

# ONCE APOSTOLIC, STILL BLACK

by

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*To those who have gone before me*

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## **ABSTRACT**

This thesis highlights four dualities of the black Apostolic (Oneness) Pentecostal tradition that psychologically and theologically complicate the process millennials must navigate when they leave the denomination for non-Apostolic, multicultural or majority-white churches. A product of the United States Pentecostal movement that was sparked by the influential 1906 Azusa Street Revival in Los Angeles, the Oneness Pentecostal movement is distinguished by doctrinal tenets such as its non-Trinitarian view of the Godhead, emphasis on the importance of water baptism in Jesus' name, and belief in Spirit baptism with the evidence of speaking in tongues as prerequisite to salvation for all believers. For millennials who were raised in the black Apostolic church but have left the denomination and gravitate to multicultural and/or white-majority, non-Apostolic churches, four key dualities render the process complex: 1. While the black Apostolic church's distinct, restorationist view of Christian history imbues its adherents with a sense of dignity due to its exclusivist doctrine, black Apostolic history in the United States is also steeped in racial division. 2. The denomination's emphasis on physical manifestations of the Spirit, especially speaking in tongues, may feel imbalanced, but it also provides adherents with a tangible understanding of the Spirit often lacking in white or multiracial non-Apostolic spaces. 3. While the black Apostolic tradition is not heavily interested in contributions from systematic theological history, the tradition enables a useful, critical perspective on theological orthodoxy as understood in the white, Western tradition. And 4. Despite aspects of the black church that millennials raised in it may find to be "toxic," the black church holds distinctive, culturally and existentially-affirming value for once-Apostolic black millennials who are drawn to multicultural or majority-white church spaces. Through a mixed methods approach of autoethnography, history, and textual analysis, this project highlights the ways in which ties between Pentecostal spirituality and blackness imbue once-Apostolic black millennials with a rich cultural-spirituality that continues to inform their experience even as they move into white-dominant Christian spaces.

## INTRODUCTION

Recently, I walked into the home of my maternal grandmother with the intention of asking her questions for this research project. She was born in April 1931—just a couple days after the death of Garfield Thomas (G.T.) Haywood—she reminds me. Haywood was an early Presiding



Fig. 1. Garfield Thomas (G.T.) Haywood (1880-1931), founding pastor of Christ Temple Apostolic Faith Assembly in Indianapolis, IN, USA. Reproduced with permission from Apostolic Archives International.

Bishop of the Pentecostal Assemblies of the World (PAW) and is considered the founder of Christ Temple Apostolic Faith Assembly in Indianapolis. That church, which I often label as “home,” is considered the “Mother Church” of the PAW. My grandmother, whom we call “Nana,” grew up in that church. As did my mother and myself.

I sat down in Nana’s thrift store armchair, biting into the liverwurst sandwich I made from what was in her fridge. I worked on the applesauce and Meijer potato salad Nana also insisted I take as I waited for her to finish making a customer service call. She is a very lucid 90 years old. I had a lot on my mind. Two days after that I would be giving a tribute at the funeral of my paternal grandfather. He had been a prominent

Apostolic pastor in Indianapolis and was ordained as a Bishop in the PAW. I wanted to get this conversation with Nana on the books, though, so I was focused.

I went into that “interview” with Nana with a notebook full of my preliminary thoughts. I had noted some plot points in PAW history from the time before Nana was born. I wanted to know how a notably interracial denomination become largely black, for example. I also wanted to know how my grandmother’s perspective on interracial churches might compare to that of myself, a millennial (let’s say one born 1981-1996) who has in my adulthood left the black Apostolic church and gravitated toward multiracial or majority-white



Fig. 2. A 2021 photo of Nana holding my son. Photograph by author; from author’s personal collection.



congregations (Dimock). All the churches I have attended since I was 18 are either nondenominational or are affiliated with the Assemblies of God. None of them could be considered “black” churches.

Based on the experience of myself and other once-Apostolic black millennials who are now in majority-white Christian spaces, I launch my primary research question for this thesis: why is it so complicated for millennial Christians raised in the black Apostolic church to leave it for non-black, non-Apostolic spaces? By “complicate,” I primarily mean make emotionally and theologically complex. I specify “Apostolic” because the denomination’s distinct restorationist doctrine creates additional complexity for those who abandon it for non-Apostolic spaces. I specify “black Apostolic” because the culture of multiracial and white-majority Apostolic/Oneness Pentecostal churches is different despite doctrinal overlap. I specify “millennial Christians” because I am particularly interested in the experiences of people born between 1981 and 1996 who also continue to identify with the Christian faith.

Though once-Apostolics outside of the “millennial” generation may resonate with many of the experiences described in this project, it is “black millennial” experience to which I relate most and in which I am most interested. Important to note, my experience as a twenty-first century black millennial in the United States has been marked by both a desire for unconditional integration in historically-white spaces and a keen awareness of the pervasiveness of institutional racism. My generation witnessed the new possibility represented by a President Barack Obama in 2008 and 2012—a possibility which I believe made a President Donald Trump in 2016 even more frustrating. In 2021 we saw the inauguration of Kamala Harris as the first female, first black American, and first Asian American to serve as Vice President of the United States. In 2022 we recently saw the confirmation of Judge Ketanji Brown Jackson as the first black woman to serve as United States Supreme Court Justice. It is also difficult to separate my black millennial experience from the rise of the Black Lives Matter movement—from outrage over systemic racism as it works itself out in the police force, our schools, and our healthcare systems.

My personal black millennial experience has also been marked by a desire for a multicultural racial inclusivity backed by a theology recalling the “every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages” standing before the throne of God in the biblical book of Revelation (*English Standard Version*, Rev. 7.9). The “diversity” of Christendom (and of humanity) never seemed to need special recognition in the black Apostolic church where I grew up. It was not until

later when I was immersed in majority-white Evangelical culture that I was bombarded with reminders that the gospel was meant for “every nation and tribe and language and people”—that it is not “Greek and Jew, circumcised and uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave, free; but Christ is all, and in all” (*English Standard Version*, Rev. 14.6, Col. 3.11). Such constant reminders have also strongly impacted my understanding of what “ideal” religious spaces look like (in my American Midwest milieu at least) as I continue my journey through black millennial adulthood.

Anyone familiar with the black Apostolic tradition might say spending time in mid to large-size white nondenominational churches is a big divergence from my upbringing. The thing is, I am not alone. Surveys conducted by the Pew Research Center between November 2019 and June 2020 found that, unsurprisingly, black millennials (born 1981 to 1996) and Gen Zers (born 1997 to 2012) in the United States are less religiously-engaged overall than previous generations (Dimock; Mohamed et al., Mohamed). Sixty percent of black adult survey participants who attend religious services at least several times a year attended black congregations (Mohamed et al., Mohamed). This number goes up to sixty-seven percent for those who identified as Protestant. The same study found an overall generation gap for likelihood to attend any black religious congregation, however. Black millennials who attended religious services at least several times a year were twice as likely as Baby Boomers (born 1946 to 1964) to attend a “White/other congregation” as opposed to a black church or “Multiracial congregation” (Mohamed et al., Mohamed). In other words, while most black American congregation-goers in general attend black congregations, black millennial congregation-goers in the United States are much less likely than older generations to attend a black congregation.

These trends for black congregations in general are echoed in the black Apostolic church. In my research I came across a 2018 presentation presented at a PAW Christian Education Conference. The presentation, “Thoughts from a Pew Baby” was presented at a session called “Preserving the PAW Legacy by Educating, Empowering and Equipping the Millennials and Generations to Come through Christian Education” (Dobson). I was immediately struck by the way the session title betrays an anxiety about the black Apostolic church’s ability to retain its millennials. The presentation’s survey of “Apostolic Millennials” revealed that sixty-nine percent of participants had “considered leaving” their church in general. Thirty-eight percent of participants said they would be interested in joining a church that was “not apostolic [*sic*]” (Dobson). While the scope of the survey is unstated and there is no way to know exactly what type

of non-Apostolic church participants had “considered” leaving for, my experience as a millennial rubbing elbows with other millennial “Pew Babies” from the black Apostolic church gives me insight to fill in some of the blanks.

From my observation and experience, many millennials raised in the black Apostolic church identify as Apostolic and align with its doctrine to such a degree that, while they would consider attending a white or multiracial Apostolic church, they would not consider attending a church that was not Apostolic. Others are not bothered by the idea of attending a church that is not Apostolic, whether or not they personally continue to identify with the denomination’s doctrine, but they have never considered attending a congregation that is multiracial or majority-white (two environments that in my experience in the U.S. Midwest at least, are often not that different). Although I have dear family members and friends who belong to both groups, and though I believe this study could provide members of both groups with new insights into their own experiences, neither of those two groups are the primary subject of this thesis.

I have gathered from my conversations that I am not the only black millennial who—subject to societal trends as is anyone else—was raised in the black Apostolic church and still identifies as Christian but who has dissociated from Apostolic doctrine and has gravitated to multiracial or majority-white, non-Apostolic churches. I have also gathered that I am not the only once-Apostolic black millennial who has wondered if they were rejecting a valuable part of their heritage if they no longer attend a black Apostolic congregation. Or who values racial diversity to the degree of having felt like they must “force” themselves to be comfortable in a sometimes-uncomfortable majority-white church while also being deeply bothered by certain aspects of the black church. I am not alone in wondering if in leaving the black Apostolic church I must forego worship in “Spirit-filled” spaces. I am not alone in also having “middle-class” tastes and craving the “structure” those less-Spirit-filled places often seem to provide.

