
PRESIDENTIAL ADDRESS**ENGAGING THE PROPHETIC DIMENSION OF CHRISTIAN LEADERSHIP**

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The theme of the 2020 Virtual Annual Meeting of the Academy of Religious Leadership was “Engaging the Prophetic Dimension of Christian Leadership.” This theme was conceived in the present national context of partisan political leadership, a global pandemic, social unrest, and an outcry for addressing America’s original sin of racism against indigenous people, Black people, and other people of color. The current moment demands a sustained focus from teachers and practitioners of religious leadership on questions such as: “What do we understand as prophetic leadership, given our foundational sources and our current context?” and “How do Christian leaders speak and lead with authority in a situation of flux where churches are decentered in a post-truth society?”

Thus, I called for the Academy of Religious Leadership to study, reflect on, and engage the prophetic dimension of Christian leadership in order to better understand how to effectively equip faith leaders for ministry leadership that critiques, challenges, and transforms an array of structural injustice and systemic sins against Creation and humankind.

The current issue of the Journal features articles that engage this theme. This essay does not attempt to answer all of the questions raised; rather, it is a series of personal reflections on my lived experience in the present context that inform my perspectives on the importance of engaging the prophetic dimension of Christian leadership. Further, I assert the importance of privileging the lived experiences and interpretations of those historically marginalized in religious discourse as a source for practical theological interpretation and action. This proposal to listen to, learn from, and sift through

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the lived experiences and interpretations of the marginalized and oppressed is consistent with theological norms throughout the prophetic tradition of the Old Testament prophets and the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

Prophetic Concern in a Toxic Political Environment

Lincoln and Mamiya's dialectical model of the Black Church informs my understanding of the prophetic functions of leadership. They state that: "Black Churches are institutions that are involved in a constant series of dialectical tensions. The dialectic holds polar opposites in tension constantly shifting between the polarities in historical time. There is no Hegelian synthesis or ultimate resolution of the synthesis."¹ One of the six pairs of dialectically related polar opposites in their sociological model is "the dialectic between the priestly and prophetic functions" of the Church. They explain that:

Priestly functions involve only those activities concerned with worship and maintaining the spiritual life of membership; church maintenance activities are the major thrust. Prophetic functions refer to involvement in political concerns and activities in the wider community; classically, prophetic activity has meant proclaiming a radical word of God's judgement²

Thus, prophetic leadership involves Christian involvement in the political concerns and activities of the wider community in the tradition of the prophets who proclaimed radical words of judgement and hope. But, this requires discernment. As Professor Richard Osmer writes:

"Prophetic discernment is the task of listening to this Word and interpreting it in ways that address particular social conditions, events, and decisions before

¹ C. Eric Lincoln and Lawrence H. Mamiya, *The Black Church in the African American Experience* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1990), 11.

² Lincoln and Mamiya, *The Black Church in the African American Experience*, 12.

congregations today. Such discernment is a matter of divine disclosure and theological interpretation in the face of popular or official theologies that may be leading the world toward disaster.”³

Although prophetic leadership is needed in every time and place, my call for this focus arises from the ache in my own troubled soul. Perhaps it was because of sympathy with the divine pathos that my soul was troubled with the election of Donald J. Trump as president of the United States in 2016. After witnessing the public statements of Trump, President Barack Obama, and Democratic candidates Hillary Clinton and Tim Kaine in the immediate aftermath of the election, I mulled over the tremendous challenges of transformational leadership, a leadership approach concerned with ethical principles that change people, that treats them as full human beings, and that moves them to accomplish more than usually is expected of them.⁴ In contrast, I saw President Elect Donald Trump as an art-of-the-deal⁵ transactional leader when compared with the more transformational approach of the outgoing president.

Obama’s “yes we can” rallying cry highlights a transformational and adaptive leadership “practice of mobilizing people to tackle tough challenges and thrive.”⁶ However, the soul of America had

³ Richard R. Osmer, *Practical Theology: An Introduction* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2008), 135.

⁴ James MacGregor Burns, *Leadership* (New York: Harper and Row, 1978).

⁵ Much can be gleaned about Trump’s worldview and leadership approach from the opening lines of his defining book *Trump: The Art of the Deal*: “I don’t do it for the money. I’ve got enough, much more than I’ll ever need. I do it to do it. Deals are my art form. Other people paint beautifully on canvas or write wonderful poetry. I like making deals, preferably big deals. That’s how I get my kicks.” Donald J. Trump with Tony Schwartz, *Trump: The Art of the Deal* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1987), 1.

⁶ Ronald A. Heifetz, Alexander Grashow, and Marty Linsky, *The Practice of Adaptive Leadership: Tools and Tactics for Changing Your Organization and the World* (Boston, Mass.: Harvard Business Press, 2009), 14.

not been transformed. Obama's inclusive "yes we can"⁷ stood in stark contrast to Trump's exclusive boast: "I alone can fix it!"⁸ Despite the two-term leadership of America's first African American president and likely because of it, America elected someone whom I view as racist, sexist, narcissistic, xenophobic, and ableist to its highest office. America was not transformed. Indeed, I saw this as another indicator that racism is alive and well.

