

The New Lynching Tree
Social Justice Implications of Police Violence Against the African American Community

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For your hands are defiled with blood and your fingers with iniquity; your lips have spoken falsehood, your tongue mutters wickedness...[your] works are works of iniquity, and an act of violence is in [your] hands, and [your] feet run to evil, and [you] hasten to shed innocent blood.¹

April 14, 1906—a date to which many white or black Americans paid little attention—would quickly become noted for two different events. One would contribute to a demonic legacy of shame regarding this nation's scarred racial history. The other represented an attempt to bring a spiritual balm to that same history.

On that day in Springfield, Missouri, the future home of a denomination that would arguably become the largest segment of the global Pentecostal movement, a mob of nearly 1,000 people employed excessive force in lynching three African-American men who were accused of raping a young white woman and assaulting her young companion.²

On that same day, sixteen hundred miles to the west William J. Seymour, an African-American son of slaves from a region of the country with the highest incidence of lynching episodes, began presiding over a series of revival services in a small Los Angeles, California church. Here, at 312 Azusa Street, white and black men, women, and children regularly gathered to experience a supernatural outpouring of the Holy Spirit in an event that signaled the beginning of the modern Pentecostal movement.

The current culture of excessive police force against the African American community is not a new racial posture. Instead, it replicates the Jim Crow era's socio-politics exhibited in the murder of thousands of members of our community by lynching. Underlying attitudes undergirding both the phenomenon of lynching and the use of excessive force stem from a continued spiritual deficiency regarding race and a sinful disregard for the value of black life that seeks to sustain a climate of fear to keep the races separated and serves as a prop for a perceived God-ordained social order which this historic and new vitality has failed to eradicate.

Both the traditions of excessive force against the black community and that of Pentecostal renewal would continue, unabated, throughout the next century and both would continue to impact this country's racial climate. The first would be part of an ongoing history of racial bigotry. The Azusa Street Revival would be repeatedly hailed as a supernaturally historic moment when the spirit of [racial] unity attempted, (yet failed) to interject itself into the project

¹ Isaiah 59:1-7a

² "Black, White Pentecostals Mark Historic Lynching With Unity Services" Charisma Magazine. Apr 14, 2009.

of revising that history. What has been most disconcerting for the African American Christian community, from a theological viewpoint, however, is that while Pentecostal spirituality has seemingly infused the contemporary global church with a new vitality, this spiritual vitality has failed to provide the Church and its leaders with the power to lodge a credible witness against all types of excessive force against the Black community. For, in most cases, the white Christian community has either maintained a deadly silence or, has tacitly supported these practices as necessary to maintain a “God-ordained” social order, while the black church seems to lack the power to do anything substantial about it.

Twelve years later, following the 1918 murder of abusive Georgia plantation owner, Hampton Smith, a white mob launched a reign of terror in which several black persons, including Hayes Turner, were killed. Turner’s nineteen-year-old widow, Mary, publicly disputed her husband’s involvement in Smith’s killing, threatening to have members of the mob arrested. Given the Jim Crow racial climate of the American South, Mary may not have expected to receive justice for her husband. Yet, she had not expected her protest to result in the horrific end she received.

After launching her remonstrance, a mob of several hundred abducted the distraught woman, took her to a bridge, tied her ankles, hung her upside down from a tree, doused her in gasoline and motor oil, and set her on fire. While she was still alive, a member of the mob split her abdomen open and stomped and crushed her unborn child as it fell on the ground. The woman’s body was then riddled with hundreds of bullets.³

This dastardly incident was not much different from numerous egregious episodes of lynching that occurred between the end of the American Civil War and the end of the contemporary American Civil Rights Movement. While many historians believe the number is considerably under-reported, during that period, three-quarters of the, at least, 5000 men, women, and children who were lynched were African-American.⁴

Though, purportedly, the Turner incidents were related to killing a white man, alleged infractions of civility as minor as raising one’s voice to a white person or looking at that person in a perceived unacceptable manner could spark a lynching. And, such transgressions as stealing from a white person or causing—or threatening to cause—they or their property harm could be considered justification.

More than seventy percent of these atrocities occurred in the Bible Belt. The twelve states in the American South—Alabama, Arkansas, Florida, Georgia, Kentucky, Louisiana, Mississippi, North Carolina, South Carolina, Tennessee, Texas, and Virginia—are in this region.

³ For an account of the entire incidents related to the atrocity, see, Julie Bruckner Armstrong, *Mary Turner and the Memory of a Lynching* Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2011.

⁴ *Lynching in America: Confronting the Legacy of Racial Terror*, 3rd ed Montgomery, Alabama: Equal Justice Initiative, 2017.

