Real Is Race? A Sourcebook on Race, Culture, and Biology* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2014), xxii. For more about defining race-related terms, see Bonilla-Silva, *Racism without Racists*, 8–10.

13. Willie James Jennings, *After Whiteness: An Education in Belonging* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2020), 9.

14. Jennings, *After Whiteness*, 8.

a matter of melanin, it's a matter of power."<sup>15</sup> Racialization perpetuated by whiteness has historically been about the power to control and destroy, racing that which needs to be dominated because it is perceived to be in the way, economically, socially, or even religiously.

The struggle to define is important, but we ought to be careful that it does not distract from the fact that “[w]alls are going up around the world to keep people separated from one another. . . . The process of colonization that robbed some of land and language for centuries and which divided people according to such categories continues to rob people of their dignity and lives in the present.”<sup>16</sup> This is the key point and understanding in this book: human division and polarization perpetrate injustices that undercut the dignity of all people, but especially those thrust to the margins by racialization. And to be clear, the church has been as complicit in racism, and as raced, as the world.

It has been said that the most segregated hour in America is 11 a.m. on Sunday, when churches gather.<sup>17</sup> This reality is a reflection of history, the unfortunate history of Christianity's baptism of the enslavement of Black peoples and the historical oppression of the other across the world. “Racism continues to plague the church,”<sup>18</sup> and silence, evasion, and indifference are not faithful Christian options. Thus, this book is geared toward the church and is an attempt to lure the church out of indifference, into meaningful engagement and hopeful opportunities in relation to raced relations, systems, and structures.

Of all the organized entities, the church should be focused on and working toward the flourishing of all human beings on earth, rooted in the incarnation of God in Jesus Christ, who came to earth as a human being. However, what has happened historically in this raced environment, of which the church has been a part, is that barely any room has been cultivated in either the world or the church for becoming human in the fullest sense, because some people have been viewed not as people but as pawns in a racialized game of power. More specifically, history demonstrates that there are those who desire the unbecoming

15. Jemar Tisby, *The Color of Compromise: The Truth about the American Church's Complicity in Racism* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2019), 17.

16. HyeRan Kim-Cragg, *Postcolonial Preaching: Creating a Ripple Effect* (Lanham, MD: Lexington, 2021), 1.

17. Martin Luther King Jr., interview moderated by Ned Brooks, *Meet the Press*, NBC, April 17, 1960; <https://kinginstitute.stanford.edu/king-papers/documents/interview-meet-press>.

18. Tisby, *Color of Compromise*, 15.

of human flesh, especially Black flesh. To use the words of Perry, “How do you become in a world bent on you not being and not becoming?”<sup>19</sup>

The struggle for racial equality has really been about the struggle for dignity and worth as a human being—and I would add, a human becoming. Stories of this struggle for dignity abound, none more poignant in recent years than that of Ahmaud Arbery. On February 23, 2020, Arbery, a twenty-five-year-old Black man, was jogging in Satilla Shores, a neighborhood near Brunswick, Georgia. While he was jogging, three white male residents began to pursue him—two of them, armed, in one vehicle, while the third recorded the situation in another vehicle. They followed and chased him for a few minutes and eventually caught up to him and tried to falsely imprison him. In the resulting struggle, one of the men came out of his truck, assaulted Arbery with a shotgun and then shot him three times as Arbery defended himself. Arbery was killed, and the three men were eventually convicted and sentenced. Arbery was viewed as a threat in that neighborhood; he was raced or racialized, revealing how we are “not quite human yet.” But fundamentally and vital to this exploration is to note that “Ahmaud Arbery was a human being, a person, a man with a family and a future, who loved and was loved. . . . Who knows what Arbery could have become. He was young, his life a buffet of possibilities.”<sup>20</sup> He was a human being, but the raced world does not want everyone to be or become.

Racialization kills. It happened to King. It happened to Arbery. It has happened to so many named and unnamed, known and unknown. The church is implicated in the inhumanity of racialization, and it is time for the church to confront the racism of its past and present reality head-on. It is time for the church to remember that while we are human or at least becoming human, we can never be fully human as long as racialized violence still pervades the land, denying and destroying otherness.

