

LIBERTY UNIVERSITY SCHOOL OF DIVINITY

Black American Identity Crisis: Culture and Christ

Submitted to Dr. C. Fred Smith

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Thesis Writing

by

Celestine Job

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THESIS APPROVAL SIGNATURE PAGE

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Grader	Date
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Dr. C. Fred Smith, Mentor	Date
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Dr. Edward Martin, Reader	Date
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## ABSTRACT

The purpose of this thesis is a comparative and qualitative study of African American identity and Christian/Spiritual identity. The formation of each identity was presented by examining psychological and sociological, causes of

The case for an African American identity crisis was supported by the psychological and sociological trauma experienced through the African American experience in American. The research showed that the historical effects of slavery and lawful subjection, exclusion from the dominant society indeed cause an identity crisis that has rippling effects even to today.

The Christian identity proved to be the highest form of identity, as it is rooted in the eternal. The spiritual life is essential to a health mental state, which includes formation of identity. By one embracing and being transformed into Christlikeness proved to be the healthiest and most effective identity for self and culture.

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## Chapter 1: Thesis Introduction and About the Thesis

### Introduction

Anyone living in the United States today with uncensored internet connection has some knowledge of the racial tensions, uprisings, and protests that have become a regular theme around the United States. In fact, it has become a common topic of discussion no matter the place, time, or person. There are many people that support these social justice movements and protests in the United States. Black Americans are screaming to be recognized and accepted in a society so they may be valued, find purpose and their identity. It has become apparent that many of the issues that are prevalent today in the United States stem from the identity crisis within the Black community.

It was William Shakespeare that wrote, “To thine own self be true.”<sup>1</sup> To be true to self is to know of one’s identity. Paul Pettit explains that identity is a complicated concept to describe. He states that “identity has visible and invisible elements. The most obvious visible elements that make up our identity include gender and ethnicity, as well as other elements such as temperament, gifts, strengths, weaknesses, and character flaws. But more so than that, identity includes who we have become as a result of the life experiences God has taken us through...our identity filled out by our gifts and abilities indicates what we uniquely contribute.”<sup>2</sup>

Drawing from Paul Pettit’s statement, identity is directly connected to God. Christians look to God to discover their identity. This is expressed in passages of scripture such as Psalm 139:1, 139:13-14, and 16, where it speaks of God knowing an individual even before birth.

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<sup>1</sup>“Hamlet”, accessed June 2020, <https://www.enotes.com/shakespeare-quotes/thine-own-self-true>.

<sup>2</sup> Paul Pettit, *Foundations of Spiritual Formation* (Grand Rapids: Kregel Publications, 2008), 183.

However, this biblical view of discovering identity in God is not held by many African Americans. In fact, more individuals within the African American community draw their identity from race and cultural rather than from a biblical perspective.

The Pew Research Center report shows an overall decline in Christianity in the United States. The Christian share of the population is down and religious “nones” have grown across multiple demographic groups: white people, black people and Hispanics; men and women; in all regions of the country.”<sup>3</sup> The number of Black Americans identifying as Christians has declined. Many Black Americans are identifying themselves based on cultural and racial markers rather than discovering their true identity in Christ, which has contributed to an identity crisis within the Black community.

This thesis is a comparative study of the black racial and cultural identity and Christian identity. The thesis will explore how racial and cultural identity markers contribute to the identity crisis within the Black community. Finally, the thesis will show how the highest form of identity is found in Christ through spiritual formation and spiritual transformation and provide a solution to the identity crisis within the African American community.

#### Statement of the Problem

In today’s racially intense climate, the African American community seems to draw their self-identity from black movements and black culture and race. However, identity formed from culture and race is not the highest form of identity. The majority of African Americans are not fulfilling their purpose and realizing their highest form of identity because they have not discovered their Christian identity.

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<sup>3</sup> “In U.S, Decline of Christianity Continues at Rapid Pace: An update on American’s Changing religious landscape,” accessed June 2020, <http://www.pewresearch.org>.



### Statement of Importance of Problem

This research is important to help identify reasons for current identity crisis within African American community. Black Americans draw their identity primarily from race and culture, and many have neglected to cultivate their identity in Christ. This research will serve as a baseline for Black Christians to understand the identity crisis within the African American community, as well as establishing the importance of revealing how an individual's spiritual/Christian identity is a solution to the identity crisis.

### Statement of Position of the Problem

The researcher's position is that the identity crisis within the Black community can be solved by realizing that the highest form of identity is found in Christ. It is through the spiritual formation and transformation process and relationship with Christ that identity is revealed.

### Research Approach and Methods

The defining of terms is key for a thorough evaluation. This thesis is a comparative qualitative study of existing data and analysis. The thesis will use bodies of research already compiled to support arguments. The researcher will utilize studies, dissertations, theses, panel interviews, scholarly discussion panels, videos, podcast, interviews, books, articles, questionnaires, and other written data from previous research concerning psychological, sociology, spiritual, theological, historical, political, and health reports to conduct a comparative study to show the impact of social constructs, such as race, has on identity formation within the Black community. The thesis will also evaluate the biblical understanding of spiritual transformation and spiritual formation as it pertains to identity.