This region, where Evangelical Christianity with its rigid personal piety, high rates of church attendance, and social conservatism, has also been the area lynching occurred most often.⁵

Bishop Ida Robinson, the founder of the Mt. Sinai Holy Church of America, noted the irony of Southern white Christians' professing of strong biblical values at the same time they were supporting violence against the African American community. The proto-womanist was as concerned for the welfare of the black community as the sexist hierarchy within Pentecostalism. Not limiting her prophetic voice, she attacked the Southern white churches' failure to stand against the hideous practice, stating,

...Our people in certain... states are killed, their bodies dismembered and thrown to vultures [as]... a common occurrence... unfortunately where "Christianity" is more prevalent... For... laws are made to uphold Christianity... and to prevent any teachings... that tend to distort, minimize or otherwise change the principle... [of] Christianity as taught in the Bible... [A]nyone found guilty of teaching doctrine contrary to Christianity in any [state] supported school... shall be punished to the extent of the law..."⁶

Robinson explicitly understood that lynching was more than a social issue or a convenient method of keeping order. Rather, she saw it as a spiritual menace. Further, she understood that only those who could turn a deaf ear and blind eye to the convicting power of the Holy Spirit could fail to see the intense evil in what was, essentially, murder. She explicitly denounced those who claimed to follow Christ while committing [or permitting to be committed] inhumane atrocities against their Black neighbors—many of them fellow Christians—as hypocrites, insisting that,

... these same people... will toss their own laws to the four winds and trample under feet the laws of Christianity and utterly ignore the words of the sacred "Book" they pretend to love so dearly, and esteem so highly...

So, let us Saints pray that the Constantine of our da... send a letter to the modern pagans in the polluted southland in the form of "Anti-Lynching" legislation... now pending in Congress. We can... and we will overcome... in this present world, the persecution we [are] made to suffer by our unjust brethren.⁷

Yet, while nearly eighty percent of lynchings occurred in the region, the horrendous practice would, at some point, be carried out in every state except Alaska, Rhode Island, New Hampshire, Massachusetts, and Connecticut. In 1900, a quarter-century before Robinson's complaint, Civil Rights activist, Ida B Wells, insisted that lynching was,

"not the creature of an hour, the sudden outburst of uncontrolled fury, or the unspeakable brutality of an insane mob." Rather, for Wells, it represented "the cool, calculating deliberation of intelligent people who avow[ed] that there is an "unwritten law" that

⁵ Ibid. From 1882 to 1968, Mississippi had the highest rate of lynching with 581; Georgia was second with 531; and Texas was third with 493.

⁶ Ida B. Robison, "The Economic Persecution," *The Latter Day Messenger*. May 23, 1935, 2.

⁷ Ibid.

justifies them in putting human beings to death without complaint under oath... trial by jury, ...opportunity to make defense, [or]... the right of appeal.⁸

The most often targeted black victims were men, who symbolized the physical, economic, moral, and spiritual strength of the community. Yet, no black person was safe, and anyone deemed threatening the social order could be a subject. Hostility could be focused on boys as young as preadolescence, teens (such as in the infamous Emmitt Till case), pregnant women such as Mary Turner, and, as the opening narrative demonstrates, even babies—who represented the future of the community.

The level of cruelty to which lynching could rise demonstrates its darkly spiritual, absurdly demonic nature. Perpetrators were not satisfied simply to take a life. They dehumanize their victims and their spiritually depraved consciences devised ever more torturous schemes for exacerbating victim's suffering and reinforcing the lesson they sought to teach the black community. Burning alive, dragging, castration, and mutilation were considered appropriate measures. Following a death, mobs often dismembered victims, taking pieces of recovered flesh or bone as souvenirs, or, sending them throughout black communities as a warning. At times, they left corpses in the open for scavenging animals to devour to send a clearer message.

The victim's social standing, moral character, or profession was insignificant. Charles Harrison Mason, founder of the Church of God in Christ, arguably the largest black Pentecostal body in the world, was targeted by at least one lynch mob for his World War I pacifist stance. Though he escaped the intended attack, he was repeatedly persecuted by white leaders as high up as the Federal Bureau of Investigation.⁹

While, again, black people were the usual target, more than 1,000 whites were lynched during these decades. Interestingly, many of these victims were executed for the "crime" of assisting, or trying to prevent violence, against black people. Their perceived "crime" could be as innocuous as being a Republican when that party stood for racial tolerance, or they simply could have been supporting black citizens in opposing lynching or other mistreatment.

These murders were carried out with impunity, sometimes in broad daylight and often in very public places. As Wells reminds us, these were not acts of "frontier justice," in lieu of a functioning justice system. Instead, they occurred where such systems were operative but deemed unnecessary.¹⁰ And, often, mobs were aided by law enforcement officials (sometimes, themselves part of the mob). Sheriffs or police officers could leave an inmate's cell unlocked and unguarded to allow easy access as rumors of a lynching circulated. Or, they would stand quietly by without offering assistance or protection as the mob pulled their target(s) out of the jailhouse.

Most perpetrators escaped accountability from local, state, or federal officials. In many cases, there was no intention of apprehending the culprits. If they might have been apprehended,

⁸ Ida B. Wells, "Lynch Law in America" *The Arena* 23 (January 1900), 15-24.

⁹ Theodore Kornweibel, Jr. "I Thank God for the Persecution Attack: The Church of God in Christ under Attack" in *Investigate Everything": Federal Efforts to Ensure Black Loyalty During World War I*. Bloomington, IN: University of Indiana Press. 2002, 149-163.