*Once Apostolic, Still Black* outlines key dualities that complicate the process of leaving the black Apostolic tradition for millennial Christians raised in it. In naming and describing these dualities, I intend to outline the realities and validate the lived experiences of black millennials who have tried to make the transition to a white or multiracial non-Apostolic church. In the process of describing what one could consider challenges of this transition, I also seek to identify the benefits of being raised in the black Apostolic tradition that those who leave it can take with them wherever they go. Although gender dynamics, heteronormativity, and diversity outside of the

black-white binary are important aspects of a comprehensive discussion about contemporary experiences in the black Apostolic church, this study focuses primarily on dynamics between black and white Protestant churches in the United States in reference to race, history, and general spirituality. My hope is that through my chosen mixed methods of autoethnography, history, and textual analysis, I can show those like me that they are not alone. I also hope that onlookers outside the core audience of those raised in the black Apostolic church will gain a greater understanding of both the particularity of the black Apostolic tradition and the complexity of experience those who come from such a background may carry with them.

A few additional notes on my positionality and the basis of conclusions I make in this study, since these factors present their own relevant bias: I am a twentysomething black millennial woman who was raised in a historical, black Apostolic church affiliated with the PAW in the metropolitan Midwest. I am the fourth generation in my family to have been affiliated with the Apostolic church, with all four sets of my maternal and paternal great-grandparents having been black Apostolics in the Midwest. Growing up, my dad was a social worker and my mom was a stay-at-home mom turned part-time school cafeteria worker. I attended racially mixed public schools where honors tracking in middle and high school resulted in most of my later peers being white and seemingly well-off. While I never spent a significant amount of time around white Christians until I left to attend a predominately white, Evangelical-professing liberal arts college at the age of eighteen, I nevertheless had exposure to non-Apostolic, white Christian cultural products as a child. This exposure mainly came from Moody Radio, a broadcast of the majority-white Moody Bible Institute in Chicago, and my mother's fandom of Sandi Patty, the white contemporary Christian singer who was especially active in the 80s and 90s. I identify as a Christian and do not currently profess several of the key distinguishing tenets of Apostolic doctrine. I seek to be fair in my assessments of my largely positive experience in the black Apostolic tradition, though my decision to dissociate from Apostolic doctrine is undoubtedly reflected in the perspectives I share. The insights I provide about once-Apostolic black millennials are generally based on personal experience and observations as a member of this group as well as my analysis of conversations I see black millennials having about race, church, and Apostolic doctrine.

In the next section of this study, "Go Back" I demonstrate how black Apostolic history is both pride and pain for those of its heritage. While the denomination's distinct, restorationist view of Christian history imbues its adherents with a sense of dignity due to its exclusivist doctrine,

black Apostolic history in the United States is also steeped in racial division. In section two, “Color,” I posit that the black Apostolic experience of theology is simultaneously limiting and freeing; the experiential theology of the black Apostolic tradition is not heavily interested in contributions from systematic theological history, yet it enables a useful, critical perspective on theological orthodoxy as understood in the white, Western tradition. In section three, “Holy Ghost,” I highlight how the denomination’s emphasis on physical manifestations of the Spirit, especially speaking in tongues, is both troubling and grounding. While it may seem imbalanced, the black Apostolic emphasis on speaking in tongues instills a tangible understanding of the Spirit that those raised in the tradition can find to be lacking in white or multiracial non-Apostolic spaces. In section four, “By and By,” I argue that black church is both unsatisfactory and difficult to avoid for once-Apostolic black millennials who gravitate toward white or multiracial churches. In spite of cultural aspects of black churches that people who leave them often describe as toxic, black church environments often hold distinctive, culturally and existentially-affirming value for black millennials.

## SECTION ONE: GO BACK

*I remember a long time ago  
When the saints, they used to pray  
Down at the altar  
Where they sought the Lord  
And they tarried for the Holy Ghost  
. . . Go back!*

—From “Holy Ghost Power,” Chicago Mass Choir, *Calling on You* (2001)<sup>1</sup>

### Introduction

In 2016, my mom offered to put together the “Heritage Room” of my home church. It would be a little museum-like room off the lower sanctuary, dedicated to the history of the eminent Christ Temple Apostolic Faith Assembly in Indianapolis, Indiana, USA. The project involved rummaging through boxes stored in scary boiler rooms and sifting through physical artifacts and copies of the church periodical dating back to the 1950s. My “millennial” contribution was printing out relevant photos my mom could use from the public Facebook page of “Apostolic Archives International.”

Walking into the finished room, which took shape by 2017, you would see framed church convention photos lining the walls, the old wooden pulpit used prior to the church’s 2008 renovation, and miniatures of tracts written by Bishop G.T. Haywood, the church founder. You would see a lot of photos of Bishop Haywood, actually. There is a sepia one of him in a suit and brim hat in 1923, shovel in hand, breaking ground on what would be the second location of the church (“Church History”). To my mom’s fascination, she has been called on multiple occasions to lead



Fig. 3. Christ Temple Apostolic Faith Assembly in Indianapolis, Indiana as it stands in 2022. Reproduced with permission from Christ Temple Heritage Room Archives.

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<sup>1</sup> See Chicago Mass Choir. Used with permission from Saved Children’s Music and Slickey Music.

groups of white Apostolic tourists who travel to the church hoping to get a glimpse of its history. On the first floor of the building, walking into the main lobby and up the red-carpeted stairs before entering the sanctuary, there are large, identically-framed photos of all the church's pastors since its 1908 founding. All black men. My dad's dad, Bishop Byron Val Johnson, is pictured there, labeled with his pastoral tenure of 1990 to 2001.

That black people would demonstrate such a reverence for history is not strange. However something about this willingness to reminisce to the early twentieth century—days that also happened to be the height of our state's lynching era—is strange to me when I imagine it from an outside perspective. Millennials are arguably the initiators of “wokeness” in its current cultural conception; we generally value being “awaken” to or aware of social injustice, and we know all too well that black history is difficult (Borten). And yet, as I seek to demonstrate, this reverence for history is the lifeblood of black Apostolic tradition. In this section, I elaborate on the first major duality that is the focus of this study: while Apostolic history is the pride of black Apostolics due to the denomination's exclusivist and restorationist doctrine, that history a source of pain due to its racial conflict that I argue is particularly difficult for black millennials to ignore.

### **Restorationism and Doctrinal Pride**

Scholarly attention has been directed toward the “restorationist” underpinnings of the Apostolic tradition: the belief that its doctrine constitutes a restoration of spiritual truth (French 10). As a result of this aspect of the denomination's doctrine, a distinct, restorationist view of history is transmitted to a layperson like me who was raised in the black Apostolic tradition. This distinct view of history is imperative to understand before any meaningful exploration of the challenges of those who leave the tradition. Dedicating significant attention to the restorationist basis of Apostolic doctrine, Talmadge French in his 2011 dissertation “Early Oneness Pentecostalism, Garfield Thomas Haywood, And The Interracial Pentecostal Assemblies Of The World (1906-1931)” demonstrates that early Apostolic leaders saw their beliefs about the non-Trinitarian nature of God and the importance of the name of Jesus as a “’restoration’ of truth” and “mystery revealed” (qtd. in French 10). To provide an example of the way this view of Christian history may be passed to the layperson, I reflect on Apostolic teaching as taught to me in a black Apostolic context:

Growing up, preachers and Sunday School teachers emboldened us young people by the fact that we were part of a tradition that finally realized the Truth. *We* were part of the One true body of Christians. We were taught water baptism in Jesus' name for the remission of sins and the baptism of the Holy Ghost with the evidence of speaking in tongues (as Peter boldly preached about in Acts 2:38). This language is oft-echoed verbally in Apostolic circles, in tracts, and in "What We Believe" sections of church websites ("Our Beliefs"). This baptism by immersion in Jesus' name is necessary for salvation. Baptism in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Ghost is not biblical. The initial evidence for the Baptism of the Holy Ghost is speaking in tongues, so speaking in tongues is also necessary for salvation (Alexander 24; "Our Beliefs"). How can you be saved and not have the Spirit? The word "Trinity" is nowhere in the Bible, and thus we reject such a pseudo-polytheistic idea that the One God would exist in multiple "persons" (Black Fire loc. 2670; "Our Beliefs"; "I'm a Oneness Pentecostal"). God is One and his name is Jesus. I'll give an oft-used analogy. My name is Krista. I'm a mother, I'm a daughter, and I'm a wife. These are all roles that I have, but I'm still only one person. In the same way, we could say that Jesus is the Father, Jesus is the Son, and Jesus is the Spirit.

This doctrine is what the original Apostles *actually* taught, believed, and preached—that is, the teaching of those messengers of Jesus described in Acts and the Pauline Epistles. Thus the name "Apostolic." Presumably, people fell away from these truths after the New Testament era. Maybe around 100 or 200 C.E.? The implication given to me and my peers was that from the end of the New Testament era until the birth of the Apostolic Pentecostal movement around 1907, all those who called themselves "Christians" (i.e. those who believed in a "Trinity") were not actually saved. So-called Christians were lost and without real salvation for nearly two thousand years until those first few early Apostolic leaders—G.T. Haywood, Robert Lawson, and Sherrod C. Johnson among them—finally received divine revelation and true biblical doctrine on Earth was restored (Alexandra 222, 224).