19. Perry, *Breathe*, 52.

20. Charles M. Blow, “The Killing of Ahmaud Arbery,” *New York Times*, May 6, 2020; accessed January 31, 2022, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/05/06/opinion/ahmaud-arbery-killing.html?smid=fb-share&fbclid=IwAR2iZhcOLIMxVcu0EdiLJfeuXOOKq5DB8GywSAsgHTQC2p47fb4oai3Ru0>.

## INVOKING THE SPIRIT INTO THIS RACE(D) CONVERSATION

This is where the Holy Spirit can bear some fruit. Writing the Spirit into this exploration is inviting the Spirit to come and blow racialization in another direction, a more human one. From the days of the early church, the Holy Spirit has been deemed essential for the church's life and mission. The Spirit is the one who empowers the church, the *ekklēsia*, in the book of Acts. At the Eucharist, there is the *epiclesis*, the invocation for the power of the Holy Spirit to come upon the bread and wine that they might be the body and blood of Jesus Christ. As part of the benediction of liturgies, one may hear the minister declare, "and the communion (*koinōnia*) of the Holy Spirit" (2 Cor. 13:13). Without the Spirit's blessing, there is no divine presence or power, no *koinōnia* or *ekklēsia*. Thus, the Spirit is vital for an effectual church community and experience of God. This includes how to engage conversations and practices around race effectively in a thoughtful, pneumatological manner.

There are numerous theological works on race that have been a luminous portal to new thought and perspectives on race in the church.<sup>21</sup> However, even if some of these mention the Spirit, pneumatology is muted and implied; we need to remember that one cannot discuss the Christ, the anointed one, without at least implying the anointing Spirit. What I aim to do in this work is to foreground pneumatological reflection explicitly for this exploration of race and racism in the church. The Spirit is often either forgotten or treated as an afterthought many times, when she is actually the power needed to overcome destructive dehumanizing powers like racism. In addition, sometimes Spirit talk is siloed within Pentecostal traditions; but the Spirit cannot be confined to any one tradition, denomination, or pattern. The Spirit transcends our constrictions and limits to transform us for the common good, because the Spirit cannot be restricted. The Spirit is a wind that "blows where it chooses, and you hear the sound of it, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes" (John 3:8).

The Spirit is a wind, the breath (*ruach*) of God. She is a holy wind that woos us together rather than break us apart, because this breath

21. Some key examples include Brian Bantum, *Redeeming Mulatto: A Theology of Race and Christian Hybridity* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2010); J. Kameron Carter, *Race: A Theological Account* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008); and Willie James Jennings, *The Christian Imagination: Theology and the Origins of Race* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2010).

blows in all human bodies. This common breath is critical for confronting racialization for a more fruitful future as human beings. Plus, breath cannot be raced. It has no color, but it moves in all flesh, all bodies, even raced ones.

Although this divine breath flows through physical bodies, pneumatology can be viewed as purely philosophical, esoteric, or just detached from earthly life. Some of this perspective is due to the fact that the Spirit is breath or wind and therefore seems to be immaterial. But in Christian theology the spiritual is material and physical. The incarnation of God in Jesus Christ was midwived by the Spirit of God, showing how pneumatology implies materiality and the reality of incarnationality.<sup>22</sup> This means that the Spirit takes on earthly flesh and works in tangible, mundane ways. There is enfleshment in and with the Spirit, not sans Spirit. Thus the Spirit engages issues of race and racism and all of the implications related to these concepts and realities in material human life. God the Spirit is present with God the Son in the material existence of Jesus, and is therefore immersed in earthly, enfleshed life and is vital to a theological framework for confronting racialization and its effects.

This particular pneumatological emphasis on breath and bodies leads to the constructive pneumatological lens that will be used in this work to engage the raced world and church. My pneumatic approach to racialization will be rooted in the story of Pentecost in Acts. What is offered is not an exhaustive attempt at a full-blown biblical pneumatology of race. Rather, it is a provisional offering to continue an ongoing conversation about ecclesial thought and practice related to race. It aims to be constructive—even as it is limited in not trying to posit everything that can be noted about the Spirit and race—through the lens of Pentecost as a way to move the conversation further into more human and humane directions. This is not a perfect offering by any means, but it is one person's offering, and thus a human and finite one.

Pentecost is a helpful, intriguing story to engage the idea and imposition of race in the life, thought, and practice of the church, because that ancient experience has been called “the church's charter.”<sup>23</sup> The spiritual experience among people in Acts 2 reveals what the church

22. I call this a “holistic material pneumatology” in *Spirit Speech: Lament and Celebration in Preaching* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2009), 2.