¹⁰ *Lynching in America: Confronting the Legacy of Racial Terror*, 4.

no charge was brought. When they were charged, they frequently were never brought to trial. And when brought to trial, rarely, if ever was a substantial conviction handed down. For example, according to Douglas Blackmon's Pulitzer Prize-winning work, *Slavery by Another Name*, in the ten-years between 1891-1901—the worst decade of that history—an average of over 100 African-Americans annually were brutally lynched, yet one person was convicted of first-degree murder in any of these incidents.¹¹

Among the most spiritually unsettling realities of lynching was the degree to which some in the white community embraced it. They did not see it as an unfortunate, uncomfortable necessity for maintaining order, as Wells pointed out, but as a joyous moment of “wholesome” celebration. Though lynching rarely occurred in secret, it increasingly, became a spectator event, involving not just the executors, but sympathizers, and, sometimes, entire communities. Hundreds of men, women, boys, and girls crowded into public squares of large and small towns, to witness these “events.” Fathers and mothers packed picnic meals enjoy while viewing the spectacle with their children. Thus, they graphically passed white supremacist attitudes to younger generations, teaching them to devalue black life, and desensitizing them to the moral implications of this inhumane activity. For they were transmitting the message that the human beings who dangled from a tree, or other structure, were little more than animals and what they were watching was not unlike other forms of animal sport such as dog or cockfighting.

A 1930 editorial in the *Raleigh* [North Carolina] *News and Observer* exemplifies this attitude:

Whole families came together... bringing even their youngest children. It was the show of the countryside—a very popular show... Men joked loudly at the sight of the bleeding body... [and] girls giggled as the flies fed on the blood that dripped from the Negro's nose.”¹²

As these occasions were repeatedly reported in detail in newspapers and heard on radio broadcasts, news of individual episodes prompted a rise in racial tension throughout the nation. Moreover, the practice was romanticized in productions such as the 1930s film, *The Birth of a Nation*, which portrayed the act in a manner that titillated racist attitudes and spurred an upsurge in xenophobic behavior, including increased episodes of lynching.

The act became a symbolic rite in which the victim was not only being disciplined for an alleged singular crime, but served as a scapegoat being sacrificed on the altar of displaced anger and general hostility toward the black race. As Craig Scandrett-Leatherman confirms, though the rage displayed in lynching appeared focused on the individual or group, the entire black

¹¹ Douglas Blackmon. *Slavery by Another Name: the re-enslavement of Black Americans from the Civil War to World War II*. London: Icon, 2012.

¹² Cited in Jamiles Lartey and Sam Morris. Pain And Terror: America's History of Racism: How White Americans Used Lynchings to Terrorize and Control Black People. *The Guardian*. April 26, 2018.

community was targeted in a warning not to challenge the God-ordained supremacy of the white race.¹³

The pitiful practice never went completely unchallenged; yet, while some efforts to curtail it were made, they had little effect. In 1918, Missouri Republican Leonidas Dyer introduced the Dyer Anti-Lynching Bill in the House of Representatives, to make it and all mob violence illegal. Though his effort failed, the bill was re-introduced in subsequent sessions and passed by the House in 1922, only to be blocked in the Senate by a Southern Democratic filibuster. No progress in proposing similar legislation was made until 1934 when Senators Robert F. Wagner and Edward Costigan introduced the Costigan-Wagner Bill, but, ultimately, it also failed to win passage. Throughout the first half of the 20th Century, congressional lawmakers made nearly 200 attempts to pass legislation, Yet, though between 1890 and 1952, seven presidents—Theodore Roosevelt, Woodrow Wilson, Warren G. Harding, William Howard Taft, Calvin Coolidge, Franklin Roosevelt, and Harry Truman supported their efforts, none succeeded.

While more than a decade later, 1960s' Civil Rights legislation, virtually outlawed lynching, it continued for some time, though slowing significantly. The 1981 lynching of nineteen-year-old Michael Donald by Ku Klux Klan (KKK) members in Mobile, Alabama was the last reported episode. Donald, who had committed no offense, was abducted by the group who was frustrated over the acquittal of another black man accused of shooting a white officer. The mob kidnapped the youth at gunpoint, drove him to a wooded area, beat him, and slit his throat.¹⁴

Yet, unlike earlier periods, this episode evidenced progress toward holding wrongdoers accountable. One member of the group was sentenced to death and executed, another was sentenced to life in prison after pleading guilty and testifying against the first, a third was convicted as an accomplice, and a fourth was indicted but died before his trial ended.¹⁵

In 2005, Louisiana Democratic Senator, Mary Landrieu, and Virginia Republican, George Allen issued a bi-partisan motion expressing remorse for Congress' failure to approve anti-lynching legislation. The belated, non-binding resolution conveyed, "the deepest sympathies and most solemn regrets...to the descendants of victims of lynching, whose ancestors were deprived of life, human dignity and the constitutional protections accorded all citizens..."¹⁶ Importantly, however, the resolution proposed no restitution or reparations for descendants and

¹³ Craig Scandrett-Leatherman, "Rites of Lynching and Rites of Dance: Historic, Anthropological and Afro-Pentecostal Perspective on Black Manhood after 1865" in Amos Yong and Estrela Alexander, eds., *Afro-Pentecostals: Black Pentecostal and Charismatic Christianity in History and Culture*. New York: New York University Press, 2012, 104.

