

**REVELATION AS REVOLUTION:  
BLACK PENTECOSTAL THEOLOGY AS A MEANS OF  
RADICAL SOCIAL CHANGE**

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**Abstract**

*Two critical works recognizing the correlation between Black Pentecostalism and black Power were written in the last years of the 1970s, both dissertations are still unpublished. In 1978 at Howard University, James Tinney completed “A Theoretical and Historical Comparison of Black Political Movements.” He compared the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, The Black Panther Party, and Black Pentecostalism, and concluded that Black Pentecostalism was not anti-political, non-political, or other-worldly in nature.<sup>2</sup> In the following year, Leonard Lovett, an ordained Church of God in Christ preacher, completed at Emory University his dissertation, “Black Holiness-Pentecostalism: Implications for Ethics and Social Transformation.”<sup>3</sup> Lovett’s study stands as a needed theological counterpart to Tinney’s political project. Lovett’s insightful overview and analysis provide a comprehensive socioethical treatment of Black Pentecostalism, and it serves as my point of departure for the premise of this paper. The present essay argues that Lovett’s Black Pentecostal theology of pneumatological liberation recovers the indispensability of revelation for initiating the social and political activism that, due to their beliefs, history, and experience, Black Pentecostals are best in position to pursue.*

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<sup>2</sup>James Tinney, “A Theoretical and Historical Comparison of Black Political Movements” (PhD diss., Howard University, 1978).

<sup>3</sup>Leonard Lovett, “Black Holiness-Pentecostalism: Implications for Ethics and Social Transformation” (PhD diss., Emory University, 1979).

## Pneumatological Liberation

In his dissertation, Leonard Lovett analyzes Black Holiness-Pentecostalism by theological and ethical claims, a task that, at the time of the dissertation's completion, had not previously been attempted by scholars. Lovett surveys the history of Black Pentecostalism and traces its development through five Black Pentecostal groups, a practice of his methodology that reaches into the present. In comparing and contrasting their doctrines and core beliefs, Lovett identifies the theological norms that inform and constitute a Black Holiness-Pentecostal ethic. Pentecostal scholarship was still burgeoning at the time of Lovett's publication, and much of his work is tasked with introducing Black Pentecostalism to the broader academy. However, he marks himself as an innovative, groundbreaking scholar by helping to inaugurate a dialogue between black theology, black power, and Black Pentecostalism, a sorely needed conversation that prophetically identifies the revolutionary possibilities in Black Pentecostalism, and offers a compelling and cogent critique of both black theology and black power ideologies. Most valuably, Lovett outlines a framework for liberation that transcends the boundaries of racially defined blackness by linking liberation to an encounter between the human and the divine, defined as revelation.

In his last chapter, "Pneumatological Liberation," Lovett announces "that liberation, a product of divine power, comes not in opposition to Black Power but is the most authentic Christian expression of it, the power of the Spirit which frees and unites."<sup>4</sup> He elaborates by saying that "authentic liberation can never occur apart from genuine Pentecostal encounter, and likewise genuine Pentecostal encounter can never occur unless liberation becomes the consequence."<sup>5</sup> Lovett finds that a true spiritual encounter with God produces the type of transformation that forms the basis for an ethic and theology that privileges the poor. Lovett is suspicious of any ideology whose result is racial division, and he favors the theme of reconciliation espoused by J. Deotis Roberts, a critic and contemporary of Cone, whose conciliatory impetus Cone soundly denounces in *God of the Oppressed*.<sup>6</sup> Lovett agrees that Roberts' positioning of reconciliation as intrinsic to liberation, which means that blacks must forgive, and whites must repent, evokes the soteriology and

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<sup>4</sup>Lovett, "Black Holiness-Pentecostalism," 138.

<sup>5</sup>Ibid., 145.

<sup>6</sup>See James Cone, *God of the Oppressed* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1975), 239-240, and 243-244.

radical transformation that is at the heart of Black Pentecostalism's pneumatology.<sup>7</sup> Before providing his conception of pneumatological liberation, Lovett is careful to reject the insularity and separatism that sustains both black power and black theology. However, Lovett recognizes black power's potency as a symbol that points to a deeper reality; a reality in which the actualization of Black Power itself participates. This is because Black Power foregrounds questions of power that had long since lain beneath the surface of societal consciousness. In demanding answers to these questions, the oppressed are simultaneously empowered, and the oppressor is challenged to act to eradicate his or her acts of injustice.<sup>8</sup>

### **Liberation as Spiritualization**

Lovett propounds a dual definition of pneumatological liberation that includes spiritualization and humanization.<sup>9</sup> Lovett defines spiritualization as an existential transformation that occurs when revelation—God's self-disclosure through his spirit—is received by individuals. This contact between the Spirit of God and humans results in a radical transformation of human consciousness, fundamentally altering the way one perceives oneself and the world. This conversion means that "the shift to a new center of life provokes a transformation of a person's moral identity and the system of values by which human life is lived."<sup>10</sup> Using Isaiah's vision in the temple in Isa 6:1-8 as paradigmatic of the spiritualizing process, Lovett identifies three stages toward empowerment. First, the prophet looks upward and sees the Lord, thus recognizing the greater, all-encompassing power of God. Next, the prophet sees himself, and exclaims, "Woe is me, I am undone" (Isa 6:5). Lastly, the prophet, looking outward, sees the oppression of his people and presents himself to God as the one who will help negate their oppression and maximize their deliverance, thus saying "Here am I, send me."<sup>11</sup> Through the process of spiritualization, the powerless become powerful due to transformation of the ego. Lovett draws implications for the poor and oppressed who view themselves as powerless to transform the systems, regimes, and institutions

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<sup>7</sup>Lovett, "Black Holiness-Pentecostalism," 149.