My analogy of the impact of the Obama years is of a bottle of orange juice with thick pulp. When the bottle sits awhile, the pulp settles on the bottom. However, when the bottle is shaken, the pulp is diffused throughout the juice. There are times and places in which racism is experienced by people of color as covert, subtle, and institutionalized. It is not visible or apparent to those whose social location does not require them to perceive the ever-present, anti-Black culture of America. To the undiscerning who believed that the election of the first Black president signaled a post-racial America, the pulp of racism is not seen. However, the elevation of a Black man to the most powerful political office shook up the orange juice so that covert and subtle racism became overt, blatant, and ugly, not only in its individual expressions, but also in its systemic expressions. In her post-election concession speech,

⁷ In his victory speech following his election, Obama called for the collective spirit and energies of the American people to solve challenging problems: "This is our time to put people back to work and open doors of opportunity for our kids; to restore prosperity; to reclaim the American dream and reaffirm that fundamental truth, that, out of many, we are one; that while we breathe, we hope. And where we are met with cynicism and doubts and those who tell us we can't, we will respond with that timeless creed that sums up the spirit of the people: yes we can." The Full Text of Barack Obama's Victory Speech, November 5, 2008. <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/americas/the-full-text-of-barack-obamas-victory-speech-993008.html> (accessed August 17, 2020).

⁸ In his acceptance of the GOP nomination for president in July 2016, Trump boasted: "Nobody knows the system better than me, which is why I alone can fix it. I have seen first-hand how the system is rigged against our citizens, just like it was rigged against Bernie Sanders. He never had a chance." <https://www.cnbc.com/video/2016/07/21/trump-i-alone-can-fix-the-system.html> (accessed August 17, 2020).

Hillary Clinton offered a biblical perspective to frame the moment: “Let us not lose heart in doing what is right, for we will reap in due season if we do not give up.”⁹

I listened to Obama’s reflection that progress is not a straight line; neither is it inevitable. Progress will include successes as well as setbacks. In my social media post on November 9, 2016, I expressed my inner pain:

Today feels like a crucifixion and death of a host of interrelated social movements in history. While the victors claim a mandate, people of color, women, the LGBTQ community, the disabled, and all those whose vote propelled Hillary Clinton to win the popular vote, America chose to elevate a man who has no commitment to the interests of these communities. Senator Kaine, using the words of William Faulkner, expressed resilient hope in this moment of sitting in the ashes: ‘they killed us, but they ain’t whupped us yet.’¹⁰ The work of justice is clearly not about one election which tempts one to cynicism, despair and to disparage those who think differently. Faith (and work), the audacity of hope and the power of love still abide.¹¹

Reflecting my social constructivist understanding of the world,¹² I saw the national competing narratives (“Make America Great

⁹ Galatians 6: 9.

¹⁰ Watch Tim Kaine speak after Trump presidential victory, *PBS News Hour*, November 9, 2016. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Kh-Chy06rQzo&list=LLjABP2yvk_2ap_Tlz1cFFdQ&index=3232 (accessed August 15, 2020).

¹¹ Jeffery L. Tribble, Sr., Facebook timeline, November 9, 2016, (accessed August 15, 2020).

¹² Merriam and Tisdell explain interpretive research as follows: “Interpretive research, which is the most common type of qualitative research, assumes that reality is socially constructed; that there is no single, observable reality. Rather, there are multiple realities, or interpretations of a single event.” Sharan B. Merriam and Elizabeth J. Tisdell, *Qualitative Research: A Guide to Design and Implementation*, 4th ed. (San Francisco, Calif.: Jossey Bass, 2016), 9.

Again”¹³ versus many people of color’s view that MAGA is a racist dog whistle to go back to an era of unchecked racial discrimination) as “partial, situated, and subjective knowledge”¹⁴ that I hoped would be revisited, reframed, and perhaps even revised in the social struggles of history. Concluding my post, I wrote, “But, we do not give up praying for and working for Shalom for all.”

I drafted the Academy of Religious Leadership (ARL) call to papers two years later as I mulled over the significant events surrounding the impeachment of Donald Trump. Trump’s impeachment came after a formal inquiry in the House of Representatives, which alleged that he had solicited foreign interference in the 2020 U.S. presidential election to help his reelection bid, and then obstructed the inquiry by telling officials in his administration to ignore subpoenas for documents and testimony. Particularly troubling to me were reports that some GOP senators admitted that they intended to violate their oath to a fair and impartial impeachment trial.¹⁵

¹³ In his acceptance of the GOP nomination, Trump described an America in crisis. He postured himself as both “the voice” and the solution against attacks on police and terrorism as threats to the American way of life. He said that America suffered from domestic disaster and international humiliation. An America full of shuttered factories and crushed communities, one with “poverty and violence at home” and with “war and destruction abroad” is one that Trump declared should be made great again. Breaking with two centuries of American tradition, Trump did not ask people to place their faith in each other or in God, but rather in Trump. Yoni Appelbaum, “I Alone Can Fix It,” *The Atlantic*, July 16, 2016. /www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2016/07/trump-rnc-speech-alone-fix-it/492557/ (accessed August 17, 2020).