This is the view of Christian history as taught to a black Apostolic layperson as I was. At least in my Midwestern metropolis, historic church, pants-and-earring-wearing (I am referring to the women for this one), movie-theater-and-bowling-going-since-the-90's black Apostolic milieu. There may be an understanding that differing teaching from congregation to congregation regarding appropriate dress or entertainment establishments is mostly a matter of individual conviction. However Apostolic doctrine is such that any deviation from it in terms of the necessity of speaking in tongues, the necessity of baptism in Jesus' name, and perhaps even the Oneness of the Godhead is not only outside of a tradition; it is outside of salvation. This exclusivity creates obvious chagrin for the once-Apostolic black millennial Christian who no longer professes Apostolic doctrine. However before distancing from Oneness doctrine—before believing that one



might not always need to speak in tongues to be saved, that Trinitarian baptisms are not null and void, or that the aggressive Apostolic emphasis on Oneness may just be based in misunderstanding—that sense of spiritual exclusivity is emboldening. Not even necessarily in a boastful way, knowing you are privileged to know the truth is edifying.

### **Historical Witness**

On the other side of the black Apostolic view of history, however, is the complex record of events that contributed to the Apostolic movement in the United States as it stands today. As the rest of this section demonstrates, the historical record of the twentieth century U.S. Oneness Pentecostal movement, especially that of the Pentecostal Assemblies of the World (PAW) 1. complicates the view of Christian history I was taught and 2. becomes a source of pain that in my experience as a black millennial is particularly difficult to ignore.

The time when early proponents of the Apostolic movement began discussing their revelations about Oneness doctrine was part of a larger, general Pentecostal movement generally recognized to be initiated in 1901 by Charles Parham, a self-taught white evangelist. The Pentecostal movement was ignited to much larger impact and international spread in 1906 by William Seymour, a black minister (Alexander 8, 17). Itself an outgrowth of the U.S. Wesleyan “Holiness” movement of the nineteenth century, the Pentecostal movement was largely Trinitarian and was characterized by an emphasis on speaking in tongues as the initial “evidence” of the baptism of the Holy Spirit. It was not a characteristic feature of the general Pentecostal movement to teach that Spirit baptism accompanied by speaking in tongues was requisite to salvation, however (Alexander 8, 21, 24). In 1906, William Seymour led a fervent, influential, and notably interracial revival headquartered at the “Azusa Street Mission” in Los Angeles. By around 1914, which coincided with the end of the initial Pentecostal revival period, there were more than twenty (mostly Trinitarian) denominations and hundreds of churches in the United States that self-identified as Pentecostal and believed that speaking in tongues was the initial evidence of Spirit baptism (Alexander 154).

The “Apostolic,” also known as “Oneness,” Pentecostal denomination arose from this larger Pentecostal movement. It differs from most other Pentecostal denominations due to its 1. Non-Trinitarian view of the Godhead 2. Acceptance of water baptism only in the name of Jesus and 3. View that Jesus-name baptism and Holy Spirit baptism with the evidence of tongues are not

mere outward signs or landmarks in the life of the believer but are prerequisite to salvation (Alexander 234). The context surrounding the birth of the Oneness movement in the United States reveals that while certainly particular, the doctrine was not the result of an ahistoric, spontaneous revelation as I was once taught to believe. “Holiness” Christians in the nineteenth century were exhibiting behavior that I have often seen Apostolics today attribute to themselves. Members of the nineteenth century movement talked of being “sanctified” and “fire baptized,” restricted their dress, and waved the banner of “Holiness” before there was record of any major denomination in the United States insisting Spirit-filled believers must speak in tongues (Alexander 20, 62-63). The Apostolic iteration was one flavor of a larger Pentecostal movement, and the numerous churches and traditions that developed from the broad Pentecostal movement in 1906 belong to the same kinship. Revising Christian history to downplay this kinship is inaccurate. Especially as someone who has left the Apostolic tradition and has associated with other products of the Pentecostal movement such as the Assemblies of God church, I believe recognizing ties between Trinitarian and non-Trinitarian Pentecostal traditions is only fair.

### **Race and Oneness in the Twentieth Century**

I am fascinated by demographics of the Apostolic church. It is estimated that there are now more than 30 million Oneness believers worldwide (French 5). Some estimates have indicated that seventy percent of Apostolic Pentecostals in the United States were black and that forty percent of black Pentecostals identified as Apostolic. It is unclear if that forty percent refers to black people in the United States or worldwide, however (Alexander 213). The largest Apostolic organization in the United States is the majority-white United Pentecostal Church International (UPCI), followed by the majority-black Pentecostal Assemblies of the World (PAW) and majority-black Church of Our Lord Jesus Christ of the Apostolic Faith (COOLJC) (French 5).

This study focuses primarily on the PAW because it is the oldest Oneness organization in existence, it is currently the largest black-majority Oneness organization, and it is the Oneness organization with which I am most familiar. The PAW also has a fascinating theological and racial history that I argue black millennials are particularly positioned to find disturbing.

In 1913, there arose one of several schisms that led to the creation of new denominations in the early Pentecostal movement: disagreement over whether it was most correct to baptize people in the name of the “Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost” or simply in the name of “Jesus.”

Several ministers in the general Pentecostal movement around that time, including white ministers Robert McCalister, John Scheppe, and Frank J. Ewart, began preaching that Jesus-name baptism was preferable to the Trinitarian formula; there was no record of the New Testament apostles baptizing in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Spirit (Alexander 206-208). Black Pentecostal historian Estrela Alexander writes that by 1915, the Pentecostal movement had been “turned upside down” by the Jesus’ name controversy (Alexander 207).

Several years prior to the rise of the Jesus’ name controversy, in 1907, the PAW was founded. The organization was Trinitarian and majority-white (Alexander 214). G.T. Haywood, early PAW leader and founder the church where I grew up, had heard of and accepted the new Jesus-name teaching and had rebaptized his entire congregation by 1915 (French 163). Only after initial discussions about the correct baptismal formula did Apostolic doctrine pertaining to the non-Trinitarian nature of the very Godhead emerge (Alexander 212). Many of the Oneness adherents in the Assemblies of God, having been expelled from that organization in 1916, joined the PAW. By 1918, the PAW was considered a Oneness organization (French 166, 171).

While the PAW in its beginning years was three-fourths white, the 1919 relocation of its headquarters from Los Angeles to Indianapolis, where Haywood had already grown a racially-

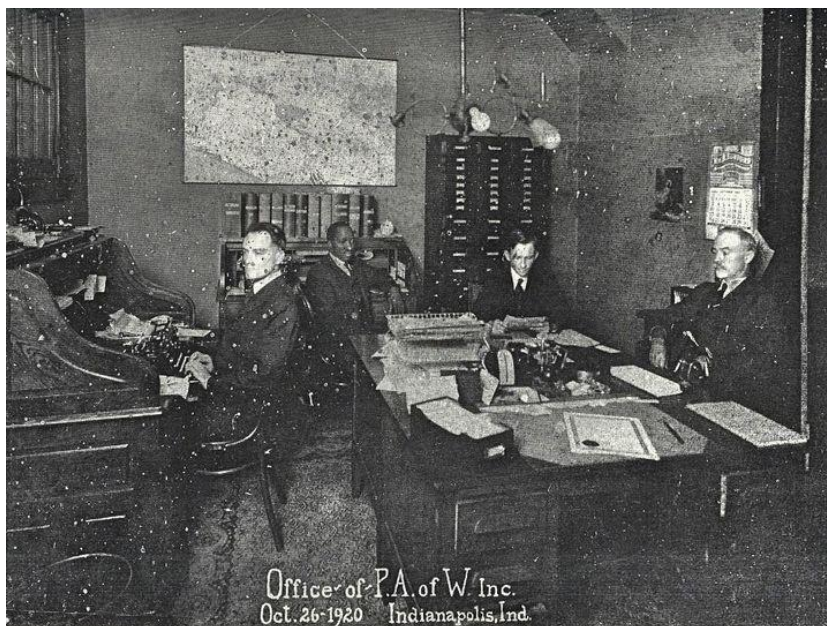


Fig. 4. Pentecostal Assemblies of the World (PAW) executive officers at the organization’s Indianapolis headquarters in 1920. Pictured from left to right: Elder A.W. Lewis, Elder G.T. Haywood, Elder William A. Mulford, and General Superintendent E.W. Doak. Reproduced with permission from Apostolic Archives International.

integrated congregation of several hundred members, helped bring in a large black membership to the organization (Alexander 216). Through the civil rights era, though the number of white PAW congregants had decreased, the leadership remained intentionally biracial (Alexander 219; French 176). This was a testament to the degree to which racial reconciliation in that era was a core PAW value. In fact, out of all the Pentecostal organizations that emerged from the larger 1906

movement, Trinitarian and Oneness, the PAW maintained the original interracial pattern of the Azuza Street revival the longest (Alexander 21).