23. Theodore Hiebert, *The Beginning of Difference: Discovering Identity in God's Diverse World* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2019), 110.

is and what it should be, especially as it relates to raced relations and matters. At the beginning of the church in Acts, as the Spirit blows, we see what the church should be and what it is becoming, that is, a multiethnic, multilingual, mosaic polyphony of holy fire and breath, bodies, and tongues, all proclaiming God. The boundary-crossing Spirit of Pentecost shows the blessing of difference in whatever form. The Spirit of Pentecost offers a pneumatology that can move the church through and beyond racialization and all of the polarizations of our time. It offers a fresh gift of fire that can burn away the chaff of racist thought and practice among God's people. Pentecost can be perceived as "a clinic in the accoutrements of ecstasy"<sup>24</sup> but it is also a pneumatic canvas for observing the beauty and diversity of humanity. This is why the Spirit matters for this conversation on race, especially in the church.

The Spirit can help us reclaim our humanity with all of its rich particularity of culture, language, and ethnicity. A turn to the Spirit is a turn to the human race, not one specific racialized group holding power over other groups of people. In the face of the dehumanization promoted by racialization, the Spirit moves to humanize all people, especially those who have been dehumanized and treated as less than human. At Pentecost, the Spirit affirms all human flesh and tongues and gifts, regardless of raced status. This is liberating if we take what Thurman says to be true: "The burden of being black and the burden of being white [are] so heavy that it is rare in our society to experience oneself as a human being."<sup>25</sup> Racialization makes humans feel inhuman and more like objects than people gifted by the Spirit in their unique humanness. The Spirit reminds us of our human beauty that is wonderfully diverse. Humans are more than any imposed descriptive marker and are enfleshed beings created and loved by God.

Through this lens, the church has an opportunity to embrace people as spiritual creatures made in the image of God. God did not create the social construct of race; we did. God created the human race, human beings inspired and gifted by the Spirit. The ecstasy of Pentecost can be illuminating for the church's approach to race. Ecstasy means "standing outside oneself" and for this exploration suggests that the Spirit helps one to get outside oneself, out of self-interests, in order

24. John R. Levison, *Filled with the Spirit* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2009), 325.

25. Howard Thurman, *The Luminous Darkness: A Personal Interpretation of the Anatomy of Segregation and the Ground of Hope* (New York: Harper & Row, 1965), 94.

to see others' views and to get a wider perspective on God and life. To make human progress, it is important not just to be caught up with or in oneself, standing in one's own interests and identities. It is vital to stand outside oneself, as a means to make space for others to enter one's life. This is what happens at Pentecost; when people speak other people's languages and not their own mother tongue, the other enters in through the gift of a language not one's own. The ecstatic moment helps one see the world of race in a new way, from a different angle, even with a new expression of tongues. This is what the Spirit will do to show that "different" is not the same as "demonic"; those different from us are still human, always created in the image of God.

As creatures of God, "We are dirt, wet with Spirit."<sup>26</sup> The Spirit touches all flesh, washes all flesh, ignites all flesh, the human dust and incarnate dreams of God. The Spirit baptizes the material lives of human beings as they are and, by doing so, nudges them toward who they will become. According to Thurman, "[T]o be Christian, a man would not be required to stretch himself out of shape to conform to the demands of his religious faith; rather, his faith should make it possible for him to come to himself whole, in an inclusive and integrated manner, one that would not be possible without this spiritual orientation."<sup>27</sup> In other words, the Spirit shapes one to become more fully human, more whole, more as the person God created. Pneumatology thus implies humanity; this is why I engage a pneumatological perspective on race for the life of the church. A turn to the Spirit is a turn to the human.