<sup>8</sup>Ibid.,

<sup>9</sup>Ibid., 162.

<sup>10</sup>Murray W. Dempster, "Evangelism, Social Concern, and the Kingdom of God," in *Called & Empowered*, eds. Murray W. Dempster, Byron D. Klaus and Douglas Petersen (Peabody, Massachusetts: Hendrickson Publishers, 1991), 26.

<sup>11</sup>Lovett, "Black Pentecostal-Holiness," 163-164.

that maintain their economic and psychological subjugation. Therefore, spiritualization represents an infusion of power from outside of the oppressive structures, which can lead to massive mobilization among a group of people who are now infused with self-worth, lasting significance, and a sense of purpose and ability.

## **The Role of Revelation**

Lovett also depicts revelation as foundational to lasting liberation and empowerment. The empowerment of spiritualization is a type of revelation wherein God reveals something to people about their divine vocation to liberate the marginalized. Pentecostals already distinctively value experiential revelation as central to their beliefs, illustrated by belief in *glossolalia*, divine healing, miracles, and exorcisms as the definitive criterion for identifying traditional Pentecostal believers.<sup>12</sup> Furthermore, ecstatic experiences, dreams, visions, and other supernatural manifestations are at the core of Pentecostal religion. Regrettably, the magnitude of revelation in actualizing liberation has been mainly ignored within the Western church, and especially amongst Pentecostals. For example, Matthias Wenk observes that in Western Europe and America most Pentecostals are vociferously opposed to liberal perspectives on moral issues such as abortion or homosexuality, but mostly silent regarding questions of globalization, economic justice, and the environment.<sup>13</sup> Wenk illustrates that for many Western Pentecostals, revelation has been conditioned by middle class, individualistic values and norms that prioritize piety, problems of personal sin, and a one-sided definition of the kingdom of God. It is at this juncture that Black Pentecostals like Lovett are most helpful for recapturing the social issues catapulted beyond the spirit's purview by Western Pentecostals.

Black Pentecostals' conception of liberation as subsumed within revelation also chides other theologians for their inability to suggest a

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<sup>12</sup>Here I do not assert that the experience of these manifestations is the touchstone for whether one is Pentecostal, but rather, whether one believes that they exist and are beneficial to Christian life. This means that a person can never have spoken in tongues but still be Pentecostal by virtue of a belief in speaking in tongues as something available and desirable for all Christians.

<sup>13</sup> Matthias Wenk, "The Holy Spirit as Transforming Power Within a Society: Pneumatological Spirituality and its Political/Social Relevance for Western Europe," *Journal of Pentecostal Theology* 11.1 (2002): 131.

reliable, definitive course of action that leads to amelioration of social conditions. Cornel West states, “Black theologians all agree that black liberation has something to do with ameliorating the socioeconomic conditions of black people. But it is not clear what this amelioration amounts to.”<sup>14</sup> For West, this deficiency originates from the lack of clear-cut social theory to produce a substantive political program or social vision. West’s insight, while identifying the inadequate attention given to capitalism and economic systems by black theologians, somewhat overstates the issue, for even he agrees that the dialectical methodology of Marxists discourages discussions about the ideal society and what ought to be.<sup>15</sup> Furthermore, in propagating progressive Marxist social theory as a clear-cut means of diagnosing injustice, West forgets that investigating the nuances of Marxist thought is competently achieved by the sociologist, philosopher, and political scientist, but less so by the layperson, the theory is designed to liberate. This leads ultimately to the simple question of methodology that underscores the hesitancy of many who desire liberation—namely, what are they supposed to do?

Compounding the confusion is that “oppression” as a designation for a material condition exacerbated and maintained by an outside hegemony no longer registers with most middle class blacks. Cheryl Sanders’ wrote *Empowerment Ethics for a Liberated People* precisely for this reason. Sanders perceives that black people have made the transition from victimization to moral agency and are therefore more in charge of their institutions and resources. She assumes that “The ethics of liberation grounded in the dialectics of oppressor versus oppressed needs to be modified to provide more suitable norms for moral decision making by those who have moved beyond liberation and protest to assume positions of spiritual and material empowerment.”<sup>16</sup> However, Sanders’ misidentification of inclusion as empowerment is an error that other black theologians have also made.<sup>17</sup> For example, being included in the upper echelons of management within an oppressive corporation hardly means that one has the power to alter its practices. Thus, the question of what ought to be done remains.