The organization was not immune to the racial politics of the time, however. In 1922, following complaints from white PAW ministers in the South about always having to travel North to Indianapolis for meetings, ministers in that group decided to hold their own Southern Bible Conference in Little Rock, Arkansas. As black ministers were necessarily excluded from such a conference in the South due to fears for their bodily safety, such a southern meeting was interpreted as an intentional exclusion (French 244). Further, in 1923, white minister and then-PAW chairman E.W. Doak resigned. It was decided that rather than have him replaced by his most logical successor, General Secretary (and black man) G.T. Haywood, the position of chairman would be eliminated and replaced by a seven-member interracial board. Later that same year, to deal with the challenge of white ministers who did not want their PAW ministerial credentials signed by black ministers, it was decided that white ministers would sign for white ministers and black ministers would sign for black ministers (French 245-246). Further hammering the nail in the coffin of an integrated PAW, in 1924 white PAW ministers met separately in Houston, Texas, distancing themselves from the PAW name and establishing a separate white administration and black administration within their state (Alexander 218; French 248). When such a structure was rejected for the PAW as a whole, most of the white PAW ministers walked out and joined the Texas organization. That majority-white group in Texas eventually became the United Pentecostal Church International (UPCI), also colloquially known as the UPC (Alexander 218; French 249).



Fig. 5. 1928 Annual Convention Photo of Christ Temple Apostolic Faith Assembly in Indianapolis, Indiana. Reproduced with permission from Christ Temple Heritage Room Archives.

While there were still white congregants in the PAW and the leadership remained biracial over the next few decades, white congregants were a minority in the organization overall and their numbers continued to decline over the next few decades (Alexander 220; French 265). My grandmother remembers a mass exodus of white people from my home church in the 1950s. She recalls scared white parents fleeing when their teenagers demonstrated romantic interest in their black counterparts. Anti-miscegenation laws and not wanting to break the law were reasons those white people who fled provided. By the 1980s, the church of Nana's girlhood that had been sixty percent black and forty percent white—the church which had been featured in newspapers and had attracted negative attention from local authorities due to its unseemly racial mixing, the church which had brought black and white worshippers together when the Ku Klux Klan in Indiana was at its height—was basically a black church. Today, white congregants in the PAW are few. I do not personally remember ever having seen any upper-level white PAW leaders over the years. The PAW, with its commitment to Jesus' name baptism and the Oneness of the Godhead, has continued to grow, however. In 1997 it was estimated that worldwide PAW membership had reached one million people (Alexander 220). Overall, there are currently more than fifty different black Oneness organizations (Alexander 24). Most Oneness organizations, black or white, can trace their origins back to the PAW (Alexander 220).

As a child, when the major majority-white, UPCI-affiliated church in Indianapolis would visit Christ Temple for fellowship, my deepest thoughts were fascination that the white UPC congregants could not clap on beat. Knowing the history of the racial division that led to the founding of such a congregation now, however, I am indignant. I get angry when I think that the other church only exists because they did not want to worship with black people, or that as Nana recalls, that UPC church at least once sent a black man who wanted to be baptized over to Christ Temple because they would rather not have black people enter their baptismal waters. ““They couldn't even baptize this black boy. And called ‘emself saved,” Nana said when telling me about once such instance. Around that time she heard some black Apostolics jokingly declare “UPC” to stand for “Ugly Prejudice Crept In.” Of course, we can talk about reconciliation, about the UPC church's leadership having denounced such past practices, about how today you can find content black and Latinx members for example among their ranks. But as a millennial, the generation which initiated the Black Lives Matter movement and of whom fifty-six percent reportedly believe

systemic racism in the United States is at least fairly widespread, I am less inclined to believe bygones have simply become bygones (“A Call for Accountability”).

### **Conclusion**

The pain of racism in Apostolic history in the United States is a reality that balances the doctrine I was taught about how singular and otherworldly the Oneness movement was in my mind. The so seemingly-unnecessary reality of racial division within the movement may be in part what has driven some once-Apostolic black millennials, especially those like myself who are accustomed to rubbing elbows with white people in school and in the workplace, from the black church to more multiracial spaces. I do not believe the burden of “diversifying” majority-white institutions should be on black people or other people of color, as contemporary conversations about “diversity” and “inclusion” have often acknowledged (“Understanding the Emotional Tax”). Yet facing the reality that most white people will not feel comfortable integrating into majority-black spaces (for a whole host of reasons I find mostly illegitimate), choosing more racially diverse spaces outside the black church has served as an imperfect, individual solution for someone like me who appreciates some cultural aspects of contemporary-style majority-white churches. Transitioning from a black Apostolic context to a majority-white/multiracial and non-Apostolic context, as the next section will demonstrate, creates its own set of theological challenges, however.

## SECTION TWO: HOLY GHOST

*It shall be light in the evening time  
The path to glory you will surely find  
Through the water way it is the light today  
Buried in his precious name  
Young and old repent of all your sins  
and the Holy Ghost will enter in  
The evening time has come  
'Tis a fact that God and Christ are one.*

—From “The Water Way,” Hattie E. Pryor (1919)

### Introduction

The first time I spoke in tongues, I was eighteen years old. I was at home alone, making a grilled cheese sandwich and listening to music by Contemporary Christian band Jesus Culture. I did feel “different” afterward. Looking back at that moment now though, I cannot help but wonder if my experience was all it had been “cracked up to be” in the black Apostolic teaching with which I was raised.

Speaking in tongues is the culmination of the “Plan of Salvation” that had been drilled into me from the time I was a young child in Sunday School. The Plan of Salvation, I was taught, was clearly preached by Peter in Acts 2:38. The scripture is quoted so often I memorized it as a young child: “Then Peter said unto them, Repent, and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins, and ye shall receive the gift of the Holy Ghost” (*King James Version*, Acts 2:38). To be saved one must 1. Repent of one’s sins and then 2. Be water baptized by immersion in the name of Jesus. Then if that repentance was sincere enough, the believer will receive 3. The gift of the Holy Ghost with the evidence of speaking in tongues. In our adulthood, my younger sister and I have made fun of how fixated Apostolics are on Acts 2:38. I once joked about there probably being people out there with Acts 2:38 tattoos. Given the conservative stance many Apostolic church take on tattoos, my Google image search of such a tattoo was unsurprisingly unfruitful.

Because the phenomenon of speaking in tongues is the definitive marker of salvation and Spirit baptism according to Oneness doctrine, those raised in the black Apostolic tradition understand the Holy Spirit as something physical. This more concrete experience of the Spirit is supported by frequent reminders of the Spirit's resurrecting power—that same power that cured the sick, raised the dead, and made the blind man to see (*King James Version*, Matt. 10.8, Jn 9.1-6). Admittedly, this insistence on physical manifestations of the Spirit can seem troubling to a once-Apostolic person like me when looking back at the tradition. I believe the Spirit can move in a lot of ways, not all of which are detectable by human eyes and ears. However, my time since becoming once-Apostolic has demonstrated what is the second duality of focus in this study: while it can be problematic, the black Apostolic emphasis on physical manifestations of the Spirit is also grounding. It imbues those from the tradition with an understanding of the Holy Spirit that is more multidimensional than what may derive from a non-Apostolic, non-black setting. The black Apostolic understanding of the Holy Spirit as physical and communal stems from elements of African spirituality and is reflected in practices such as tarrying and teaching on Spirit-filled believers' influence over physical reality. As this section demonstrates, such practices create a positive, tangible understanding of the Spirit that once-Apostolic black millennials can take with them as they move into majority-white and multicultural spaces.

### **Blackness and Embodied Spirituality**

The physical, communal understanding of the Holy Spirit present in black Apostolic theology is rooted in African culture and spirituality. Estrela Alexander discusses the fact that despite the diversity of African continental cultures and the forced erasure of African culture through the Middle Passage, general links between African and African-American spirituality can be found in elements such as “universal belief in a supreme being; a pervasive sense of the reality of the spirit world; blurring of lines between the sacred and profane; practical use of religion in all of life; [and] surrender of excessive individualism for community solidarity” (Alexander 31). Ashon Crawley further describes connections between “shouting,” the Spirit-powered holy dance practiced in African American Pentecostal churches, the joyous, communal “ring shout” practiced in plantation slave worship, and the even older *saut* (pronounced like “shout”) dance in Afro-Arabic Islamic tradition (95). Black spirituality exhibits close connections between the divine and the way bodies move. Research suggests that from the African context from which slaves in the



United States derived to cultural conditions under slavery, Spirit power is active, wielding real influence on physical reality.

Scholars of the black Pentecostal church have written extensively of how this tangible understanding of the Spirit translates to African American Pentecostal spaces, and it fits squarely within my experience in the black Apostolic church. In her 2009 dissertation *The Black Oneness Church in Perspective*, Elaine A. Brown Spencer writes that in black Apostolic spaces, “Spirit is experienced in intense personal and communal ways” (50). William Seymour’s 1907 written testimonial of the experiences that led to his leadership of the Azuza Street Pentecostal revival reflects the community and physicality associated with the Spirit in black Pentecostal spaces:

On April 9, 1906, I was praising the Lord from the depths of my heart at home, and when the evening came and we attended the meeting the power of God fell and I was baptized in the Holy Ghost and fire, with the evidence of speaking in tongues. During the day I had told the Father that although I wanted to sing under the power I was willing to do what ever He willed. . . . [I]t seemed as if a vessel broke within me and water surged up through my being, which when it reached my mouth came out in a torrent of speech in the languages which God had given me. . . . I sang under the power of the Spirit in many languages... the Spirit led me to the piano, where I played and sang under inspiration, although I had not learned to play. In these ways God is continuing to use me to His glory ever since that wonderful day, and I praise Him for the privilege of being a witness for Him under the Holy Ghost’s power. (qtd. in Crawley 193)

Though he begins his testimony by speaking of his personal experience at home, he precedes discussing his Spirit baptism by saying “we attended the meeting” (emphasis added). The move of the Spirit for Seymour was characterized by “sing[ing],” “water” that “surged” into a “torrent” of utterances, and playing the piano. The Spirit in this instance is not the “still small voice” often associated with the Holy Spirit in the white Evangelical context where I spent my undergrad years (*King James Version*, 1 Kings 19.12; Rouis). The experience of the Spirit is communal, raging, and physical. Ashon Crawley speaks more broadly about the physicality of black Pentecostal experience. He writes, “Blackpentecostalism is an intellectual practice grounded in the fact of the flesh, flesh unbounded and liberative, flesh as vibrational and always on the move. Such practice constitutes a way of life” (Crawley 4). In a black Pentecostal context like the black Apostolic church, possession by the Spirit is understood in physical terms and has real, tangible consequences.