Furthermore, the Spirit as a person of the Trinity has no color or race, yet the Spirit takes on human flesh, even flesh that has been racialized, thus dehumanized, in order to rehumanize God's blessed creation. This means that not even the Spirit is color-blind; she takes on the hues and colors of all of humanity by indwelling them, not to enthrone color or feed the raced imagination but to affirm the beauty of God on all flesh. The worldwide church struggles with race matters and their role in faith because of the legacy of colonialism.<sup>28</sup> Yet it is clear that the Spirit does not "e-race" anyone, implying that it is a part of someone's spiritual life. Deleting or ignoring color would be impossible anyway,

26. Bantum, *Death of Race*, 30.

27. Thurman, *With Head and Heart*, 120.

28. An example of this is discussed in John Burdick, "What Is the Color of the Holy Spirit? Pentecostalism and Black Identity in Brazil," *Latin American Research Review* 34, no. 2 (1999): 109–31.

since color blindness is impossible.<sup>29</sup> The life of faith in the power of the Spirit strives to make a person whole, including all of one's flesh, even raced flesh, for the beautiful purposes of God and human flourishing.

The vast work of the Spirit will keep the church honest, holy, whole, and moving toward racial healing and a new humanity. In the Spirit, the church can “de-fang cheap racism, annihilate and discredit the routine, easy, available color fetish, which is reminiscent of slavery itself.”<sup>30</sup> The Spirit can move us beyond the objectification of human bodies and personalities to the recognition that we are holy subjects, free to live in the Spirit as one, such that every human being is of worth and dignified by the breath of the Spirit.

### **OVERVIEW OF CONTENT AND MOVEMENT OF THE BOOK**

This exploration of the interface of pneumatology and race through the lens of Pentecost will begin with the historical reality of racialization and move toward the hope of humanization through theological and practical reflection. Chapter 1 presents a historical perspective on racism, particularly against Black peoples, their bodies, and thus their humanity. It will reveal a perpetual history of inhumanity in which racialization is a form of dehumanization, through which certain people and bodies are not deemed human, rooted in the legacy of slavery but impacting the church, educational institutions, and the academic guild.

Chapter 2 will present a biological perspective on the issue of race, racialized difference, and raced bodies and reveal how the social colonial construct of race is not biologically real, in that racialized groups have been proven to be more alike than different genetically. By doing so, this chapter opens a path to the possibility of moving beyond the myopic “race” talk and the misguided practice of racialization within the church, to a different kind of theological consideration, discourse, and practice in relation to human difference (i.e., pneumatology), perhaps something that will be more fruitful, more spiritual, more Christian, and even more human.

29. Eduardo Bonilla-Silva teaches about the workings of color-blind racism in his book *Racism without Racists*.

30. Morrison, *Origin of Others*, 53.

Chapter 3 will draw on the day of Pentecost in Acts 2 as a constructive theological means for thinking about racialized difference and raced bodies, ultimately affirming the humanity of all, especially the dehumanized. This chapter will uncover new ways of thinking and talking about race and confronting dehumanizing racialization, inside and outside the church. It will show that the Spirit embraces all flesh, bodies, and tongues, as a humanizing gesture, resisting the historic dehumanization of Black bodies and people. This turn to the Spirit will be a turn to the human and begin to direct the church away from racialization to humanization.

Chapter 4 begins to flesh out what this pneumatological lens and emphasis on the human and humanization might mean for homiletics, the theory and practice of preaching. Chapter 5 will continue reflection on ecclesial practice by exploring what it means to do ministry in general with humanity, in light of the discussed work of the Pentecost Spirit and the thought of Howard Thurman, a person who ministered through and beyond racism during his lifetime.

Through the movement of this book, despite the racialized history of the world and church, I will demonstrate how the Spirit can move us through and beyond racialization toward humanization, a new humanity in Christ formed by the power of the Spirit. Pneumatology can be a theological resource to help the church move through and beyond racism to God's reconciling future present. Though there is a stark perpetual history of dehumanization, as will be shown, the Spirit's power ignites a type of rehumanization in which we can reclaim our common humanity. If "imagination is about venturing to the very edge of humanizing possibilities,"<sup>31</sup> then this entire book is a work in imagination, exploring the pneumatological possibility of humanization in our time, to find a redeeming rhetoric and ethic for how we speak and live as God's children on earth in order to become more fully human.