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<sup>14</sup>Cornel West, *Prophesy Deliverance!* (Louisville: WJK Press, 2002), 111.

<sup>15</sup>*Ibid.*, 111.

<sup>16</sup>Cheryl L. Sanders, *Empowerment Ethics for a Liberated People: A Path to African-American Social Transformation* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1995), 2.

<sup>17</sup>West disagrees with an assessment of empowerment as middle class status that leaves the imperialist, capitalistic system intact. West interprets Sanders’ empowerment simply as “inclusion.” For more on this critique of traditional notions of liberation propounded by black theologians, see *Prophesy Deliverance!*, 112.

In answering this question, Cone believes that the next actions of the oppressed, *whatever* they might be, already begin creating the liberation sanctioned by divine revelation. As Cone expresses,

Thus the criteria of ethical judgment can only be hammered out in the community of the victims of injustice. But since God's will does not come in the form of absolute principles applicable for all situations, our obedience to the divine will involves the risk of faith. The risk of faith means that the oppressed are not infallible. They often do not do the will of God which they know, *and do not know the will of God which they proclaim* (emphasis mine).<sup>18</sup>

And again,

But the gospel of Jesus means liberation; and one essential element of that liberation is the existential burden of making decisions about human liberation without being completely sure what Jesus did or would do. This is the risk of faith.<sup>19</sup>

Cone's evisceration of revelation's ecstatic and miraculous elements means that he is forced to identify the oppressed community as detached from an active, divine assist, which thus leads to a truncated outcome—an attempt at liberation that is derailed soon after leaving the station. Cone's ethic must proceed largely by "trial and error," a principle that is certainly part of *every* revolutionary movement, but as the dominant guiding principle for black Christians pursuing social transformation is largely unsatisfying and abortive. Admittedly, faith is a part of every theological enterprise, including attempts at social transformation. However, Cone's approach emphasizes faith at the expense of a risk made exponentially more uncertain by a lack of immediate transcendent revelation. This revelation, intrinsic to Black Pentecostal belief and practice, is needed to direct the oppressed community toward realizing its liberation.

Paul Tillich's observations regarding revelation provide an effective rubric for determining how revelation is constituted. For Tillich, revelation is comprised of mystery, ecstasy, and miracle. Tillich also identifies three facets of a genuine miracle. First, a genuine miracle is astonishing, unusual, and shaking. Secondly, it points to the mystery of being in a definite way. Third, it is an occurrence, which is received as a

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<sup>18</sup>Cone, *God of the Oppressed*, 208.

<sup>19</sup>*Ibid.*, 222.

sign-event in ecstatic experience.<sup>20</sup> For Tillich, the objective occurrence is the miracle, while the subjective reception appears in ecstasy. What is revealed is the mystery or ground of being that is never *fully* disclosed, but is manifested in particular contexts. This revelation cannot be simply reduced to history, groups, or individuals. For Tillich, it is history's transparency to revealing the mystery that is revelatory, but not history itself. Furthermore, only as groups of people are transparent for divine disclosure are they revelatory. However, this cannot "be foreseen or derived from the qualities of persons, groups, and events."<sup>21</sup> Groups and personalities become mediums of revelation in connection with historical events of a revelatory character—with this character comprising an ecstatic experience.

Such an interpretation of revelation parallels Black Pentecostals' understanding of the Spirit's activity within the black Christian community. In cohering with Tillich, Black Pentecostals understand revelation as experiential, being received in the depth of one's struggles, decisions, and conflicts.<sup>22</sup> The gifts of the Spirit embody the Holy Spirit's leadership and direction of the Christian community to his desired ends and purposes. This pneumatological liberation supersedes the conceptions of the personal and individual that pervade contemporary Pentecostal theology, and opens out into the institutional, the global, and the cosmic. The Holy Spirit is a reminder of Christ's reign over all powers, processes, and systems, but even more importantly, he discloses the methods by which Christ desires to combat those structures which are unjust, oppressive, and contradictory to humanity's reflection of God's image.

James Forbes, Black Pentecostal preacher, social justice activist, and former pastor of the historic Riverside Church in New York, powerfully broadens traditional Pentecostal assumptions regarding revelatory activity to include liberation induced by inspiration of the Holy Spirit. In "Ministry of Hope from a Double Minority," Forbes associates black liberation with pneumatology and challenges Black Pentecostal preachers also to discern this obvious connection. Forbes declares, "Indeed the traditional spokesmen of the Pentecostal movement have usually been too caught up in 'spiritual things' to pay much attention to the oppression of black people. But to me, the incongruity is that the power of

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<sup>20</sup>Paul Tillich, *Systematic Theology* Volume 1 (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991), 117.

<sup>21</sup>*Ibid.*, 120.