¹⁴ While gaining expertise in qualitative research as a research tool for practical theological research, the idea of the “partial, situated, and subjective” nature of knowledge was impressed upon my mind, heart, and imagination. Richardson’s analysis of the nature of qualitative knowledge is useful: “Sociological discovery, generally, happens through finding out about people’s lives from the people themselves—listening to how people experience their lives and frame their worlds, working inductively, rather than deductively... Most ethnographers are keenly aware that knowledge of the world they enter is partial, situated, and subjective knowledge.” [L. Richardson, *Writing Strategies: Reaching Diverse Audiences* (Newbury Park, Calif.: Sage Publications, 1990,) 28.

¹⁵ Ted Barrett and Ali Zaslav, “Mitch McConnell: ‘I’m not an impartial juror’ ahead of Senate impeachment trial,” *CNN*, December 17, 2019. Veronica Stracqualursi, “‘I’m not trying to pretend to be a fair juror here’: Graham predicts Trump impeachment will ‘die quickly’ in Senate,” *CNN*, December 14, 2019.

The open declaration of powerful senators of their intent to violate their oath to be impartial as a political decision on a matter so consequential to the nation caused me to reflect on the necessity of ethical leadership. Whereas Burns's concept of transformational leadership focuses on the positive aspects of leadership, such a brazen violation of ethical principles led me to contemplate the concept of pseudo-transformational, or the "dark side" of leadership. Northouse explains: "The dark side of leadership is the destructive and toxic side of leadership in that a leader uses leadership for personal ends."¹⁶ Hogan and Kaiser take this idea further, formulating a helpful model of the toxic triangle of destructive leaders.¹⁷ The toxic triangle consists of destructive leaders, susceptible followers, and conducive environments. Destructive leaders are characterized by their charisma, personalized power, narcissism, negative life themes, and ideology of hate. Susceptible followers include conformers and colluders. Conformers are characterized as persons with unmet needs, low core self-evaluations, and low maturity. Colluders are characterized by their ambition, similar worldview as the destructive leader, and bad values. Finally, conducive environments are characterized by instability, perceived threat, cultural values, lack of checks and balances, and ineffective institutions. In my view, conformers in this model could include aggrieved workers who feel left behind in a globalized post-industrial economy, while colluders might include the ambitious politicians whose influence in public life would be nullified if they opposed the president, or the white Evangelical leaders who sacralize his values and policies. A deeply divided democracy and a president who has attacked the democratic institutions of his own government provide a conducive environment for a destructive leader.

Robert Jones, CEO of the Public Religion Research Institute, asserts that "The two divergent and competing narratives—one looking wistfully back to midcentury heartland America and one

¹⁶ Peter G. Northouse, *Leadership Theory and Practice*, 7th ed. (Los Angeles, Calif.: Sage Publications, Inc., 2016), 339.

¹⁷ A. Padilla, R. Hogan, and R.B. Kaiser, "The Toxic Triangle: Destructive Leaders, Susceptible Followers and Conducive Environments," *The Leadership Quarterly* (18): 180.

looking hopefully forward to a multicultural America—cut to the massive cultural divide facing the country today.”¹⁸ Donald Trump’s campaign slogan, “Make America Great Again,” resonates with Americans who look back to the 1950s as an earlier time of prosperity, and who from their social location, believe American culture is changing for the worse. On the other side of the cultural divide, the social revolutions and new immigration patterns of the 1960s and 1970s were most beneficial for advancing the lives of African Americans, immigrant communities, women, the disabled, and others. These are the groups most attacked by Trump personally and by his supporters.

According to Jones, the question of whether American culture has gone downhill since the 1950s or changed for the better reveals cultural divides by race and religion. His analysis of responses to the question, “Since the 1950’s, do you think American culture and way of life has mostly changed for the better, or has it mostly changed for the worse?” is revealing:

More than seven in ten (72 percent) white evangelical Protestants and nearly six in ten (58 percent) white mainline Protestants say American culture and way of life has changed for the worse since the 1950’s. Roughly six in ten white Catholics (58 percent) agree with their fellow white Christians that American culture has changed for the worse since the 1950’s. Meanwhile, approximately six in ten Hispanic Catholics (59 percent) say the opposite—that American culture has changed for the better. Approximately six in ten (63 percent) religiously unaffiliated Americans also say American culture and way of life has changed for the better since the mid-twentieth century, as do majorities of African American Protestants (55 percent). Overall, the pattern is unambiguous: most white Christians—along with groups in which they constitute a majority,

¹⁸ Robert P. Jones, *The End of White Christian America* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2016), 85.

like the Tea Party—believe that America is on a downhill slide, while strong majorities of most other groups in the country say things are improving.¹⁹

It is important for prophetic leaders to discern what gladdens or grieves the heart of God in the political concerns and wider events of the world.²⁰ The partial, situated, contextual nature of knowledge requires humility in this task due to human limitations and fallibility. At the same time, prophetic leaders need to speak and act boldly with integrity and love. This understanding of prophecy resonates with my appreciation of the perspective of the Apostle Paul: “As for prophecies, they will be brought to an end. As for tongues, they will stop. As for knowledge, it will be brought to an end. We know in part and we prophesy in part; but when the perfect comes, what is partial will be brought to an end.”²¹