During this literary journey, readers will notice something about each chapter title. They include a haunting and holy idea and phrase from a spiritual, songs of the Spirit forged by the unknown Black bards during the flames of inhumane slavery in the Americas and other parts of the world. Each chapter, and really this whole work, is haunted by the holiness and humanity of enslaved African peoples, because they knew what it meant to be human together with other human beings in dire circumstances. Their spiritual sounds echo down the acoustical

31. Kim-Cragg, *Postcolonial Preaching*, 7.

corridors of human history and through these pages as a refrain to beckon us to become human in the power of the Spirit, even though “racial ‘others’ of dark complexion are always viewed as incapable of doing much.”<sup>32</sup> They did much for so many of us and are remembered in order to re-member the future of the church and what is possible with God, even in the face of horrific realities. They are the unexpected holy guides for this conversation, not only because they are seers and singers of the Spirit who know about the struggle for their humanity, but because their dehumanized Black flesh is also the glory of God in human flesh. Through their haunting and haunted wisdom and life experience, we learn what it means to be not quite human yet, even while we strive to become human. Through them, we hear the melody of the Spirit’s call, “there’s room for many-a more.”

### SIGHS OF HOPE BENEATH THE WORDS

This expansive room or space of the Spirit in the heart of God is the compelling impetus for this work; underneath the words are “sighs too deep for words” (Rom. 8:26). These sighs are prayers of and in the Spirit, because prayers do not have to be spoken but can come in diverse embodied forms, like falling teardrops from human eyes. The sighs are prayers because the turbulent racialized waters in human existence are dangerous and treacherous. Wading into these waters is a calling after one has been baptized in the water of the Spirit. The unspoken sighs know that any progress in raced relations, systems, or structures is “not by might, nor by power, but by [God’s] spirit” (Zech. 4:6).

These sighs whisper several hopes for the reader: that you will be willing to accept the honest assessment of historical racialized inhumanities and how the church is implicated in it; that you will learn that race is not biological but social and understand how this impacts where we are today; that you will discover a pneumatological way of thinking and talking about race, open to moving through and beyond racialization to humanization with a new tongue to speak about it and each other; that you will learn about initial pathways for how humanization in the Spirit can impact both homiletics specifically and ministry generally; and in the end, that you will see the need to move beyond rhetoric to an ethic that embodies the fullness of the Spirit of Christ,

32. Bonilla-Silva, *Racism without Racists*, ix.

to reclaim our humanity, and to become human with each other as the holy gift of God.

Beneath the words of every page are sighing prayers, whispering a hope that these ideas would take on human flesh in our day, as we remember the human flesh of those whose bodies have been broken by hatred and violence. I have a memorial on the right corner of my Duke Chapel office desk. Sitting side-by-side I have a communion cup and plate to remember Jesus Christ, and next to them a can of Arizona iced tea and a packet of Skittles to remember Trayvon Martin.<sup>33</sup> When I look at these elements, I hear a faint sigh, “Remember.” Thus every day I remember broken Black bodies and the broken body of Christ, while remembering that at the Lord’s Table, we are all one, which is why it is called communion and why we can give thanks (*eucharistia*) for that gift and eternal hope. Those physical objects represent the communion of the Spirit on my office desk, a calling if you will, that beckons me to a new horizon and new creation, where we remember every human being to re-member our new humanity in Christ.

To reach this new humanity means “that race must die, [which] is to say we must refuse the lie that we can exist freely while others struggle to be seen as human. . . .”<sup>34</sup> Racialization must die in order for something new to rise from the Spirit in our hearts and lives. My pastoral heart resonates with Thurman, who followed the scent of searching for common ground and yearned to transcend “the walls that divide,”<sup>35</sup> because in the Spirit of communion, we are truly one. I do not write about race to reify it but to “de-fang” its tight hold on the church and broader society, that we might be free in the Spirit to become human. I am filled with a “sober intoxication”<sup>36</sup> as on the day of Pentecost, intoxicated with an ecstatic hope for what we might become as human beings together in the wide circle of grace of a loving God. I am not drunk but filled with a new wine that has a flavor of the foretaste of a new humanity in Christ. Wade in these waters with me as we flow in the Spirit together and pray with sighs too deep for words that God would trouble these waters.

33. Dan Barry, Serge F. Kovalski, Campbell Robertson, and Lizette Alvarez, “Race, Tragedy and Outrage Collide after a Shot in Florida,” *New York Times*, April 1, 2012; accessed January 31, 2022, <https://www.nytimes.com/2012/04/02/us/trayvon-martin-shooting-prompts-a-review-of-ideals.html>.

34. Bantum, *The Death of Race*, 141.

35. Thurman, *Luminous Darkness*, x.

36. Levison, *Filled with the Spirit*, 336.

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