<sup>22</sup>*Ibid.*, 127.

the Holy Spirit was never related to the theme of liberation.”<sup>23</sup> Twice, seemingly appalled at the egregious error, Forbes rhetorically questions how Pentecostal preachers could have missed this interrelatedness. Forbes also offers commentary on Luke 4:18, the oft-quoted verse where Jesus declares, “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovering of sight to the blind, to set at liberty those who are oppressed.” Forbes attaches this verse’s significance to the antecedent event in Luke 4:14, where Jesus, after being tempted, returns in the power of the Spirit to Galilee. Thus, for Forbes, the correlation between being filled with the power of the Spirit and performing acts of justice is conspicuous. This conspicuous correlation does not merely privilege the social work of the Holy Spirit over against the personal. Rather, the Spirit chooses according to sovereign design the degree of each that a person’s ministry will entail. Forbes summarizes his prophetic pneumatology by saying,

There was a time when life in the Spirit was associated primarily with the joy and peace of the individual. But one of our strong emphases at St. John’s is that the work of the Holy Spirit is bigger than simply bringing a good feeling to someone who is down in the dumps. This is not to be minimized. It is crucial. But Jesus promised to send power so that we could be witnesses for him. That is big business of cosmic scope. The Spirit we talk about empowers people to find personal fulfillment so that they will be freed up to participate in the work of liberation. The Holy Spirit may lead us into a special concern for deliverance from personal bondage—drug addiction, alcoholism, mental illness or social maladjustment. On the other hand, he may empower us to combat institutional racism or injustice in the courts. When he gives the assignment he also gives the power and guidance to accomplish the task.<sup>24</sup>

Both Cone and Forbes admit that one cannot always be certain of the impending course of action. However, Forbes expands Cone’s reliance on the community to include revelation instantiated in manifestations of the Spirits’ activity amongst the community so that humans can follow the

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<sup>23</sup>James Forbes, “Ministry of Hope,” 307.

<sup>24</sup>James Forbes, “Ministry of Hope from a Double Minority,” *Theological Education* 9.4 (1973).



Spirit's leadership into possible political and social activism. As Forbes proclaims of the Holy Spirit,

But we are not sure of how, when, or where he shall manifest his presence, for he works according to the mystery of his own plan and purpose. We stand ready and open to progress with him wherever he shall lead us and to be used of him according to his sovereign will.<sup>25</sup>

Forbes' awareness of the Holy Spirit's adaptability to differing settings and contexts echoes Tillich who realized that revelation is always for someone in a concrete situation of concern. This is where social theories and methodologies run around on the reefs of reason, for reason cannot completely give an account for realities that are themselves unreasonable, including despotic governments, repressive regimes, and rapacious institutions, nor can any methodology work in all cultural, social, and institutional contexts. The corruption endemic to human institutions will always remain, but it is the Holy Spirit whose revelation directs humanity within particular existential realities toward confronting the powers that usurp God's claim to sovereignty.

### **Liberation as Humanization**

Lovett's other strand in pneumatological liberation is humanization, which refers to making and keeping human life more human. In light of his attention to the poor and oppressed, making life more human can be interpreted in accordance with the Old Testament's view of people as divine image-bearers. Therefore, all people are worthy of dignity, respect, and value, because all are made in the image of God. Pentecostal theologian Murray Dempster unites humanization and social justice by portraying social justice as a biblical concept that is rooted deeply in the assumption that all men and women are bearers of the divine image, which surpasses philosophical concepts of justice awarded based upon merit, work, need, rank or legal entitlement. Dempster finds that "the Old Testament teaches that persons are entitled to just treatment on the basis that they are persons created in the divine image, nothing more or nothing less."<sup>26</sup> For Lovett then, political activism must be inexorably

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<sup>25</sup>Ibid., 310.

<sup>26</sup>Murray W. Dempster, "Pentecostal Social Concern and the Biblical Mandate of Social Justice," *Pneuma* 9.2 (1987), 132.

linked to preserving a biblical conceptualization of humanity, and he declares “that there can never be a sociological divorce between Pneumatological Liberation and the political life of man, since politics has to do with humanization.”<sup>27</sup>

### **The Journey to Personhood**

Black Pentecostals are in the best position to exemplify this correlation because of their historical identification with both the black struggle and with the origins of Pentecostalism in America. First, the entire existence of blacks in America has been a long, arduous, political journey toward humanization. The journey toward humanization began with slave revolts and escape plots that declared black people’s right to freedom although a Constitutional amendment misconstrued them as three-fifths of a person. It was followed by black people’s active political protest against lynchings and dehumanizing Jim Crow laws that justified segregation under a myth of being “separate but equal.” Throughout this history, the Black church was actively involved and often leading the way in advocating for liberation through political participation and protest.