Prophetic Truth-Telling in a Post-Truth Era

The presidential election of 2016 was a significant moment in U.S. politics, culture, and church life. It has been analyzed by many persons from different perspectives. In the previous section, I have offered my interpretation of these events. I realize that single causality reasoning must be critically examined, however, since multiple interpretations of the same event are possible. Ethicist D. Stephen Long names a set of diverse explanations of the meaning of this election. One explanation, for many on the political left, is that the election was a symptom, not a cause; it is the logical consequence of cultural trajectories long in place, including a two-party system that has abandoned working people.²² A second explanation, posited by some conservatives, is the view that Trumpism is a cause more than a symptom. They believe that Trump individually hijacked the GOP by falsely presenting

¹⁹ Robert P. Jones, *The End of White Christian America*, 87.

²⁰ Richard R. Osmer, *Practical Theology: An Introduction*, 135–139.

²¹ I Corinthians 13: 8–10, CEB.

²² D. Stephen Long, *Truth Telling in a Post-Truth World* (Nashville, Tenn.: General Board of Higher Education and Ministry, 2019), xi.

himself as a conservative.²³ A third explanation, shared by many in the white evangelical Christian church, is that Trump is a gift from God along the lines of Cyrus in the Old Testament (2 Chronicles 36: 22–23).²⁴ Long describes this white evangelical view as follows:

Just as God raised up an outside, foreign leader to save Israel from Babylonian captivity, so God raised up Trump to restore religious freedom in America, the freedom not to bake a cake for gay weddings, the freedom not to be taxed for artificial conception and abortion, the freedom to pray at public events, and so forth. They may not like much about him, but he is the person God brought to bring something that is being lost in the U.S.²⁵

Finally, for others, Trump's election represents the victory of the business class against the establishment politicians in Washington. In the face of these multiple interpretations of the presidential election of 2016, Long asserts that while these interpretations might appear to conflict, they could all be true.²⁶ Discernment of the truth is a complicated matter.

Long takes up an important question in a post-truth world: "Why should truth matter?" It matters because we are a people who have become increasingly susceptible to lies. Long says: "A tradition of lies begets other lies, and truth becomes suspect, prompting us to question, 'Is there such a thing as truth?' 'How would we know it?'"²⁷ This is perhaps best illustrated by an early episode in the Trump presidency.

The day after Trump's inauguration, Chuck Todd, reporter for NBC's Meet the Press, interviewed Kellyanne Conway, special counselor to President Donald Trump. The interview included an exchange about Sean Spicer's first press conference in which he told the press what Trump wanted to hear; the crowd for his inauguration

²³ D. Stephen Long, *Truth Telling in a Post-Truth World*, xi.

²⁴ D. Stephen Long, *Truth Telling in a Post-Truth World*, xi.

²⁵ D. Stephen Long, *Truth Telling in a Post-Truth World*, xi–xii.

²⁶ D. Stephen Long, *Truth Telling in a Post-Truth World*, xii.

²⁷ D. Stephen Long, *Truth Telling in a Post-Truth World*, 5.

was the largest in history both in person or around the globe. Todd queried Conway about why the press secretary, who at times speaks not only for the president but also for the American people, would utter a “provable falsehood.” In this exchange, Kellyanne Conway introduced the nation to a novel concept that eventually would become common nomenclature, asserting that Press Secretary Sean Spicer had shared “alternative facts.”²⁸

Long analyzes Conway’s line of argument and offers this illuminating guide: “Truth can always be put into question through these steps—confusion, deflection, the reduction of things in the world to data, and the assumption that interpretation of the data will always serve someone’s political interests.”²⁹ Here we have an oft-used playbook for obscuring the truth: sow seeds of doubt and confusion, deflect from the issue of focus, and reduce the world to a set of data that is marshalled, not to support an evidence-based claim, but for political purposes.

Why does truth matter? Long suggests that if the very idea of truth is undermined, there can be no justice, no ethics, no true education, and no basis for faith. Put bluntly, if we lose truth in a post-truth world, “We may have nothing left but ‘bullshit.’”³⁰ Further, Harry Frankfurt argues that a distinction can be found between someone who is lying and someone who is “bullshitting.” He writes:

It is impossible for someone to lie unless he thinks he knows the truth. Producing bullshit requires no such conviction. A person who lies is thereby responding to the truth, and he is to that extent respectful of it. When an honest man speaks, he says only what he believes to be true; and for the liar, it is correspondingly

²⁸ Kellyanne Conway, counselor to the president, tells Chuck Todd that the press secretary used “alternative facts” in his first statement to the press corps. “Conway: Press Secretary Gave Alternative Facts,” NBC *Meet the Press*, January 22, 2017. <https://www.nbcnews.com/meet-the-press/video/conway-press-secretary-gave-alternative-facts-860142147643> (accessed August 17, 2020).

²⁹ D. Stephen Long, *Truth Telling in a Post-Truth World*, 8.