### **Tarrying: Community and Tangibility**

One practice that embodies the communal, fleshly understanding of the Spirit in black Apostolic circles is tarrying. Estrela Alexander explains the links between African worship practices and tarrying, describing the latter practice: “In tarrying, the seeker approaches God through the repetition of specific words-‘Jesus, Jesus, Jesus, Jesus,’ or phrases-‘Thank you, Jesus; Thank you, Jesus; Thank you, Jesus; Thank you, Jesus’ in rapid succession, to the point of exhaustion” (Alexander 54). The goal of approaching God through repetition of speech is receiving Spirit baptism. Tarrying was always explained to me as a way get one’s mind and heart focused on God such that your soul will be ready to receive Holy Spirit baptism. A common practice in black Apostolic circles in which I have been, tarrying is often seen as the conventional means by which those who seek to be “filled with the Holy Ghost” can receive that experience while at church.

I recall experiencing several tarrying services as a young person in the black Apostolic church, each experience reflecting the physical and communal understanding of the Holy Spirit in the tradition’s theology. There would be groups of ten or twenty children and teenagers surrounding the altar, hands raised, tears streaming down faces. The clamor of many voices speaking repentance and praise, promising devotion was always loud and unmistakable. Ministers would circulate between seekers, applying the laying on of hands or speaking words of encouragement or Scripture. My church had a “Power Room” dedicated to individuals or small groups who would tarry outside of main services in a more private setting. I have been there a couple times too. My strongest memories of tarrying are sensations: the noise of people crying out, the taste of salt from my own tears, the gentle pressure of a Bible pressed into my belly as someone declared “out of his belly shall flow rivers of living water” (John 7:38) and someone else whispers “you’ve got to let it go, girl” in my ear. I recall the warmth of the Spirit in the room.

Scholars have written on the distinctive blackness of tarrying. David D. Daniels contrasts tarrying with the contemplative prayer traditionally associated with whiter Christian settings: “While most contemplative prayer forms limit bodily involvement and movement, tarrying incorporates active, bodily participation. Finally, tarrying is not a private experience of an individual directing him- or herself; it is a communal event with the encouragement of altar workers and a prayerful congregation” (qtd. in Crawley 168). As is likely true of tarrying in black Pentecostal churches in general, tarrying in black Apostolic circles is communal and tactile. It is

an experience those of us raised in black Apostolic churches would likely be hard-pressed to forget. It is also my experience that it imbues the individual with a tangible, communal understanding of the Spirit that lingers even when entering into non-black, non-Pentecostal churches where the conspicuous “Holy Ghost” becomes a more abstract and docile “Holy Spirit.”

### **The Spirit’s Physical Power**

In addition to tarrying, black Apostolic teaching regarding the Spirit-filled believer’s power over physical reality reflects an embodied understanding of the Holy Spirit. When it comes to spiritual empowerment, getting to the “initial evidence” of speaking in tongues in the black Apostolic context in which I was raised was only half of the equation. We were told that those who had been filled with the Holy Ghost had “power” (*King James Version*, Acts 1.8). We would have the same power that allowed the biblical apostles to “heal the sick, cleanse the lepers, [and] raise the dead” (*King James Version*, Matthew 10.8). As a child I longed for that superpower that would tell you things, guiding you with specifics for what to pursue and what to avoid.

It not difficult to make connections between such teaching on the effects of individual empowerment by the Holy Spirit and the (much-criticized) name-it-and-claim-it teaching which I have observed in many black Pentecostal circles. This teaching, encouraging congregants to call on the power of the Holy Spirit to change their realities is often accompanied by exhortations to “declare [the desired outcome] over your life” or “speak it into existence.” Black millennials who foray into white Evangelical theology, especially that of the Reformed tradition, are bound to find criticisms of such teaching, which is often associated with the “Word of Faith” movement and/or “prosperity theology” (“Word of Faith Movement”). Given the African cultural roots of belief in a pervasive spiritual reality, in addition to the natural appeal of such Spirit-empowerment teaching for a demographic historically disenfranchised in U.S. society, I find many of the criticisms of this theology to be lacking in important context. Once-Apostolic black millennials who have left the tradition for non-Apostolic, non-black spaces on the other hand are likely to have to this additional sociological context when they encounter criticisms of name-and-it-and-claim-it theology. The fair amount of sensitivity I have found the millennial generation to have to questions of cultural difference may make such acontextual theological criticisms more bothersome. Once-Apostolic black millennials are privileged with a background that provides valuable, culturally and theologically-balancing perspective when critically evaluating popular theology.

## **Conclusion**

Black Christians raised in the Apostolic church are the heirs of a rich pneumatology rooted in community and physical reality. The faith of those who have left the tradition for non-black, non-Apostolic churches is likely still grounded in the conviction the Spirit is real, present, and physical. This may explain (at least in part) the lack of satisfaction once-Apostolic black millennials might feel when moving into white and/or non-Pentecostal spaces, for example. Even though I might prefer some aspects of a typical white or multicultural nondenominational church, I cannot help but wonder what it may be like for fellow parishioners in that environment who have never had the experience of walking into thick worship and physically feeling the Spirit of God. No matter how distant once-Apostolic black millennials may grow from black Apostolic doctrine or spaces, they can take their concrete conception of the Spirit as a positive theological understanding wherever they go.

## SECTION THREE: COLOR

*Someone asked a question  
Why do we sing?  
When we lift our hands to Jesus  
What do we really mean?  
Someone may be wondering  
When we sing our song  
At times we may be crying  
And nothing's even wrong*

*I sing because I'm happy (I sing)  
I sing because I'm free (His eye's on)  
His eye's on the sparrow (that's the reason)  
That's the reason why I sing*

—From “Why We Sing,” *Kirk Franklin & The Family* (1993)<sup>2</sup>

### Introduction

When I graduated from high school, I was fascinated by the idea of white, non-Apostolic Christians. I knew they existed and that they talked about religion differently. My mom often listened to Moody Radio in the car growing up. I *liked* the way those white people talked about God, actually. They made things sound so matter-of-fact—so easy, as though it were completely normal to believe that the whole world could be saved because one guy thousands of years ago died on a piece of wood and then miraculously came back to life. As I would be starting my freshman year at Wheaton College (IL), a predominately-white, non-Apostolic and Evangelical-professing liberal arts institution, I would soon be among such white Christians.

From the thrice-weekly chapels, required Bible and theology classes, dorm floor worship sessions, small groups, and the way most everyone around me talked in general, I was immersed

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<sup>2</sup> See *Kirk Franklin & The Family*. Used with permission from Capitol CMG, Inc.

in the world of white, Trinitarian, largely non-Pentecostal theology and tradition. I pored over the theology articles I was assigned in class, analyzing each concept in comparison to the precepts I was taught in my black Apostolic background. I came to know the hypostatic union, common grace, theistic evolution, and the different predominant views of soteriology. I had to memorize that the First Council of Nicaea happened in 325 AD and that Sabellianism, a



Fig. 6. Me on campus during my time at Wheaton College (IL) in 2015. Photograph by Yuxi Zhao; from author's personal collection.

non-Trinitarian “heretical” view of the Godhead that I have seen critics of Apostolic theology reference, was debated there (“Sabellianism”; “First Council of Nicaea”). I was amazed that more than a thousand years ago, people were already talking about this stuff. At Wheaton was the first time I experienced Christianity as something that could be intellectualized—debated without fear of “losing” one’s belief. My nerd bone was tickled, and my faith was deepened.

In the black Apostolic context in which I grew up, by contrast, the word “theology” had a negative connotation. To be sure, education—including theological education—was generally valued in conversation when encouraging some young person, or when listing the accomplishments of Suffragan Bishop So-and-So before he comes up to speak, or in a convention magazine blurb. But in the middle of sermons, especially when exhorting the congregation to be more visually enthusiastic in their praise, preoccupation with “theology” was always painted as part of a caricature I have heard criticized in black Apostolic sermons times without number: the highfalutin Christian. This person is “saditty,” as I remember one guest preacher saying. Too “intellectual” to shout or run or lift their hands, this is the one who sits in the pew like a bump on a log and acts like God did not bring them out of darkness into the marvelous light (*King James Version*, 1 Pet. 2.9). While leaders may recognize the value of thinking deeply and systematically about the attributes of God when the rubber meets the road, theological thinking was often rhetorically portrayed to laypersons as something that gets in the way of more authentic ways of connecting with God.