In their authoritative tome, *The Black Church in the African American Experience*, C. Eric Lincoln and Lawrence H. Mamiya critique the widely held view that the Black church is an intrinsically anti-political agency.<sup>28</sup> Their research indicates that during slavery numerous black clergy and lay persons became involved in the Underground Railroad to help slaves escape to the North. In a prominent example, the basement of Mother Bethel A.M.E. Church in Philadelphia was used by Bishop Richard Allen—founder of the African Methodist Episcopal Church and its first bishop—to hide escaped slaves.<sup>29</sup> Furthermore, the three largest slave revolts in American history were led by slave preachers in the early to mid-nineteenth century. These revolts, fomented by Gabriel Prosser in 1800, Denmark Vesey in 1822, and Nat Turner in 1831, can all be described as revolutionary attempts to recover the divine image brutally effaced by white racism and slavery.<sup>30</sup> Even the communal gatherings in the “hush harbors” by worshipping slaves were acts of political subversion

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<sup>27</sup>Lovett, “Black Holiness-Pentecostalism,” 166.

<sup>28</sup>C. Eric Lincoln and Lawrence H. Mamiya, *The Black Church in the African American Experience* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1990), 198.

<sup>29</sup>*Ibid.*, 202.

<sup>30</sup>*Ibid.*, 203.

punishable by severe flogging and even death.<sup>31</sup> Following passage of the Civil Rights Act in 1867, thousands of former slaves registered to vote and elected twenty black congressmen and two black senators. Predictably, these political gains were vanquished by white backlash that erected electoral obstacles to disenfranchise blacks and sanctioned ubiquitous violence that enforced a new reign of terror. Thus excluded from the mainstream political process, for close to a hundred years, from the failure of Reconstruction until the passage of 1965's Voting Rights Act, the Black church was the primary locale of black political activity.<sup>32</sup> Therefore, Dempster's assertion that the church needs to come to terms with "the pervasive politicization of all dimensions of human life,"<sup>33</sup> resonates more fully with black people who only survived due to the black church's radical political engagement and attempts at social reform.

Secondly, the origins of Pentecostalism demonstrate a radical process of humanization led by blacks during the Azusa Street Revival that touched the lives of all races, classes, and strata of American society. Pentecostalism, one of the largest and fastest growing religious movements in the world, while soon ramifying into several branches and streams, began as a predominantly black religious movement. The most profound experience of black humanization happened due to pneumatological liberation that occurred during the Azusa Street Revival, led by a black, partially blind preacher named William Seymour.

The Azusa Street Revival, which began in Los Angeles in 1906, is widely recognized as the birthplace of Pentecostalism, and one of its salient characteristics was "the freedom it granted all people, regardless of race, gender, or station in life, to be treated as equals. Anyone could play an active role in worship; no one was ruled out by virtue of gender, color, class, or previous condition of servitude."<sup>34</sup> Without political coercion or threat, the Seymour led Azusa Street revival flattened barriers of classism, racism, and sexism under the banner of Pentecostal worship and participation. Seymour even accepted hugs and kisses from white women and men in his congregation, a practice that completely eschewed cultural norms, and that showed his multiracial congregation's strong commitment to him and to his interracial vision.<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>31</sup>Albert Raboteau, *Slave Religion* (Oxford: OUP, 2004), 212-218.

<sup>32</sup>Lincoln and Mamiya, *The Black Church*, 205.

<sup>33</sup>Dempster, *Evangelism, Social Concern*, 35.

<sup>34</sup>Cecil M. Robeck, Jr., *The Azusa Street Mission & Revival: The Birth of the Global Pentecostal Movement* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 2006), 137.

<sup>35</sup>Robeck, *The Azusa Street Mission*, 125.

It became one of the most racially inclusive, culturally diverse groups to gather in the city of Los Angeles at that time. It included people from all classes. It held the attention of the highly educated alongside the illiterate. It had something for new converts as well as for seasoned professionals in ministry. Even so, worship at the mission was undoubtedly heavily flavored by the dominantly African American character of its founding core membership.<sup>36</sup>

The common denominator uniting this otherwise disparate group of people was the outpouring of the Holy Spirit into their lives individually and collectively which led them to speak in tongues, shout in songs of praise, leap, run, jump, and embrace one another in gladness. Other manifestations of the spirit included falling down, jerking, rolling, and quivering.<sup>37</sup> That this ecstatic, exuberant practice of worship has compelling political implications is not readily apparent. However, occurring during an era when science and modernity had empirically declared the inferiority of blacks, Pentecostal practice collapsed the ideological barriers propping up the existing institutions to demonstrate allegiance to the lordship of Christ and not to prevailing societal norms or laws. Therefore, although the media frequently excoriated the revival, and police intervened to quell “disturbances,” the vision of beloved community so eloquently later espoused by Dr. King had already been concretized in the revolutionary worship of the Azusa Street Revival, a movement whose practice stripped American racist and sexist ideology of its potency and dominion while proleptically witnessing to the authenticity of Christ’s reign in which, “There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus.”<sup>38</sup>

### **Confronting Institutions: The African World-view**

If Black Pentecostalism theology truly has revolutionary implications, as I have claimed here, then pneumatological liberation, the theological tenet that defines my assessment of the Spirit’s role in the world, must have something to say about the tyrannical social institutions

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<sup>36</sup>Ibid., 88.

<sup>37</sup>For a full account of the varying manifestations of worship during the Azusa Street Revival, see Robeck’s chapter “Worship at the Azusa Street Mission” in *The Azusa Street Mission & Revival*, 129-186.