³⁰ D. Stephen Long, *Truth Telling in a Post-Truth World*, 11.

indispensable that he considers his statements to be false. For the bullshitter, however, all these bets are off: he is neither on the side of the true nor on the side of the false. His eye is not on the facts at all, as the eyes of the honest man and of the liar are, except insofar as they may be pertinent to this interest in getting away with what he says.³¹

A tradition of lies has produced a fact-checking response by political analysts; but it also has helped to foster a culture in which disinformation is readily believed and where conspiracy theories seem plausible. In a culture where bullshitting has become normalized, I sense a despair in our ministry students. If the world of lived experiences is reduced to data that is routinely manipulated to say whatever you want it to say, is truth a possibility? This post-truth culture has pushed me to be more intentional in my teaching of qualitative research methods. Honesty and rigor matter for all research that is concerned with producing valid and reliable knowledge in an ethnical manner.³²

Long also argues that truth is more basic than a lie, a claim that is metaphysical, theological, and moral.³³ He makes a compelling point with real implications for indigenous people, Black people, and other people of color. Asserting that Western culture has replaced truth with value, Long suggests that:

One of the reasons that we are where we are is because we have replaced truth and goodness with 'value.' ... but suffice it for now to say that value assumes the world is nothing but inert matter without meaning until our will works on it. Once it does, then it has value. Once

³¹ Harry G. Frankfurt, *On Bullshit* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2005), 55–56.

³² In Doctor of Ministry and Doctor of Educational Ministry project proposals, I require students to reflect in their project design serious attention to issues of internal validity such as types of triangulation, adequate engagement in data collection, researcher reflexivity, and peer examination. Sharan B. Merriam and Elizabeth J. Tisdell, *Qualitative Research: A Guide to Design and Implementation*, 259.

³³ D. Stephen Long, *Truth Telling in a Post-Truth World*, 12.

this becomes the ruling idea, which it has become in politics, business, and some modern philosophy, then the pursuit of wisdom will be abandoned and finally forgotten. No one needs to know anything about the past if all there is is value.³⁴

It seems that this substitution of value for truth is playing itself out in the Black Lives Matter debate. As an African American who is informed by the history of Black America, the assertion that “Black Lives Matter” is a simple, powerful, and profound assertion rooted in the lived experiences of Black Americans. When I first heard this phrase coined by the founders of the Black Lives Matter movement,³⁵ it immediately resonated with me. I appreciated the fact that the movement’s founders intended to move Black lives that have been marginalized by the dominant culture and other black liberation movements to the center: “Black queer and trans folks, disabled folks, undocumented folks, folks with records, women and Black lives along the gender spectrum.”³⁶ It challenged and enlarged my perspective of leadership, which has been in religious spaces where Black heterosexual cisgendered men have dominated.³⁷ Yet, Black people know from four hundred years of American history that our lives have not had the same value as white lives.

Historical perspective of the underlying systems of domination by class, empire, capitalism, racism, patriarchy, and heteronormativity is missing by those who defensively retort, “All Lives Matter” in response to the simple assertion that “Black Lives

³⁴ D. Stephen Long, *Truth Telling in a Post-Truth World*, 15.

³⁵ In 2013, Alicia Garza, Patrisse Cullors, and Opal Tometti created a Black-centered political will and movement called #BlackLivesMatter in response to the killing of Trayvon Martin and the acquittal of Trayvon Martin’s murderer, George Zimmerman. <https://blacklivesmatter.com/herstory/> (accessed August 17, 2020).

³⁶ <https://blacklivesmatter.com/about/> (accessed August 17, 2020).

³⁷ I am an ordained Elder, former pastor, and former presiding elder in the African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church. Though we describe ourselves as “The Freedom Church,” the official statement of the Board of Bishops, comprised of eleven active male bishops and one active female bishop, forbids same-sex marriage and the ordination of confessing queer persons.

Matter.”³⁸ In her antiracist talks, Robin DiAngelo uses a metaphor of a dock to describe this phenomenon. A dock does not merely float on water. It is literally anchored in the ocean floor. She challenges white people to go below the surface to examine the pillars that anchor the surface attitudes, perceptions, fears, and actions of white people. One of those pillars is a limited understanding of American history. She claims that some white people believe that racism ended in 1865 because they do not know of the ongoing history of racial discrimination to the present. Thus, they do not understand how history connects with the present effects of racial discrimination and racial privilege.³⁹

DiAngelo also asserts that white fragility is “the inability to tolerate racial stress.” Racial stress is triggered when our positions, perspectives, or advantages are challenged. White fragility functions to block the challenge and to regain the equilibrium. I believe that “All Lives Matter” as a defensive reaction to the assertion that “Black Lives Matter” is a manifestation of this white fragility, anchored in part by an obliviousness or a refusal to acknowledge the deadly discriminatory impacts of racism in America.

Why does truth matter? Prophetic truth-telling requires a belief in truth and justice. Truth is often elusive in our culture of American individualism because historicity matters for prophetic truth-telling. Long writes:

Unlike the modern “I”, truth will always have a history. It will recognize the debts we owe to those who come before

³⁸ Though the present discussion is focused on how the substitution of truth with value is played out in the “Black Lives Matter” debate in the American context, this argument has implication beyond the problem of racism. In his conversation with bell hooks, George Yancy notes her persistent use of the expression “imperialist white supremacist capitalist patriarchy” to describe the power structure that underlies the social order in a global context. George Yancy, *On Race: 34 Conversations in a Time of Crisis* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017), 16.