¹⁴ See, B. J. Hollars, *Thirteen Loops: Race, Violence, and the Last Lynching in America*, Tuscaloosa, AL: University of Alabama Press, 2011.

¹⁵ For a complete telling of their story, see, Laurence Leamer, *The Lynching: The Epic Courtroom Battle That Brought Down the Klan*, New York: William Morrow, 2016.

¹⁶ "A Resolution (S. Res. 39) Apologizing to the Victims of Lynching and the Descendants of those Victims for the Failure of the Senate to Enact Anti-Lynching Legislation. *Congressional Record* 151:77 (Monday, June 13, 2005) [Senate], S6364-S6388].

did nothing to reverse psychic, emotional, or spiritual trauma imposed by decades of murderous oppression.

What Lynching Accomplished

Lynching, as excessive force, functioned to preserve a perceived “God-ordained” moral order in status relationships which posited white people on top and black people, whom they viewed as being deferentially subservient, on the bottom. Those who carried it out saw the biblically warranted order as demanding this control to ward off “race-mixing” of all kinds, and to curb black criminality and defiance of the racial mores. In the minds of perpetrators, the practice provided swift punishment to the black community for its “sins” against the civility of the white community when other measures seemed to fail or take too long to run their course. Then, lynching appeared to be the quickest, most direct, and most graphic way to demonstrate white political and social dominance.

At the most basic level, the threat of lynching ensured that black people kept a respectful distance from the white community in their daily intercourse. These measures instilled a perpetual sense of fear within the black community and at the same time, alleviated white fear of encroachment that allows that community to enjoy a sense of security.

The excessive force also subjugated and disenfranchised the black community, rendering it incapable of fully actualizing its “inalienable rights.” These mechanisms reminded blacks of their perceived inferiority, so they never dared consider themselves equal to those who considered themselves superior. They did not dare contend that they should enjoy the same privileges of citizenship as their protagonist. Scandrett-Leatherman sees the invoking of this ongoing pattern of violence as a weapon for keeping black men in a perpetual state of boyhood and submission. He, as correctly, sees it as part of an ongoing project of taking away the moral agency of those within the black community.¹⁷ Repeated incidents of lynching kept black people in a perpetual state of quasi-slavery in which they could never fully consider themselves emotionally, psychologically, or spiritually free. For over their heads loomed the possibility that the slightest infraction of the race code could incite an incident.

What Grace Elizabeth Hale states about lynching in *Making Whiteness*, still resounds with an alarming ring of truth: “blacks were humans... [who] could be treated as nonhuman, and no amount of care on their part to follow the ‘rules’ could, in the end, ensure their safety.”¹⁸ Lynching enforced segregationist ideologies and devalued black lives so that they did not matter.

¹⁷ Scandrett-Leatherman, “Rites of Lynching and Rites of Dance: Historic, Anthropological and Afro-Pentecostal Perspective on Black Manhood after 1865” 106.

¹⁸ Grace Elizabeth Hale, *Making Whiteness: The Culture of Segregation in the South, 1890-1940*. New York: Random House, 2010. Cited in Feliks Garcia, “Police brutality is Modern Lynching—And You may be a Part of It” *Daily Dot*, Apr 20, 2015. <https://www.dailydot.com/via/black-men-police-violence-lynching-internet/>.

Interim Measures

Between the time that lynching was outlawed and the passage of effective Civil Rights remedies, other forms of forced social control remained in place and by the mid-twentieth century, such measures generally fell into three categories. First, judicial measures such as racial profiling, mass incarceration, and disproportionate sentencing, replicate the injustice of lynching while they wreak havoc on the spirit and psyche of the African American community. Next, voter intimidation schemes disenfranchise black people, attempting to keep them away from the polls and out of political office in any meaningful numbers. Finally, legally sanctioned mechanisms such as segregation in housing, education, employment, and public services, voter disenfranchisement, and unequal access to medical care and other human services, as well as communal measures such as bombing public spaces and private homes, Ku Klux Klan marches or, cross-burning reinforced the sense of vulnerability foisted on the black community.

With the passage of Civil Rights legislation and installation of their own leaders, as well as increased involvement from more progressive white leadership, however, the black community has been increasingly emboldened to challenge such injustices and ideologies regarding any legitimately God-ordained social order. Yet, this new attitude of boldness and increased social and political participation raised the level of insecurity within the white community regarding their hold on the reins of that order. Subsequently, more diffuse, extra-legal measures of social control began to emerge, while at the same time becoming more clandestine and more seemingly defensible by the white power structure.