<sup>38</sup>Gal 3:28

that perpetuate oppression. Black Pentecostals have long been content to engage in interpersonal acts of social justice, including feeding the hungry, caring for the orphan, and visiting the sick. However, the same alacrity has not permeated their approach to confronting social structures and institutions although the Black Pentecostal worldview is amenable to this task. One prominent characteristic of Black Pentecostalism derived from its African origins is a holistic appraisal of reality that is not “disenchanted” like that of Western Theology. For instance, Africans often attribute the workings of government and unjust institutions to evil spirits. This worldview includes all segments of society within the Holy Spirit’s reach and influence, and it can also intensify Africans’ resistance to powers and institutions by portraying the government, institutions, and systems as evil forces on the wrong side of a divine battle or struggle.

In Africa, there are numerous divinities and gods that order individual life and the affairs of society.<sup>39</sup> Albert Raboteau, in describing the traditional religion of West Africa, states that “the power of the gods and spirits was effectively present in the lives of men, for good or ill, on every level—environmental, individual, social, national, and cosmic.” James Tinney also reports that the Pentecostal movement reflects its African heritage through its emphasis upon the spirit world. This means that the social and political order is also ordered by spirits and demons, and the degree to which a political system is just or benevolent depends upon to what degree its leaders are Holy-Ghost filled or demon controlled.<sup>40</sup> This enchanted worldview pertains to revolutionary social change for two reasons. First, it produces the ideological and psychological motivation needed to enter the political context and wage battle against the political forces (demons) that would turn life into a kingdom of evil.<sup>41</sup> Secondly, the generalization of social, political, and spiritual problems as consisting of “multi-dimensional manipulation of persons and institutions by evil spirits” elicits multifarious efforts to engender social change. Meaning, attack strategies frequently shift from various focal points and types of political engagement to resemble a sort of “guerrilla” political activism.

### **Explicating the Powers**

Theologian Walter Wink devotes an entire trilogy to the discussion of powers, replete with in-depth biblical analysis and exegesis of angels,

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<sup>39</sup>Raboteau, *Slave Religion*, 8.

<sup>40</sup>Tinney, *A Theoretical and Historical Comparison*, 233.

<sup>41</sup>*Ibid.*, 241.

demons, principalities, spirits and institutions.<sup>42</sup> Wink has observed the extremism within western societies that either attribute every act in the universe to an angelic or demonic force or completely deny the spiritual world's existence altogether. Within a society torn between the reductionism of science, and eerie accounts of strange beings, Wink recognizes that "between the rock of rejection and the hard place of hysteria, it is hard to find a place to locate the demonic on our current world maps."<sup>43</sup>

Wink defines the powers not as separate heavenly entities with corresponding deities, but "as the inner aspect of material or tangible manifestations of power."<sup>44</sup> They do not have a separate, spiritual existence, and we encounter them primarily in reference to the material reality of which they are the innermost essence. Wink uses a "mob spirit," at a soccer match as an example. A mob spirit does not exist independently of the mob, but is formed when the crowd is collectively agitated to a certain degree. Thus, the Powers are "the simultaneity of two aspects in a single entity: an outer organization of power maintained by human personnel, role typifications, policies, structures, and building; and an inner or spiritual essence that is the corporate personality of the institution or system."<sup>45</sup> In Wink's system, institutions become demonic when they turn their back on their divine vocation, which is to preserve justice and resist oppressive tendencies. While Wink believes that segments of societies can be collectively demon possessed, including governments, economic systems, and entities, he understands them to be capable of transformation and not necessarily in need of annihilation, because all powers, insofar as they created, are at least partially inherently good.

Wink is right to attribute both benevolence and malfeasance to institutions, and his reconceptualization of the demonic can provide a means of discourse between both evangelicals and liberals alike. For Wink, the question is not whether demons are beings, but what do we *do* about the irrefutable manifestations of evil that currently exist. The traditional response of Black Pentecostals has been to pray for their

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<sup>42</sup>See the publications by Walter Wink: *Naming the Powers: The Language of Power in the New Testament* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1984); *Unmasking the Powers: The Invisible Forces that Determine Human Existence* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1986); *Engaging the Powers: Discernment and Resistance in a World of Domination* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1992).

<sup>43</sup>Walter Wink "Demons and DMins: The Church's Response to the Demonic" *Review and Expositor* 89.4 (1992), 504.

<sup>44</sup>Wink, *Naming the Powers*, 104.

<sup>45</sup>Wink, "Demons and DMins," 504.

leaders, governments, and institutions, thus focusing on the inward state of conglomerates and asking God that spirits of “isms” are cast out.<sup>46</sup> This is problematic for its reticence to cohesively unite prayer with action to enlist the powers of coercion at their disposal. As Reinhold Niebuhr discerned, all governments and collective institutions will be shot through with deception, self-interest, moral failure, and allegiance to the status quo, and only coercion will cause them to abdicate their unjust positions.<sup>47</sup> While social improvement is possible, it is always conditional, incomplete, and ephemeral, because the nature of humans—especially collectively—is always fraught with the tension of what they should be versus what they are at any given moment. Predictably, most revolutionary movements simply exchange places with the oppressors, and they too become corrupted by power. However, pneumatological liberation engages both the spiritual and material realms to invoke change that continually prophetically speaks and acts from the margins to hold up mirrors of truth to the powers that be.