³⁹ University of Washington Professor Robin DiAngelo reads from her book, *White Fragility: Why It’s So Hard for White People to Talk About Racism*, explains the phenomenon, and discusses how white people can develop their capacity to engage more constructively across race. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=45ey4jgoxeU> (accessed August 9, 2020).

us. We lose truth when we become a people with no history. We lose truth when we choose leaders who lack any historical sensibility as well. In a post-truth culture of alternative facts, it benefits those who would rule the citizenry not to be well-educated in the humanities—history, philosophy, and theology. These disciplines are concerned with the pursuit of truth and wisdom.⁴⁰

Consistent with this logic that truth has a history, Carol Anderson provides a series of truth claims that serve as powerful examples of prophetic truth-telling. Analyzing American history, she rebuts the Western narrative of black poverty and pathology, which is required for the ever-evolving and adaptive structures of racial discrimination. While many frame issues of racial unrest in terms of black rage, expressed sometimes in destructive ways of looting and burning down communities, Anderson reframes these issues through her concept of white rage. Anderson writes: “White rage is not about visible violence, but rather it works its way through the courts, the legislatures, and a range of government bureaucracies. It wreaks havoc subtly, almost imperceptibly.”⁴¹ Anderson names the following historical truths, which she expounds upon in successive chapters of her book:

“The truth is that enslaved Africans plotted and worked—hard—with some even fighting in the Union army for their freedom and citizenship.”⁴²

“The truth is that when World War I provided the opportunity in the North for blacks to get jobs with unheard-of pay scales and, better yet, the chance for their children to finally have good schools, African Americans fled the oppressive conditions in the South. White authorities stopped the trains, arresting people whose only crime was leaving the state.”⁴³

⁴⁰ D. Stephen Long, *Truth Telling in a Post-Truth World*, 16.

⁴¹ Carol Anderson, *White Rage: The Unspoken Truth of Our Racial Divide* (New York: Bloomsberry, 2017), 3.

⁴² Carol Anderson, *White Rage*, 4.

⁴³ Carol Anderson, *White Rage*, 4.

“The truth is that opposition to black advancement is not just a Southern phenomenon. In the North, it has been just as intense, just as determined, and in some ways just as destructive.”⁴⁴

“The truth is that when the *Brown v Board of Education* decision came down in 1954 and black children finally had a chance at a decent education, white authorities didn’t see children striving for quality schools and an opportunity to fully contribute to society; they saw only a threat and acted accordingly, shutting down schools, diverting public money into private coffers, leaving millions of citizens in educational rot, willing even to undermine national security in the midst of a major crisis—all to ensure that blacks did not advance.”⁴⁵

“The truth is that the hard-fought victories of the Civil Rights Movement caused a reaction that stripped *Brown* of its power, severed the jugular of the Voting Rights Act, closed off access to higher education, poured crack cocaine into the inner cities, and locked up more black men proportionally than even apartheid-era South Africa.”⁴⁶

“The truth is that, despite all of this, a black man was elected president of the United States: the ultimate advancement, and thus the ultimate affront.”⁴⁷

“The truth is, white rage has undermined democracy, warped the Constitution, weakened the nation’s ability to compete economically, squandered billions of dollars on baseless incarceration, rendered an entire region sick, poor, and woefully undereducated, and left cities nothing less than decimated.”⁴⁸

⁴⁴ Carol Anderson, *White Rage*, 5.

⁴⁵ Carol Anderson, *White Rage*, 5.

⁴⁶ Carol Anderson, *White Rage*, 5.

⁴⁷ Carol Anderson, *White Rage*, 5.

⁴⁸ Carol Anderson, *White Rage*, 6.

Anderson's masterful work of historical analysis and synthesis resonates with me deeply, as she prophetically articulates the unspoken truth of our racial divide.

In our post-truth world, prophetic truth-telling is vital. Without truth, freedom is reduced to one's power—the ability to act to assert one's will without anyone having the power to push back effectively. Though power and advantage tried to render truth irrelevant in an impeachment trial with no witnesses or documents allowed, truth was still told courageously by whistleblowers and witnesses in the investigation of charges of abuse of power and obstruction of justice. In the face of those who say that climate change is not real, prophetic truth-telling by teen climate change activist Greta Thunberg and others is needed to mitigate the effects of climate change that people in the world are already experiencing. In the middle of a global pandemic, the exponential rise of coronavirus cases and deaths powerfully refutes the lie that it is only a political hoax. Histories of disinvestment in public health systems and in communities of color are unspoken truths that must inform prophetic action. As religious leaders, we must not allow ourselves to be “court chaplains”⁴⁹ who spin religious narratives to sustain a culture of manipulation, coercion, power, and deception. Even in a post-truth world, the truth does matter. Power must be subordinate to truth.⁵⁰

Prophetic Leadership in the United States as it Reckons with a History of Systemic Racial Injustice

On Pentecost Sunday, June 3, 2020, I posted a video of the Morehouse College Glee Club singing the magnificent concertized spiritual “Listen to the Lambs All A Crying!” With appreciation for this musical performance, I imagined these highly educated black men, clothed in their tuxedos, raising their voices, saying to whoever would listen, “Listen to the cries of the oppressed!”⁵¹ Juxtaposing

⁴⁹ D. Stephen Long, *Truth Telling in a Post-Truth World*, 26.