The New Lynching Tree

The assertion by novelist, William Faulkner that, “[t]he past isn’t dead[; i]t isn’t even past,”¹⁹ underscores the reality forced on the African American community throughout its four-hundred-year history in this nation. For, arguably, though racial conditions have improved to the point that gaps in many indicators of socio-economic wellbeing have been decreasing, the African American community still faces the nagging awareness that not all vestiges of injustice have been eradicated. Understanding lynching as any unauthorized, extralegal act of summary harm carried out by persons against a target community, provides evidence that the increased incidents of excessive police force that are reemerging across the nation represents the newest form of a deadly toxic “old monster.” The litany of episodes of excessive force dramatically demonstrates the entrenched nature of racial oppression and how these new forms continually surface to accomplish the same goals that outright lynching once targeted.

In 1999, little more than thirty-one years after the Donald incident, four New York City police officers mistook 23-year-old Guinean immigrant, Amadou Diallo for a rape suspect. As he stood outside his Bronx apartment, these officers fired 41 shots, 19 of which struck Diallo, a

¹⁹ Will Faulkner, *Requiem for a Nun*. New York: Random House, 1951.

devout Muslim, who was reaching for a wallet that had been mistaken for a gun.²⁰ Though each officer was charged with second-degree murder, all were ultimately acquitted.

In 2014, Eric Garner died in Staten Island, New York, after an officer put him in a banned chokehold while arresting him for suspicion of selling single cigarettes from packs without tax stamps. His last words, “I can’t breathe,” spoken several times before his death, became a rallying cry for a community who felt itself under siege.²¹ Though the medical examiner ruled Garner’s death a homicide, the grand jury decided not to hand down an indictment.

In that same year, in Ferguson, Missouri unarmed 18-year-old Michael Brown was shot while allegedly attacking an officer, attempting to grab his gun, and coming towards him. After the shooting, the predominately black city erupted in a riot, again, generating debate about the treatment of African-Americans by law enforcement officers—much of it divided along racial lines.²²

In 2015, twenty-five-year-old Freddy Gray was arrested by the Baltimore Police for possessing what they alleged was an illegal knife. Gray died from injuries to his spinal cord after being transported by a “rough ride” in a police van. Prosecutors found probable cause for criminal charges against the six police officers involved in his arrest and death. Yet, though charged and placed on trial for a variety of violations, ranging from false arrest and reckless endangerment to second-degree murder, no convictions were forthcoming.²³

One year later, 32-year-old Philando Castile was pulled over and killed in Falcon Heights, Minnesota after being profiled and detained by two officers after a bank robbery. Castile volunteered that he had a firearm which he was attempting to show the officer, as he reached for his driver’s license.²⁴ His only real crime (with which most African American men are acquainted) was “driving while black.” Yanez was charged with second-degree manslaughter and dangerous discharge of a firearm, though he was acquitted of all charges.²⁵

These incidents and hundreds of others underscore the prophetic pre-shadowing of Fitzgerald’s words by nineteenth-century abolitionist, Frederick Douglass, that,

²⁰ See, Beth Roy *41 Shots . . . and Counting: What Amadou Diallo's Story Teaches Us About Policing, Race, and Justice*, Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 2009.

²¹ Matt Taibbi *I Can't Breathe: A Killing on Bay Street*. New York: Spiegel & Grau, 2017

²² Marc Lamont Hill, *Nobody: Casualties of America's War on the Vulnerable, from Ferguson to Flint and Beyond*. New York: Simon & Schuster, 2016.

²³ Graham, David A. "The Mysterious Death of Freddie Gray". *The Atlantic*. . (April 22, 2015).

²⁴ Victoria A, Massie, “What Philando Castile’s Death Says about the Dangers of Driving While Black” *VOX*, July 11, 2016, <https://www.vox.com/2016/7/11/12147878/philando-castile-driving-while-black>.

²⁵ Joles, David "City of St. Anthony Fires Officer Jeronimo Yanez". [Minneapolis, MN] *Star Tribune*. June 16, 2017.

[Slavery] has been called by a great many names, and it will call itself by yet another name; and you and I and all of us had better wait and see what new form this old monster will assume, in what new skin this old snake will come forth.²⁶

The goals of excessive force carried out by law enforcement agents through the country take on this new skin to parallel those of the earlier period. The actions continue to instill fear in an already vulnerable community, maintain and control what is still perceived by some as a God-ordained social order, keep the races separated into fractured enclaves, and disenfranchise and dis-empower the black community from exercising its full civil rights.

Parallels Between Lynching and Excessive Police Force

Much has changed within and among our communities since the last reported lynching. Certainly, no one openly tolerates this explicitly demonic act any longer and thoughtful people – especially within the Christian community -- deem it abhorrent. American communities are no longer rigidly segregated. The psychological barriers imposed by sustained racial tension, however, find the black community, again, entrapped in a spiritually challenged culture. It is repeatedly exposed to violence, lack of concern for personal rights, and the resulting signs of trauma. The connection between the culture of lynching and the current climate of racial tension brought about by exposure to excessive force is undergirded by underlying attitudes represented in lynch mobs and rogue police officers. Moreover, these attitudes are undergirded by moral and spiritual deficiencies that continually fail to confront these deadly practices.