### **The Need for Self-Transformation**

To effectively protest against and denunciate unjust institutions and powers, Black Pentecostalism must first recognize that it too has become an oppressive institution in its failure to advocate for the poor and marginalized, and for evidence of its unwillingness to include them within the life of the church community. Instead, Black Pentecostalism has increasingly been reinforcing class distinctions that exacerbate the disparity between those that are impoverished and oppressed, and those who are economically stable. For example, Lincoln and Mamiya identify the dissection of the Black church along class lines into a middle class church and a church for the underclass. Although the black underclass continues to grow, the black church, with its prosperity messages and conspicuous consumption of material goods, is more geared toward gaining middle class members, and is increasingly ill-equipped to include

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<sup>46</sup>Pentecostals will pray during prayer groups or collective worship that the (demonic) spirit of racism, sexism, greed, pride, etc. is cast out, meaning, chased away by the Spirit of God which alleviates them from having to do anything themselves. The “casting out” is left to the action of the Holy Spirit.

<sup>47</sup>Reinhold Niebuhr, *Moral Man and Immoral Society* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1932).

the poor in its life and practices, thus exacerbating the social isolation that compounds inner-city poverty.<sup>48</sup>

Isaac B. Laudarji and Lowell W. Livezey completed an ethnographic study observing the practices of churches in Chicago's Near West Side. In 1990, the neighborhood surrounding Chicago Housing Authority's Henry Horner Homes was 100 percent black with unemployment rates of sixty percent and an astounding poverty rate of eighty percent.<sup>49</sup> There were twelve churches within walking distance of the housing development, which houses the Near West Side's greatest concentration of the ghetto poor, and yet only one church, Revival Center Church of God in Christ, actually claimed participation of Henry Horner residents as members or regular church attendees, although several spoke of ministries *to* and *for* Henry Horner residents. Laudarji and Livezey found that while noble and beneficial, the social programs of most black churches did not draw the poor into a network of relationships that allowed them to effectively participate in the wider world. While Revival Center did draw the poor local residents into its church life, Laudarji and Livezey cited it as a good example of "the traditional introverted forms of Black Pentecostal social intervention," with no political activity beyond the circulation of petitions for a denominational member seeking public office.<sup>50</sup>

This study parallels Omar McRoberts' research of black churches, many of which are Pentecostal, within Boston's crime-ridden and impoverished Four Corners neighborhood. He discovers that although this half-square-mile neighborhood is inundated with twenty-nine churches, church involvement in the life of the neighborhood is largely nonexistent. Many churches do not even realize that they are in a neighborhood called Four Corners, and their membership is comprised of largely middle class and working-class families who drive into the community from more affluent areas to worship. By viewing the activity in the streets as an embodiment of sin and moral evil, the churches hesitate to engage in

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<sup>48</sup>Lincoln and Mamiya, *The Black Church*, 384. For more on the rising black underclass and its relationship to the black church, see Johnathan L. Walton, *Watch This! The Ethics and Aesthetics of Black Televangelism* (New York: New York University Press, 2009), 201-206.

<sup>49</sup>Isaac B. Laudarji and Lowell W. Livezey, "The Churches and the Poor in a 'Ghetto Underclass' Neighborhood" in *Public Religion: Faith in the City and Urban Transformation*, ed. Lowell W. Livezey (New York: New York University Press, 2000), 85.

<sup>50</sup>Laudarji and Livezey, "The Churches and the Poor," 102.



revolutionary partnership with the oppressed against social institutions to transform their socioeconomic and spiritual condition.<sup>51</sup>

Thus, the Black Pentecostal church's adoption of Lovett's theology of pneumatological liberation that infuses the practices of the church to incorporate fully the poor into the life of the church while simultaneously engaging in "the violence of non-violence" to confront systemic injustice within the inner city is desperately needed. Pneumatological liberation stands in solidarity with Latin American liberation theology as a movement of the poor and for the poor, but it is not wedded to a Marxist social theory or any predetermined revolutionary methodology for its success. Rather, by relying upon revelation, it takes seriously Stanley Hauerwas' perception of the core issue: "The issue is how the church can provide the interpretative categories to help Christians better understand the positive and negative aspects of their societies and guide their subsequent selective participation."<sup>52</sup> Notwithstanding charges to the contrary, Hauerwas does not demand the categorical withdrawal of Christians from civic engagement, but he admonishes the church that sometimes participation in government, economy, or the educational system is unwarranted, thus making this refusal to participate also revolutionary. However, by what means does the church ascertain the form that its civic participation and protest should take? Hauerwas concludes that such determinations can be made only by developing the skills of discrimination fostered in the church.<sup>53</sup>

## **The Spiritual Gifts**

For the Black Pentecostal, these determinations are pneumatologically governed through the *charismata*, the spiritual gifts that encompass the Pentecostal belief system. For our purposes, two will be mentioned here. They include the gift of discernment, and the gift of prophecy. Contrary to the patriarchal themes that dominate public images and authoritarian notions of Pentecostalism, these gifts are given to the entire community, including women. In Corinthians chapter 12 and 14, Paul is addressing the entire local church, and does not assume that only

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<sup>51</sup> Omar McRoberts, *Streets of Glory: Church and Community in a Black Urban Neighborhood* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003).