⁵⁰ D. Stephen Long, 48.

⁵¹ Exodus 3: 7–9 CEB.

the image of Black bodies crying out in song with Black bodies crying out in the streets, I posted the following reflection through social media:

These black men, clothed in respectable tuxedos, raised their voices singing: listen to the cries of the oppressed poor and vulnerable. “Listen to the lambs all a crying!” Other black men [sic persons], eschewing the politics of respectability, have raised their voices and fists in protest because of policies of over-policing motivated by municipalities seeking revenue, police brutality, inequitable sentencing, and a plethora of laws that block felons’ reentry into society. Listen to the pain of communities robbed and looted every day because America has failed to live up to its promise of life and liberty for all! America is burning on this Christian celebration of Pentecost Sunday because, like Pharaoh in the Book of Exodus, it refuses to listen until tragedy slays its own favored sons. The miracle of Pentecost is the power of spirit inspired languages understood by diverse cultures. In contrast to the tower of Babel which divided the nations, Pentecostal power unified people across cultural and linguistic barriers. The Holy Spirit gives power not only to proclaim righteousness, justice and peace; She also gives power to protest wickedness, injustice, and state sanctioned killing of unarmed citizens. May America and the world listen and respond to the cry of those with a knee on their necks because of a deadly pandemic, destructive and racist policies, and a deficit of human compassion.⁵²

According to interviews with social-movement scholars and crowd-counting experts, Black Lives Matter might be the largest social movement in U.S. history, born out of protest for a single issue. Anywhere from fifteen to twenty-six million Americans

⁵² Jeffery L. Tribble, Sr., Facebook Timeline, June 3, 2020 (accessed August 15, 2020).

participated in protests over the death of George Floyd and others over the span of weeks. According to a Times analysis, “Across the United States, there have been more than 4700 demonstrations, or an average of 140 per day, since the first protests began in Minneapolis on May 26. Turnout has ranged from dozens to tens of thousands in about 2500 small towns and large cities.”⁵³ Further, while the Civil Rights Movement protests of the 1950s and 1960s consisted largely of African Americans, these protesters are increasingly white, young, and wealthy. Why is this movement different? According to Buchanan, Bui, and Patel:

One of the reasons there have been protests in so many places in the United States is the backing of organizations like Black Lives Matter. While the group isn’t necessarily directing each protest, it provides materials, guidance and a framework for new activists, Professor Woodly said. Those activists are taking to social media to quickly share protest details to a wide audience. Black Lives Matter has been around since 2013, but there’s been a big shift in public opinion about the movement as well as broader support for recent protests. A deluge of public support from organizations like the N.F.L. and NASCAR for Black Lives Matter may also have encouraged supporters who typically would sit on the sidelines to get involved. The protests may also be benefitting from a country that is more conditioned to protesting. The adversarial stance that the Trump administration has taken on issues like guns, climate change and immigration has led to more protests than under any other presidency since the Cold War.⁵⁴

⁵³ Larry Buchanan, Quoctrung Bui, and Jugal K. Patel, “Black Lives Matter May Be the Largest Movement in U.S. History,” *New York Times*, July 3, 2020. <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2020/07/03/us/george-floyd-protests-crowd-size.html?smid=em-share> (accessed August 17, 2020).

⁵⁴ Buchanan, Bui, and Patel, “Black Lives Matter May Be the Largest Movement in U.S. History.”

These nationwide protests are in response to the high-profile killings of George Floyd, killed allegedly for trying to use a counterfeit twenty-dollar bill; Breonna Taylor, killed by police at home while in her own bed; Ahmaud Arbery, chased and killed by armed white residents who were not arrested until months later; and so many other Black female, male, and trans people killed by police.⁵⁵ Every time I hear of these or another police-involved shooting of an unarmed African American, my body feels the effect of my own sense of vulnerability, rage, and frustration. As the father of an African American son, uncle of young adult nephews and nieces, and grandfather of a beautiful black baby boy who will grow up in America, each instance of a state-sanctioned killing or of white control of Black bodies is understood in my body as injustice. Black people and others who are marginalized also know and understand this injustice through their bodies. Miller McLemore describes this phenomenon as embodied theological knowing—how bodies shape knowledge. She suggests that:

We say and perceive more than we know or understand through our bodies. This might surprise theological educators who put such stock in our big words and ideas. This doesn't negate the value of systematic doctrinal reflection. But the devil, so to speak, or the divine, is in the corporeal details.⁵⁶

Cell-phone video of George Floyd's death while handcuffed on the ground with an officer's knee on his neck for eight minutes and forty-six seconds revealed a vicious, unrighteous, and unjust use of excessive force. Floyd's words, "I can't breathe," gave words to an embodied theological knowing of injustice in the lived experiences of African Americans. In his eulogy for George Floyd,

⁵⁵ Alia Chughtai/Al Jazeera, "Know Their Names: Black People Killed by Police in the U.S." <https://interactive.aljazeera.com/aje/2020/know-their-names/index.html> (accessed August 17, 2020).