Within the racially divided Christian community, a spiritual chasm exists in which divergent views regarding the nature, causes, effects, and necessary correctives create a culture in which the two groups appear to serve different gods. For some white Christians, God, as an American white male, is most concerned with maintaining order and ensuring their personal and material security. For the black community, God is the One who is with us and all of those who suffer unjustly, as God was with Jesus as he suffered on his own lynching tree.

As expressions of control evolve, they become perfected and more resistant to correction. Just as early twentieth-century violence took a variety of forms, all of which could be categorized as lynching, excessive force by police appears in several forms. Incidents of “driving while black” pullovers, unauthorized searches, illegal means of subduing suspects, firing multiple shots, continuing to shoot already fallen victims, failing to give necessary medical attention, or providing “rough rides” in transporting suspects all go beyond what is reasonably required.

Like earlier lynch mobs, abusive police act as judge, jury, and executioner without extending the due process to victims. And similarly, even in the most egregious instances of excessive force, officers are rarely held accountable even when evidence suggests foul play. For while laws restricting the use of force are in place, interpretation is often so broad that what matters is simply whether the officer reasonably believes his safety is at risk. Whether real or

²⁶ Philip S. Foner, ed., *The Life and Writings of Frederick Douglass*, Vol. IV (1955).

not, the political justification for deadly force—fear for personal or corporate safety—has consistently seemed to be all that is needed.

Further, though theoretically accountable for their actions, a conviction is rarely rendered even in the face of abundant credible evidence to warrant it—a victim shot in the back, and/or incriminating testimony by fellow police officers.²⁷ This usurpation of the suspect’s right to due process and the exacting of more severe punishment than the law requires reinforces the sense that there is little redress within the system, and sends a message that this is another form of oppression that fails to value black lives.

As in the earlier century, within the contemporary context, perpetrators are rarely brought to justice. Few cases are reprimanded to the courts and, among those who face trial, generally, all-white, male juries who hear these cases are ill-disposed to exact justice and rarely impose a verdict of guilt.

The ghoulishly sick voyeurism of the relentless replaying of social and news media circuses with gruesomely detailed scenes repeatedly traumatizes the black community at the same time it provides racially biased whites with the assurance that their interest is protected. And, while there is physical harm and loss to individual families, the deep spiritual and psychological harm that engulfs the entire community is even more devastating, putting those who are already marginalized in emotional and psychic jeopardy.

Spiritual Implications

Even when no shot been fired, repeated exposure to unseemly tactics, such as physically restraining or laying a hand on individuals, embarrassing public personal searches, demeaning or racially charged language, prolonged isolation or incarnation prior to trial and unequal bond requirements leaves the black community spiritually drained and emotionally traumatized. These de facto extra-legal remedies reinforce the understanding that though every American citizen, supposedly, receives equal protection under the law, black Americans have been redefined as less than fully human and, therefore, less deserving of the full measure of protection.

For the outcome of excessive force is to clarify the Founding Fathers’ assertion that “all men are created equal, [and] are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights.” African Americans are thought to be less equal and the demonically spiritual stronghold this level of force engenders never allows full enjoyment of the freedom of life, liberty, or the pursuit of happiness.

While many white Christians make no such pronouncements, silence indicates a measure of assent as the prophetic witness of Scripture insists: “[n]one calls for justice, nor... pleads for truth.”²⁸ By its silence, the faith community is a co-conspirator in the fracturing Christian unity.

²⁷ Jerome Karabel, “Police Killings Surpass the Worst Years of Lynching, Capital Punishment, and a Movement Responds” The Huffington Post, Nov 4, 2015. https://www.huffingtonpost.com/jerome-karabel/police-killings-lynchings-capital-punishment_b_8462778.html.

²⁸ Is 59:4

When it does speak, the silence is usually broken only by unfortunate suggestions such as that by Franklin Graham, son of famed evangelist Billy Graham. The younger Graham denied the culpability of individual officers or law enforcement agencies, insisting that “[m]ost police shootings can be avoided” if black subjects] showed respect for and obedience to authority.”²⁹ He joins a tradition of seeing Black men—and women as unruly, dangerous, and a disruptive menace to everything considered decent. Such attitudes rationalize overly aggressive officers as preempting those who are perceived as threatening.

In essence, however, Robinson’s assessment of the culture of lynching correctly identifies the new situation in this country in which “good” Christian leaders like Graham continue to employ or support excessive force as necessary for sustaining a perceived “God-ordained” social order without regard for the spiritual, mental, emotional and physical havoc it wreaks on the black community. And, the same lack of regard for the Spirit’s brooding over the senseless death of each lynching victim is exhibited in inattention to the Spirit’s conviction over the shedding of innocent blood through excessive force.

Yet, Robinson’s insistence that the Christian community, and especially Christian leaders, invoke the Spirit of Truth to enjoin secular powers to confront the real trauma such attitudes invoke. Rather than seeing such confrontation as insinuating the church’s interference in secular matters, Robinson’s words suggest the need for valuing of every human being as created in God’s image. Such an understanding would allow the Church to enter into the Spirit’s grieving over what Scripture explicitly condemns as the taking of innocent life.