As a dedicated introvert who, especially in my late teens needed to think critically about my own faith and who was eager to learn from a variety of Christian theological sources, I felt the

limitations of a black Apostolic theology that in my experience often seemed to take outward emotional expression more seriously than deep thought—limitations that I could see in certain people’s eyes when I told them I would be going away to Wheaton, for example. The “limited” aspect of black Apostolic theology in those moments showed up as a fear of the unknown, an anxiety that one of our own would theologically explore herself into straying away from the Truth she was taught.

What I found out after attending the “Harvard of the Christian Colleges,” as Wheaton is known, is a truth that is also the third duality of focus in this study: while black Apostolic theology is limiting, it also creates intellectual and theological freedom. Recognizing this freedom creates invaluable spiritual self-awareness for any once-Apostolic black millennial like myself who has ever experienced the “limitations” of black Apostolic theology and gravitated to majority-white churches.

### **The “Freedom” in Black Apostolic Theology**

Throughout those four years at Wheaton, I was repeatedly thrown in between two worlds: the white and Evangelical on one hand, the black and Apostolic on the other when I attended my home church in Indianapolis during breaks. By the time I graduated I would have referred to myself as a Trinitarian, although I did not feel the whole Oneness-Trinitarian debate, or concerns over publicly speaking in tongues, or baptismal “formula” mattered as much as I had initially thought. The truth is, although my faith has been forever enriched by the systematic theology to which I was exposed in college, I still find there to be something thoroughly refreshing, elemental, and essential about the more experiential theology with which I was raised. I cannot let go of the idea, for example, that the Spirit can reveal truths to us personally—truths not written in any book and not handed down from the ancient church fathers: things that defy logic.

As this section demonstrates, the “freedom” in black Apostolic theology results from a greater cultural comfort with unknowability and appears prominently in two aspects of the tradition: its emphasis on speaking in tongues (especially glossolalia, which is defined below) and its views of spiritual authority.

Scholarly attention has been directed toward the way black Pentecostal theology is more comfortable with the “inexplicable” than other mainstream Christian theologies. Author of *Blackpentecostal Breath*, Ashon Crawley, demonstrates that “unknowability” was central to the

religious practice of early black adherents of the Pentecostal movement in the United States (214). He explains further that “Blackpentecostalism [in the early Pentecostal era] was not forced to cohere with, adhere to, a set of predetermined formulae, a systematics...the explanation for aesthetic practice emerges through experience” (86). Lived spiritual experience, rather than the more traditionally-supported and more restrictive doctrines that institutional Christianity considered to be orthodox, was the primary source of authority for early black Pentecostal practice. Emphasis on experience as a conduit of spiritual truth is echoed by Estrela Alexander and Albert George Miller, who write that while Black Pentecostal theology may not be “systematic,” it “arose from elements at the center of worship” (Alexander and Miller). Experience, especially that of worship, is a main source of doctrine in the black Pentecostal tradition, of which the black Apostolic church is certainly a part. That lived spiritual experience apart from what white-dominant American Christianity deems orthodox can be a primary informant of black belief creates important freedom.

### **Glossolalia**

The “freedom” in black Apostolic theology figures prominently in the tradition’s emphasis on speaking in tongues. As this study has discussed, Apostolic doctrine holds speaking in tongues to be a normative experience for every believer. Differentiating between the two distinct types of speaking in tongues enables an understanding of the liberative elements of black Apostolic theology. “Glossolalia” is the technical term for tongues that appears as utterances not known as being any natural human language, while “xenolalia” refers to tongues that is speech in a known human language that is simply unknown to the speaker. While I know people who have seen xenolalic tongues in action, all the speaking in tongues I have personally seen in black Apostolic settings (and that I have personally experienced) have been glossolalic. Ashon Crawley demonstrates how glossolalia as opposed to xenolalia was racialized in the early Pentecostal era to be associated with black people. He discusses how Charles Parham, early white Pentecostal leader who criticized the “crude negroisms” he witnessed at the racially-mixed Azuza Street Mission, taught that xenolalia was the only legitimate form of speaking in tongues. Glossolalia, with its gibberish-like utterances, was to Parham nothing more than African-influenced “animal spiritism” (Crawley 211-213).



I recall as a child being surprised when I heard a white person speak in glossolalic tongues for the first time during an inter-church fellowship. Though at the time it was the only type of speaking in tongues I knew of, glossolalia seemed too wild and illogical, involving too much loss of control over one's body for someone of white culture. Crawley discusses the subversive freedom inherent in glossolalia: "Glossolalia retreats from the linguistic system through enunciating and elaborating vocables, aspirating sounded out breath without the need for grammatical structure or rule. Tongue-speech is nothing at all, in all its wondrous manifestation, in glorious plentitude" (222). Glossolalia, a key practice in the black Apostolic church, creates space for deep meaning beyond what is immediately comprehensible. For this reason, once-Apostolics raised in the black Pentecostal church are bound to have a greater sense of God as one who "reveals mysteries" (*English Standard Version*, Dan. 2.28).

### **Spiritual Authority**

In addition to the freedom in black Apostolic theology inherent in its embrace of glossolalic tongues, freedom occurs through the tradition's approach to spiritual authority. The black Apostolic church in general enthusiastically seeks to base its beliefs in the Bible ("Our Beliefs"). In this aspect the denomination aligns with traditional Christian practice ("How Different Christian Traditions"). However, the tradition's great willingness to depart from larger, historically and institutionally-sanctioned Christian doctrines such as that of the Trinity constitutes an additional flexibility in the approach to spiritual authority. The words of early Black Oneness leader and founder of my home church, G.T. Haywood, reflect an emphasis on doctrinal truth received directly from God rather from historical authority:

The word "Trinity" is not found in the Bible from Genesis to Revelation. The term 'three Persons in the Godhead' has no place there. The phrase, 'God the Father, God the Son and God the Holy Ghost,' is unscriptural. Tradition has coined these terms, and thrust them forth into the religious world and hath obscured the glorious vision of the Mighty God, the Everlasting Father, in the Person of Jesus Christ. (qtd. in Alexander and Miller 101)

Haywood's 1923 articulations of the Oneness view of the Godhead celebrate a truth that may be "unknown" in wider Christian (or even in just Pentecostal) circles but is nevertheless wonderful. Elder Morris E. Golder, a PAW historian who was pastor of my home church from 1948-1953, similarly wrote that, "We repudiate and deny that the doctrine of the Trinity is substantiated by the

word of God. It is true that it is a part of the great heritage of what is known as ‘historical Christianity;’ however, Apostolic Pentecostals do not accept all that Christendom has embraced historically” (“Pastoral Administration”; qtd. in Yong and Alexander 117). The black Apostolic church generally does not feel indebted to the authority or dogma of wider “Christian” tradition.

Some may accuse this disregard for the “established” dogma of the Christian church—those doctrines debated at those pre-1000 C.E., Roman-dominated ecumenical councils I had to learn about at Wheaton—as being spurious and ahistorical. I often feel this way toward Apostolic teaching. Having spent significant time in both black Apostolic and white Evangelical contexts tempers this feeling for me, though. I have often found white Evangelical culture, especially that of a more Reformed persuasion, to be annoyingly fond of what Apostolic scholar Talmadge French calls “Evangelical heresy-hunting” (French 19). This phenomenon shows up in YouTube videos with titles like “5 False Teachers in the Church Today” and “Why I Left Insert-Name-of-Hip-Charismatic-Megachurch-with-a-Record-Label-Here.” While I believe detrimental heresies exist and should be acknowledged, this heresy-hunting is problematic when it privileges doctrines of the white Christian institution in complete disregard of social and cultural factors which shape differing theologies—those factors that would make Word of Faith theology especially attractive to black people, for example. Never explicitly but effectively nevertheless, Evangelical heresy-hunting today often propagates content that relegates the black Pentecostal church to how early twentieth century critics of the Pentecostal movement characterized it: as a “fraudulent, low-class cult” (Yong and Alexander 34). In the face of such critiques, the black Apostolic church maintains a persistent, oppositional stance toward historical Christian institutions such as the doctrine of the Trinity. Though my beliefs may no longer align with the Apostolic take on the Trinity, for example, the experience of being raised in a black Apostolic environment that repudiated doctrines taken as a given in larger American Protestant Christianity has made me forever more open to theologies not embraced by the mainstream.

## **Conclusion**

Though I am only once-Apostolic and am not immediately bothered every time Apostolic doctrine is criticized, the freedom to engage in subversive spirituality not endorsed by white institutions is one I believe all once-Apostolic black people, regardless of denominational affiliation, can and should hold dear. Whether through the black Apostolic church’s comfort with

glossolalia or its oppositional stance toward some cherished tenets of Protestant orthodoxy, millennials raised in the black Apostolic tradition necessarily have a broadened sense of theological orthodoxy that can be helpful when moving into new spaces. My generation consumes internet content from a variety of sources just like the GenZers after us, and not every theological argument is contextually informed. Useful for those who move into white or multicultural churches, a black Apostolic background makes it easier to put dogma of the white Christian establishment in conversation with concepts such as systemic racism and cultural difference—concepts I have observed most black millennials around me accept with ease.