<sup>52</sup> Stanley Hauerwas, "Why the 'Sectarian Temptation' is a Misrepresentation: A Response to James Gustafson," in *The Stanley Hauerwas Reader*, ed. John Berkman and Michael Cartwright (Duke University Press, 2001), 102.

<sup>53</sup>Hauerwas, "The Sectarian Temptation," 106.

one person carries the burden of gift expression. Paul's depiction of giftedness as instantiated in each of the members comprising the church staunchly reprimands those churches whose leaders assume godlike status for their sole ability to prophesy or discern the Spirit's activity. Instead, the shared practices of prayer and worship create a space wherein the Spirit lovingly reveals the church's role in its community and context. Always included in this collective revelation will be God's compassion for the oppressed and marginalized. The spirit will speak to both personal, spiritual oppression and to the avaricious principles guiding many governmental, capitalist, and societal entities—principles that also restrict the true freedom of individuals. However, many Black Pentecostal churches erect boundaries around the Spirit's activities by limiting his role to the sanction of middle class values and material wants.<sup>54</sup> A revolutionary pneumatological liberation will open the doors of our confining ideological spaces to release the Spirit into unfamiliar territories that will subvert the status quo and confront the self-interested origins of our deepest desires.

## **Conclusion**

In this paper, I have argued that pneumatological liberation as propounded by Leonard Lovett represents a theology that is revelatory in content, prophetic in its confrontation and evaluation of powers and institutions, and firmly rooted in the history and culture of Black Pentecostalism. The first revolutionary act will be the recovery of Black Pentecostal voices like Lovett, Brazier, Forbes, and Tinney within the academy to posit a theology that takes seriously the political implications of Black Pentecostalism and the plight of poor people beset by an inequitable justice system, substandard housing, inadequate education, and overall neglect. The next step includes recognition by the Black Pentecostal church that witnessing to the peace and justice of Christ will often involve political activism and public protest. Most revolutionary action will be the conjoined efforts of the church and academy in realizing radical social reform, an expectation that Cone envisioned, but which never materialized. What the theological academy needs least is another ethic that escapes embodiment in church life and practice and instead

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<sup>54</sup>See Jonathan L. Walton, *Watch This!*, for a compelling critique of the elements within the theology of some prominent Black Pentecostal preachers whose sermons reinforce middle class values and desires.

becomes fodder for endless critique and analysis. However, if it is to fulfill this task, critical issues remain.

First, the Black Pentecostal church must eradicate its anti-intellectual tradition by impelling its leaders and pastors to attend seminaries and divinity schools to gain the conceptual categories needed for effective engagement with realities that must also be thought through, and not simply danced around and preached to. Niebuhr's Christian realism illuminates the deception intrinsic to the powers and suggests that potential activists must, in order to identify it, be well-versed in the themes and language of globalization, capitalism, and institutions, and also conversant in womanist, liberation, and other contextual theologies that provide the hermeneutical lenses for identifying deception and abuses of power. The lines of demarcation, as Wink explains, are not black and white, and distinguishing between what is institutionally oppressive and what is socially beneficial takes careful discernment. The exploitation of people of color by an unjust prison system that justifies its actions as a "war on crime" proves this fact.<sup>55</sup> While the Spirit lends his voice to the task of liberation, Pentecostals must avoid bypassing higher learning, an avoidance that only increases the intimidation caused by the labyrinthine nature of political and social institutions.

Another issue is that the lack of women featured in this study illustrates the male-dominated arena that the Black Pentecostal church and black power were in the 1970s, and in many cases, continue to be. Since then, there are large numbers of black women who are entering the theological academy thereby sweetening a revolutionary chorus traditionally composed of only male voices. These female voices are still excluded from ordination within the largest Black Pentecostal denomination, the Church of God in Christ. It is hoped that the Black Pentecostal church will open its highest ranks of leadership to more Black Pentecostal women who will add their voices to a chorus begun by Tinney, Lovett, Forbes, and Brazier, but which is by no means complete. While the church will have to start slowly, taking careful steps toward revitalization of blighted communities and full incorporation of the poor into church life, we can be certain that the path is not merely discovered, but most certainly revealed.

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<sup>55</sup>For an in-depth explication of race related oppression involving the American prison system, see Becky Pettit and Bruce Western, "Mass Imprisonment and the Life Course: Race and Class Equality in U.S. Incarceration" *American Sociological Review* 69.2 (2004):151-169.

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