There are... things which the Lord hates... [and], are an abomination to Him: [among them is] hands that shed innocent blood,³⁰

[Y]our iniquities have separated between you and your God, and your sins have hidden his face from you... [Y]our hands are defiled with blood, and your fingers with iniquity ... [your] works are... the act of violence... [Your] feet run to evil, and... make haste to shed innocent blood...³¹

Rather than seeing excessive force as an evil which the Bible condemns, however, legitimizing it as necessary racializes criminality and demonizes blackness by painting a portrait of black men and women as unruly, dangerous, and socially disruptive. The racism that breeds such force assumes members of the black community are, a priori, spiritually deficient and potentially dangerous. It dismisses the spiritual implications of bigotry so that mob members or law enforcement officers’ “fear for safety” has consistently been all the justification required.

Understandably, force is, sometimes, required to subdue a subject, but unwarranted levels of violence or harassment create a sense of vulnerability that, ultimately, reminds members of the

²⁹ Michael Gryboski, “Franklin Graham's Advice to Americans When Stopped by Police: 'Follow Their Instructions!'", The Christian Post, September 26, 2016. <https://www.christianpost.com/news/franklin-grahams-advice-americans-stopped-by-police-follow-their-instructions-170081/>

³⁰ Prov 6:16-17 New American Standard Bible

³¹ Isaiah 59:2-3

black community of their perceived inferiority. Everyone in the community understands that they could, at any time, be subjected to the most atrocious and inhumane violence, without substantial recourse.

Since the very state of being a black man or woman is perceived as threatening, laws are perceived as providing no real protection for any black person, regardless of their activities, gestures, attire, or status within the community. For one of the privileges of whiteness is the ability to justify to oneself, as well as to society, the perception of an individual's blackness as a threat requiring containment. And, again, since the social position of the subject does not eliminate the perception, no one within the black community feels completely safe.

The most visible result is the imposition of an ongoing sense of fear that lies just below the surface of the individual and collective consciousness of the black community. As in the Jim Crow era, no contemporary African American who is in touch with current racial reality feels completely safe in our own neighborhoods, from the specter of excessive police force and the almost total impunity with which rogue police kill.

Still, taking innocent lives by excessive force was not introduced during the reconstruction or Jim Crow eras. Though the practice exists in every context and culture, throughout recorded history, another parallel can be found in Jesus' Crucifixion when he was lynched as an innocent subject of mob anger. Like other victims, he was forcefully taken, beaten, speared, and hung from a tree to die an excruciatingly painful and very public death. Further, all of this took place after a mock trial in which ruling officials, through their agent, Pontius Pilate, washed their hands of the matter.³²

Though motivated by socio-political and religious interest rather than race, Jesus' lynching was a very public occasion. Like modern renditions, the mob taunted him, as crowds of men, women, and children gathered to jeer. Religious leaders not only stood by but were involved in the assault. The centurions who surrounded Jesus were unconscionably immoral going beyond the punishment that the Roman system demanded. While he was in their custody, they dehumanized him, stripping him naked, mocking him, spitting on him, and maliciously beating him. In a final dehumanizing stroke, the soldiers vied for pieces of his clothing as souvenirs of their participation in the horrendous act. Similarly, excessive force strips black individuals and the black community of its dignity. Stephen, the New Testament deacon was also lynched by members of an angry mob. As with Jesus, those who murdered him were religiously devout people who, "rushed at him, dragged him out of the city and began to stone him" to death.³³ They, like Jesus' assailants, were committed to maintaining a, supposedly, God-ordained socio-religious order even if that meant going to the point of murder.

James Cones identified the lynching tree as the "quintessential symbol of black oppression in America."³⁴ Importantly, he sees the black community's identification with the Crucifixion as a critical element of our survival throughout centuries of unimaginably inhumane

³² See Matthew 27:11-33

³³ Acts 7:54-60

³⁴ James H. Cone, *The Cross and the Lynching Tree*. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2015.

oppression and the singular hope for escape from the nihilism that sustained oppression engenders. Perhaps because the pain of living in the present experience is too raw, the black community has not, as yet, been able to imagine a redemptive symbol that can ameliorate the trauma of police violence. And so, a level of nihilism—of hopelessness—lingers within its soul as an uneasy reminder of whom they have been considered to be.

So while Graham and other skeptics deny a deeper, spiritual root, contending that each episode is an isolated incident that may have been prevented if the victim had not run, shoplifted, sold cigarettes, talked back, crossed the street, worn a hoodie, carried a BB gun, or knocked on a door, black people are convinced that no one—especially our men—is ever completely safe from the menace of excessive force. Further, no one is sure when any simple gesture—lingering too long in a public space, handling expensive merchandise too closely, moving too quickly or failing to move fast enough when approached by an officer, or playing with a toy that resembles a weapon—might be the triggering event.

To contemporary sensitivities, the thought of viewing or celebrating a person swinging from a lynch party tree is abhorrent. Still, the psychic angst of the community's repeated exposure causes deep spiritual scars for both communities. For, as Feliks Garcia contends, "the willful participation in viewing... these... [media events]—is [like actually attending] lynching parties less than a century ago."³⁵ For, watching from the comfort of one's favorite chair is, in some way, participation in the spectacle of black death.