## SECTION FOUR: BY AND BY

*...we'll tell the story,  
how we've overcome,  
for we'll understand it better by and by.*

—From “We’ll Understand it Better By and By,” Charles Albert Tindley (1905)

### Introduction

A couple years ago, I participated in a living room focus group designed to gather information about millennial experiences in the U.S. Protestant church. The meeting was held by my friend’s parents, who currently lead the church by grandfather founded after he left pastoring my home church in 2001. While currently nondenominational, the church was previously associated with the Apostolic faith and is majority-black. All ten or so participants in the focus group were black as well.

I was not surprised to hear the main themes us black millennials raised about our experience in churches—topics such as toxic black church culture, lack of education about mental health issues, the effects of generational trauma and abuse, and power struggles between leaders and between generations. Naturally, the conversation reminded me of what I appreciate by contrast about the “white” churches I have attended: elements like the greater sense of structure, intentional community through mechanisms like small groups, streamlined services, and childcare during the main service. As comedian KevOnStage (who was also raised in the black Apostolic church), said in a YouTube video about “white church” that I encountered years ago: “I love the fact that...ain’t no extra. They have cut out all the extra...the Word of God was taught...wan’t no whoopin’ and hollerin’” (“I Like White Church”). As scholar and preacher Rev. Dr. Brianna Parker summarized during a conversation about a 2019 panel discussion on “Preaching to Black Millennials,” “White church seems easier than black church” (“Preaching to Black Millennials”). The personal conversations I have had with once-Apostolic black millennials echo these sentiments about seeming “ease” of white church.

And yet when it comes to black church—and even black Apostolic church, in a sense—I cannot stay away. Though I do not identify with Apostolic doctrine and I have not been seriously interested in attending a black church for years, it seems like my soul every once and a while needs

to return to its “roots.” I cannot help but punctuate sermons at the white-led church I currently attend with “well?” and “Amen.” I can enjoy a two-verse-and-a-bridge song by Bethel Music or Elevation Worship as well as anyone else, but sometimes while doing dishes or driving in the car



Fig. 7. Me participating in a Sunday School Easter program at my home church as a child. From author's personal collection.

what cuts deepest is, “I love Jesus. He’s my Savior. When storms are raging, He’s my shelter. Where He leads me, I will follow. I love Jesus, and He loves me.” As much as I can mentally pick apart a black Apostolic church service, attending one every once and a while now always feelings grounding. There is something about seeing the smile of the evangelist who taught my third grade Sunday School class and whose distinctive voice singing “With what anguish and loss!” from the hymn in “Nailed to the Cross” I can still hear so clearly in my mind (“Nailed to the Cross”).

Returning to the black Apostolic environment forces me to recall my largely good memories of all the formative years I spent knowing that religious environment and none other.

This impulse to “return” to the black Apostolic tradition, even if only in nostalgia or song, is the dynamic that foregrounds the last major duality of focus in *Once Apostolic, Still Black*: for once-Apostolic black millennials who are drawn to multicultural or majority-white churches, black church is both unsatisfactory and difficult to fully leave behind. As this section demonstrates, the inevitability of black church for once-Apostolic black millennials stems from 1. the inextricability of Pentecostalism and blackness in the United States and 2. the importance of the United States black church as a cultural-religious institution whose existence resists white supremacy.

### **Blackness and Pentecostal Expression**

The ties between Pentecostalism and blackness in the United States make it hard for once-Apostolic black millennials who are drawn to non-black, non-Apostolic churches to avoid the black church tradition in its entirety. Pentecostal practice in general, which is characterized by elements such as spirit possession, ecstatic worship, call and response, and the centrality of rhythm, has its roots in African spirituality. Afrocentric scholar Molefi Asante argues that African American slave religion was the product of African spiritual practices translated in the new North American environment, writing that “In the place of drums the African-American substituted hand-

clapping, foot-stomping, head-shaking, body-moving rhythm—all in an attempt to drive the self into further possession, by the Lord” (qtd. in Sanders 6). The religion of African American slaves retained African flavor. Estrela Alexander describes how the white-led camp meetings of the nineteenth century Great Awakenings, which are widely acknowledged as a precursor to the general United States Pentecostal movement of the early twentieth century, exhibited many of the same behaviors (e.g. spirit possession, shouting, jerking) associated with black religion and attracted a sizeable black population for that reason (30). In the 1940s, white anthropologist Melville J. Herskovitz argued that African influence from black slave religion influenced white camp meetings in the South and not the inverse (Alexander 40). Either through direct influence or through trends in black religion, practices associated with the Pentecostalism in the United States in general have historically been associated with black people.

In addition to links between black people and ecstatic worship practices prior to the twentieth century, links between Pentecostalism and blackness in the early twentieth century were abundant. Despite the multiracial composition of the foundational Los Angeles Azusa Street Revival led by William Seymour in 1906, onlookers repeatedly associated the worship practiced by white people and others involved in the Pentecostal movement sparked there with African spirituality. Contemporary secular periodicals likened the practices of the Azusa Street Revival to “heathen” rituals. The Los Angeles Ministerial Association filed a complaint against Seymour’s “negro revival,” which one white fundamentalist pastor at the time described as “a disgusting amalgamation of African voodoo superstition and Caucasian insanity” (qtd. in Alexander 29; Crawley 144). As Amos Yong and Estrela Alexander summarize, “The Azusa Street Mission was a black church to which persons of various ethnic backgrounds came to worship, and from which they went out in ministry and mission” (238). Further evidence of black influence on white Pentecostals in the early twentieth century, contemporary Zora Neale Hurston (1891? -1960) wrote in *The Sanctified Church* that in Pentecostal churches there is:

strong sympathy between the white “saints” and the Negro ones. They attend each other’s meetings frequently, and it is interesting to see the white saint attempting the same rhythms and movements. Often the white preacher preaches the sermon (in the Negro manner) and the Negroes carry on the singing. Even the definite African “Possession” attitudes of dancing mostly on one foot and stumbling about to a loose rhythm is attempted. (qtd. in Alexander and Miller 7)

White Pentecostals “attempted” the practices of their black counterparts. There is still some part of me that is fascinated when I see white Apostolics shouting, jerking, and running in worship; the

practices seem so “black.” KevOnStage comedically addresses the same phenomenon in a YouTube video titled “Are Black and White Praise Breaks Different??” Viewers see what are probably members of a white Apostolic church jumping, shouting, speaking in tongues, and running around the church in ways often associated with black worship (“Are Black and White Praise Breaks Different??”). Whether the ties are acknowledged or not, white Pentecostals in the United States are the heirs of a tradition largely informed by black spiritual practice.

Due to the wide reach of the United States Pentecostal movement, there is hardly a Christian tradition that has not been influenced by it. This makes avoiding black church culture and influence altogether more tricky for once-Apostolic black millennials who prefer non-Apostolic, white or multicultural churches. Estrela Alexander demonstrates that starting in 1960 when Father Dennis Bennett confessed to having received Spirit baptism to his congregation at St. Mark’s Episcopal Church in Van Nuys, California, Pentecostal spirituality spread throughout the Episcopal, Roman Catholic, and mainline Protestant churches over the coming decades (342). The spread of Neo-Pentecostalism in the historically mainline black Baptist or African Methodist Episcopal (AME) churches now means that Pentecostal practices like shouting and dancing are what come to mind when one thinks of “black church” in general (Alexander 355). This spread of Pentecostal influence would also produce the phenomenon of “charismatic” Christianity in all types of churches, giving greater attention to the role of the Holy Spirit in personal devotion and worship without insisting on the practice of speaking in tongues (Alexander 344). In a largely mainline, white Evangelical environment like Wheaton College, my peers used the word “charismatic” when they referred to practices like raising hands in worship and the laying on of hands for healing. In addition to the psychological ties once-Apostolics may have to their background, the spread of Pentecostal influence and the inextricable ties between Pentecostalism and blackness in the United States mean that those who run to a typical multicultural or even white non-denominational church are unlikely to completely escape the influence of black spirituality—even if that black influence is unknown or unrecognized.

The inescapability of black church spirituality has significant consequences for once-Apostolic millennials who gravitate toward white or multicultural non-Apostolic churches. The prevalence of “charismatic” elements or occasional call-and-response in the majority-white nondenominational churches I have attended, at least, creates an environment where I can *almost* but *not really* worship in a way that resembles how I grew up. The people in these majority-white

nondenominational churches may clap their hands but the music has no driving beat. Hands may be raised but they must not stay up for too long. If call-and-response occurs, it must happen predictably. In most such churches I have attended, busting out in tongues from one's seat in the congregation or shouting in the aisles would be culturally out of the question, despite dedicated teaching on the Holy Spirit that may occur in those churches. As someone who was raised in the black Apostolic church but happily tolerates the cultural restrictiveness of multicultural or majority-white, non-Apostolic worship spaces in exchange for the more structured and streamlined experience the whiter spaces provide, I find that even if just psychologically or in song, I have to return to my black Pentecostal roots every once in a while, just to get a taste of the real, unadulterated thing. I imagine this is a shared experience among other once-Apostolic black millennials in a similar position.