⁵⁶ Bonnie J. Miller-McLemore, "Spoonings" in Dorothy C. Bass, Kathleen A. Cahalan, Bonnie J. Miller-McLemore, James R. Nieman, and Christian B. Scharen, *Christian Practical Wisdom: What It Is and Why It Matters* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2016), 25.

Rev. Al Sharpton theologized and thematized from the particular embodied knowledge of a dying George Floyd a prophetic oracle of judgement: “America has had its foot on the necks of Black people for 400 years.”⁵⁷

Families who know the pain of the Floyd family were flown in for the funeral. As Sharpton began his eulogy, he invited grieving Black family members to stand: the mother of Trayvon Martin, the mother of Eric Garner, the sister of Botham Jean, the family of Pamela Turner, the father of Michael Brown, and the father of Ahmaud Arbery. Taking his text from Ephesians 6: 10–13, Sharpton preached a message about “fighting spiritual wickedness in high places.” The bodies of these grieving family members, whose names are known and recited in Black protests as well as Black prayer services, were present to share the claim of systemic injustice articulated by Sharpton: “We’re not fighting some disconnected incidents. We’re fighting an institutional systemic problem that’s been allowed to permeate since we were brought to these shores and we’re fighting wickedness in high places.”⁵⁸

Sharpton eulogized Floyd, “an ordinary brother” as a “rejected stone,” whose tragic embodiment of Black suffering is becoming the cornerstone of a movement:

But God took an ordinary brother from the third ward, from the housing projects, that nobody thought much about but those that knew him and loved him. He took the rejected stone, the stone that the builder rejected. They rejected him for jobs. They rejected him for positions. They rejected him to play certain teams. God took the rejected stone and made him the cornerstone of a movement that’s going to change the whole wide world. I’m glad he wasn’t one of these polished, bourgeois brothers, because we’d have still thought we was of no value. But George was just George. And now

⁵⁷ Reverend Al Sharpton, George Floyd Funeral Eulogy Transcript, June 9, 2020. <https://www.rev.com/blog/transcripts/reverend-al-sharpton-eulogy-transcript-at-george-floyd-memorial-service> (accessed June 29, 2020).

⁵⁸ Reverend Al Sharpton, George Floyd Funeral Eulogy Transcript.

you have to understand if you bother any one of us it's a problem to all of us. Oh, if you would have had any idea that all of us would react, you'd have took your knee off his neck. If you had any idea that everybody from those in the third ward to those in Hollywood would show up in Houston and Minneapolis, and in Fayetteville, North Carolina, you'd have took your knee off his neck. If you had any idea that preachers, white and black, was going to line up in a pandemic, when we're told to stay inside and we come out and march in the streets at the risk of our health, you'd have took your knee off his neck, because you thought his neck didn't mean nothing. But God made his neck to connect his head to his body. And you have no right to put your knee on that neck.⁵⁹

Sharpton is just one voice in the tradition of prophetic concern, prophetic truth-telling, and prophetic action characteristic of women and men in the Black Church tradition.⁶⁰ He exemplifies what Wilson calls “peripheral prophets”—prophets that arise from subcommunities that exist in tension with the dominant community.⁶¹ Brueggemann says those prophets arise in communities that have a long and available memory of pain that is owned and recited as a real social fact. Yet, there is an active practice of hope and an effective mode of discourse that is “cherished across the generations, that is taken as distinctive, and that is richly coded in ways that only insiders can know.”⁶² I assert

⁵⁹ Reverend Al Sharpton, George Floyd Funeral Eulogy Transcript.

⁶⁰ Though Sharpton, a male preacher in the Black Baptist tradition, is featured here, Black females are an indispensable part of the prophetic Black religious tradition. Marcia Riggs provides one anthology of Black women who heard and answered God's call to prophetic witness, served as prophetic witnesses in the African American community, and who bore witness in society. Marcia Y. Riggs, ed., *Can I Get a Witness? Prophetic Religious Voices of African American Women: An Anthology* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1997).

⁶¹ Robert R. Wilson, *Prophecy and Society in Ancient Israel* (Philadelphia, Pa.: Fortress Press, 1980), 69–83.

⁶² Walter Brueggemann, *The Prophetic Imagination*, Second ed. (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2001), xvi.

the importance of engaging the prophetic dimension of Christian leadership in this moment in our history. As a society, we can learn much by privileging the lived experiences and interpretations of those historically marginalized in religious discourse as a source for practical theological interpretation and action. Prophetic leadership, guided by prophetic imagination, is needed to counter the chronic issues of inequality, the politics of oppression, and the co-opting of God's freedom to be present and to act where God chooses. May the wind of the Spirit continue to fan the flames of prophetic concern, prophetic truth-telling, and prophetic actions in communities across this nation and world.

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