Christians who attended lynchings, or who watch the current unfoldings with morbid curiosity or naïve disinterest did not, and do not, consider themselves racist. They excused, and continue to excuse, themselves by seeing racism as the sin of those who carry out acts. They, therefore, allow themselves to become spiritually insensitive so as to escape the Holy Spirit's conviction of their complicity by rationalizing their presence as, purely, being spectators.

Yet, Robinson's critique underscores the truth that many, if not most, who participated in lynch mobs labeled themselves Christian. Moreover, most episodes of lynching, in fact, occurred on Sunday afternoons, shortly after church services concluded. This "lack of moral and ethical response to God's love" and denial of the Spirit's prompting to stand with victims promotes a toxic spirituality that sees faith as unattached to any resistance to injustice. The carnal, unspiritual reading and interpretation of Scripture that allows standing with perpetrators, vicariously and enthusiastically observing these activities, leaves the black community questioning, "Where has God been in all of this? Where is the convicting Spirit?"

While the Spirit of Life broods over each senselessly violent death, this assurance, however, is only partially satisfying. For the discerning Christian, genuine alignment with the Holy Spirit forces acknowledgment of unrepentant postures of actual and vicarious oppression. Further, the contemporary violent context reopens old, unhealed wounds that the Spirit calls upon us to redress.

³⁵ Feliks Garcia, "Police Brutality is Modern Lynching—And You may be a Part of It" The Daily Dot. July 6, 2016

With frequent occurrences and common media overexposure, no one is unaware of these moral and spiritual implications and no one is immune to the resulting toxic climate of mutual distrust and hatred. Every thinking Christian is, consequently, challenged to critique the painful emergence of new forms of lynching. So, when the church maintains its appalling silence, failing to mourn, lament, repent of and exorcize this corporate sin, the painful memory of lynching or current experience of police violence is magnified.

Further, such excessive force is an intergenerational sin! Racially insensitive Christians expose their children to the dehumanization of another human being without regard for how viewing these acts leave a profoundly morbid spirit on young, impressionable, minds. Decades of coverage leave no one immune from the psychological and spiritual trauma it engendered for either victims or perpetrators.

The children of the lynch mob became the members of the Ku Klux Klan whose children become insensitive, bigoted members of contemporary society. And children of mob victims continue to experience the catastrophic spiritual toll on the individual and collective soul of the entire African American community. The impact of this toll cannot be divorced from the collective dysfunction within our communities in the continuing acting out of incidents of excessive force and the diseased racial imagination. Further, refusal to authentically speak about, lament, and repent of the historical realities of racism, allows this sin to continue unhindered.

Though rigid Jim Crow laws and culture have ended, Jim Crow attitudes, passed down through generations, remain embedded in the soul, psyche, and spirits of the country. Black Jim Crow era parents taught their children techniques for avoiding the attention and wrath of white racists. “Don’t look a white person in the eye,” they cautioned and “don’t speak to white people too loudly.” Further, they would caution, “don’t loiter outside your neighborhood,” and certainly they would caution young men, don’t accost a white woman in any way.” Similarly, contemporary black parents instruct their children, “don’t go out alone,” “stay out of white neighborhoods,” “if pulled over by the police...” No member of the community feels entirely safe, no member completely trusts those who are entrusted with our safety. And, resultantly, we are still a divided nation—even within the church.

These attitudes cannot be eradicated by legislation or political posturing, for neither can completely or permanently erase the underlying idolatry that is the foundation of bigotry. These attitudes can only be exercised by the sanctifying power of the Holy Spirit who first confronts us as the Spirit of Truth calling out racial prejudice and the violence it engenders as sin and calling those who perpetrate or ignore this violence to account. That same Spirit must then be invoked as the Spirit of Unity (the unifying Spirit) to call all who proclaim themselves as members of Christ’s body to stand as one body lifting a unifying voice against bigotry. Such a stance is exemplified in the 1925 prayer penned during the height of the Jim Crow era by Robert Clarence Lawson, presiding bishop of the Church of Our Lord Jesus Christ of the Apostolic Faith:

O God, who has made man in thine own likeness, and who doth love all whom Thou has made, suffer us not because of differences of race, color, or condition to separate

ourselves from others and thereby from Thee; but teach us the unity of Thy family and universality of Thy Love.

As Thou Saviour, as a Son, was born of a Hebrew mother, who had the blood of many nations in her veins; and ministered first to Thy brethren of the Israelites, but rejoiced in the faith of a Syro-Phoenician woman and of a Roman soldier, and suffered your cross to be carried by an Ethiopian; teach us, also, while loving and serving our own, to enter into the communion of the whole family; and forbid that from pride of birth, color, achievement, and hardness of heart, we should despise any for whom Christ died, or injure or grieve any in whom He lives. We pray in Jesus' precious name." *Amen.*³⁶

³⁶ Robert Clarence Lawson, "Prayer for Freedom from Race Prejudice" in *The Anthropology of Jesus Christ Our Kinsman*. New York: Church of Christ Pub. Co., 1969.

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