### **The Black Church as Cultural-Religious Hub**

In addition to the inseparability of Pentecostalism and blackness in the United States, the status of the United States black church as a cultural-religious institution that resists white supremacy makes it difficult for once-Apostolic millennials drawn to non-black churches to stay away from black church tradition for too long. Scholar Elaine Brown Spencer, herself a member of the black Apostolic church, writes aptly that the black church is both a religious space and a “cultural system for dealing with forms of reality such as racism” (69). Though Brown Spencer's dissertation focuses on the experience of the Black Oneness church in Canada, her observations about the way black churches support resistance to racism apply to African American black churches as well. Especially given the history of plantation religion in the United States being managed by white masters who utilized the Bible to discourage African spirituality and encourage slaves to be obediently accept slavery, the very existence of a black church apart from white surveillance is resistance to white domination (Alexander 38). In addition to the social function black churches have historically played as hubs for the organization of community resistance, Ashon Crawley further discusses how black worship's comfort with shouting and noise constitute a critique of Western thought which privileges “the proper” (151). Like the persistence of African spirituality on plantations away from the eye of white overseers, the persistence of the black church and its black cultural worship practices is an affront to white ethnocentricity and domination. When people leave the black Apostolic church, they are not just leaving a religious tradition; they are



disconnecting from a major mechanism of asserting black self-determination in a society built on white supremacy.

Given the distinct role black churches like black Apostolic congregations play in affirming black worship practice and resisting white domination, it is unsurprising that once-Apostolic black millennials that attend non-Apostolic, majority-white churches would encounter lack of acceptance and racism in those white spaces. In the Jude 3 Project's 2019 discussion on preaching to black millennials, Dr. Charles Goodman discusses what he often tells his black congregants who feel drawn to white churches: "Especially in this new day with Trump administration. Run to that church if you want to. They're not addressing issues. They're supporting someone, whatever's being said. And you're okay with that? No one's addressing that?" Rev. Dr. Brianna Parker humorously responds: "Well, you know, we can all go to white churches until about October, you know, of election season. And then we got to leave, you know, so we don't have no fights, no cussin', no nothing like that" ("Preaching to Black Millennials"). Despite aspects of majority-white churches that may be appealing, such churches remain white-dominant spaces that can easily be hostile to black people. The numerous conversations I have had with fellow black millennials about our negative experiences in white churches reveal an impulse to return to black spaces, even if just temporarily. Once-Apostolic black millennials who leave the black church for majority-white or "multicultural" churches are likely to encounter inhospitable aspects in that new environment that at minimum prompt thought about returning to a black religious space.

## **Conclusion**

For black Christian millennials who were raised in the black Apostolic church but have gravitated to multicultural or majority-churches, the black church environment may be determined to be too longwinded or toxic for regular attendance. Millennial dissatisfaction with the way the black church has handled corruption and mental health issues may contribute to the impulse to leave (J.Mix). Yet psychologically and perhaps even practically, black millennials will be drawn back to the black church. The Pew Research Center's 2019 and 2020 survey of the religious lives of black people in the United States revealed that while sixty-one percent of black respondents believed historically black congregations should "diversify" and sixty-three percent of black respondents believed finding a congregation where most other attendees were also black was "not too important" or "not at all important," sixty percent of respondents still attended a black

congregation (Mohamed, Besheer, et al.). The number of black Protestants that attended black congregations was sixty-seven percent (Mohamed, Besheer, et al.). Despite beliefs about the value of multiracial congregations, something is keeping black people in black congregations. I imagine worship practices and the role of the black church in resisting white supremacy are at least partly causes. Given that I have left the black Apostolic church, recognizing the distinctiveness of black church practices and positionality gives me valuable self-awareness as I process my own experiences in non-black churches. Knowing exactly what I value about the black Apostolic church as well as what I value in a white cultural non-Apostolic church makes it easier to decide when to stick it out and when to go back “home.”

## CONCLUSION

Navigating the process of leaving the black Apostolic tradition in which one was raised for non-Apostolic, multicultural or white-dominant churches is full of dualities. The tradition claims to possess true Christian history, yet the record of the twentieth century is full of racial division that complicated the early Pentecostal narrative that the “color line” was “washed away in the blood” (qtd. in Alexander 26). The emphasis on physical manifestations of the Spirit in black Apostolic churches is both unbalanced and balancing; it gives those raised in the denomination a more concrete understanding of the Holy Spirit than what may be propagated in a white or multicultural non-Apostolic church. Further, while black Apostolic tradition tends to limit contributions from systematic “theology,” its own experiential conception of theology creates freedom to pursue biblical interpretations not endorsed by the white Christian establishment. Lastly, while many once-Apostolic black millennials who are drawn to multicultural or white churches might want to avoid black church, the impact of black spirituality in the United States is such that avoiding the influence of the black church is practically impossible.

Once-Apostolic black Christians in the millennial generation are strategically positioned to understand and embrace the dualities relevant to transitioning to white or multicultural non-Apostolic churches. When we encounter racism and prejudice in non-black churches, we have both an awareness of the systemic racism that may be at work and a religious heritage that has already faced the challenges of integrated churches (“A Call for Accountability”). With Christian millennials being the most-likely generation to tend toward “charismatic” worship forms, once-Apostolic black millennials are especially able to embrace the roots of charismatic worship in Pentecostalism and black spirituality, even as these influences appear outside the traditional black or Pentecostal church (“Christian Millennials”). Millennials’ general belief in the impact of systemic racism affords once-Apostolic black millennials with a nuanced understanding of the ways the white theological institution may privilege ethnocentric theologies (“A Call for Accountability”). In addition, black millennials’ interest in the historic role of the black church in addressing social justice issues deepens the impulse once-Apostolic black millennials may have to return to the black church after they have left it (King). Lastly, given the radical “inclusion” recent times have seen as represented in President Barack Obama, Vice President Kamala Harris, and Judge Ketanji Brown Jackson, it is perhaps unsurprising that once-Apostolic black millennials

would seek to be integrated into white or multicultural churches despite the interpersonal and systemic racism they may encounter there.

I am fascinated by the fact that my grandmother lived the interracial the Pentecostal ideal established at the Azusa Street Revival in 1906. I know my fixation on the interracial past may be a subconscious attempt to justify my impulse to flee the black church for more racially integrated religious spaces. However, as my interview with Nana also illustrated, the interracial “ideal” I always imagined was nowhere near perfect. In the 1940s and 50s, Nana recalls white people leaving Christ Temple to join the local UPCI church—the same church that had turned away a young black man she met who wanted to be baptized. I asked her how she feels whenever she sees that same UPCI church in Indianapolis today. There was a part of me that wanted Nana to fixate on the reprehensibility of the white racism. Her unequivocal denouncement could somehow justify my subconscious feelings of having been “robbed” of a racially integrated religious experience growing up, despite my largely positive experience in the black church. Nana’s actual answer to my question was a lot more complicated, creating space for redemption while recognizing the hurt the “white flight” caused. Nana paused to search for words in this section of the interview more than others, saying:

Well, you have to let the past be the past, and if they’re—you know, I—those who died with that attitude, you know, they’re in the hands of the Lord. I’m not their judge. But you know you wonder, okay. Like I said, they didn’t even want to baptize you in their pool. And, but, you know, as time goes along and young people have different attitudes, they live in their different time. Because a friend of mine... her son goes [to the UPC church]. And he loves it. And he said, “Oh, there’s a lot of black people there now.” And you know, but. [sigh] I don’t know that, at that time, if there were any other integrated churches except Apostolic people.

A reality I cling to, interraciality is the heritage of those raised in the Apostolic church. And yet it for black people in the tradition, the racial dynamics has never *not* been complex. They were complex in the perhaps more integrated early and mid-twentieth century just as they were when black millennials in the Apostolic church were growing up in churches produced by white flight, and racial dynamics are certainly complex for once-Apostolic black millennials who choose to worship in multicultural or white-dominant churches. The factors that would push a black millennial away from the black Apostolic church are multifaceted, and the limited scope of this project prohibit an in-depth explanation of them all.

Possible extensions of this study could explore the experiences of millennials from other racial or ethnic backgrounds, such as Latinx or Asian millennials, who were raised in Pentecostal churches but have gravitated toward different church environments in their adulthood. An exploration of how gender dynamics, heteronormativity, and lack of mental health education in the black Apostolic church may affect millennial experiences in the tradition (and may affect decisions to go elsewhere) is also merited. Another important area for further thought is a question that naturally emerges from this project: is there something particularly “black” about being Apostolic? While my personal experience and preliminary research would lead me to answer “yes,” the topic deserves a more thorough treatment than what the limits of this study allow.

Because racial complexity is inescapable when it comes to church in the United States, I believe encountering racism does not have to be a reason to abandon the ideal of a more racially integrated religious environment for those who feel drawn to it (although racism certainly is a justifiable reason to abandon pursuit of it). One thing that amazes me as I grow older is the power of doing what you want to do and going where you want to go. It creates space. Nana echoed this sentiment at the very end of our interview:

I do envision a day where it will be a more integrated—but to me, it doesn’t matter. You know, people will go wherever you want to go. And I don’t feel that it in any way stops God. That in no way hinders His program. Because you choose to go here, and you choose to go there. Because every man has to know God for himself. And you can’t look around and say, “Well, you know, ain’t no white people here. We can’t worship God.” *No*.

Perhaps the same sentiment applies to those who could look around and say, “ain’t no black people here.” Once-Apostolic black millennials who prefer to attend multicultural or white non-Apostolic churches may need to bounce back and forth between different environments or supplement Sunday religious experiences with learning from outside the pulpit in order to balance their Sunday morning worship preferences with their deeper spiritual sentiments and desire for affirmation as black people. Though this dynamic is complex, I find nothing about it strange. These are simply the contours of being a Christian millennial who is once-Apostolic but still black.

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