## Data Collection & Analysis

Data for this thesis will be collected from the following databases: Jerry Falwell Library ProQuest, exproxy database, globe ethics database, and the internet with sites such as Google Scholar, YouTube, Podcast, etc. The data collected from these resources will consist of theses, dissertations, journal articles, interviews, health and psychological studies, research projects, books, and questionnaires, etc. References such as Bible dictionaries, books, and commentaries will be used to present data concerning biblical principles and concepts. The Bible will be utilized to provide scripture references to support the Christian argument. Data will be collected throughout each phase of the thesis, the beginning, middle and conclusion.

Also, written data, articles, books, and teachings will be used for a clear understanding of identity. All the data sources, current and past, will be used to present the concept of Christian identity. All data sources will be used to establish what directly impacts identity formation in Black Christians and Black non-believers.

## Limitations/Delimitations

This thesis is broad in scope. The research addresses the identity crisis and identity formation with the African American community. The primary focus of the thesis is the impact the identity crisis has on those African Americans in the body of Christ. The research is based on scholarly sources as well as biblical scripture. The scholarly sources used in this thesis are a combination of different fields of study, which include sociology and psychology, history, and theology.

The thesis primarily covers the periods of the Antebellum Era to the present day. The thesis will not cover any specific Christian denomination. The primary focus of the thesis is

within the United States of America. The thesis will reference other countries to draw parallels to give a greater understanding of the African American identity crisis. One challenge of the researcher is to stay within the confines of the thesis topic because some topics could very well be a separate thesis. To remedy this, the author will touch briefly on topics such as spiritual formation, spiritual transformation, and the strategy of respectability as they pertain to the thesis. The author is aware there were other strategies used within the African American community, but due to time constraints and access to additional resources, this did not allow for greater details for these topics and strategies. The purpose of the thesis is to show how Christian identity reconciles the identity crisis within the African American Christian.

### Definitions

Acculturation. “Refers to the ways in which members of ethnocultural groups undergo a change following intercultural contact and become involved in the larger society in which they reside.”<sup>4</sup>

American Colonization Society (ACS). “Also known as, emerged in 1816 as a national organization dedicated to promoting the manumission of the enslaved and the settlement of free blacks in West Africa, specifically in the colony of Liberia.”<sup>5</sup>

Christian Identity. Martin Luther who defined Christian identity by focusing on the doctrine of justification and forgiveness. He described Christians as ‘a perfectly free lord of all, subject to none. A Christian is a perfectly dutiful servant of all, subject to all...identity as a Christian comes from...the new relationship with God.’<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Li Han, John W. Berry, Yong Zheng, “The Relationship of Acculturation Strategies to Resilience: The Moderating Impact of Social Support among Qiang Ethnicity following the 2008 Chinese Earthquake,” *PLoS ONE* 11, 10 (2016): e0164484. doi:10.1371/journal.pone.0164484.

<sup>5</sup> “American Colonization Society,” accessed January 2020, [www.blackpast.org/african-american-history/american-colonization-society-1816-1964](http://www.blackpast.org/african-american-history/american-colonization-society-1816-1964).

<sup>6</sup> ShingHyung Seong, “Christian Identity and Community – An Ethical Approach to Martin Luther,” *New Blackfriars* 95,(2015): 324-339, <https://doi-org.exproxy.liberty.edu/10.1111/nbfr.12022>.

Double consciousness. “two-ness that manifests itself culturally.”<sup>7</sup>

Identity. “A complicated concept to describe. It has many elements, some visible, some invisible...is a moving intersection of the inner and outer forces that make me who I am,

...includes who we has become as a result of the life experiences God has taken us through.”<sup>8</sup>

Identification comprises basic cognitive and social processes through which we make sense of and organize our human world. It includes things that go on in our minds as we create a complex multi-dimensional classification of our places in the world as individuals and members of collectives.<sup>9</sup>

National Council of the Colored People (NCCP). NCCP...purpose of improving the character, developing the intelligence, maintaining the rights, and organizing a Union of the Colored people of the Free States.”<sup>10</sup>

New Negro. “Young, educated, post-slavery, modern, culturally sophisticated, and thoroughly middle class...more effectively equipped, the argument went, to combat the mounting injustices that the mass of black people was facing.”<sup>11</sup> “A generational declaration of independence.”<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Patrick S. De Walt, “Discourse of African American/Black Identity: engaging the expanded nigrescence theory with a diasporic consciousness,” *Springer Plus*, 2, 233(2013): <https://doi.org/10.1186/2193-1801-2-23>.

<sup>8</sup> Paul Pettit, *Foundations of Spiritual Formation* (Grad Rapids: Kregel Publications, 2008),181.

<sup>9</sup> Lynn V Monrouxe, “Identity, identification and medical education: why should we care?” *Wiley-Blackwell Country of Publications*, Vol 44, Issue 1. (2010):<https://journals.plos.org/plosone/article?id=10.1371/journal.pone.0164484>.

<sup>10</sup> Leslie M. Alexander, *African or American Black Identity and Political Activism in New York City, 1784 - 1861* (Chicago, Urbana & Springfield: University of Illinois Press, 2008), 132.

<sup>11</sup> Henry Louis Gates Jr, *Stony the Road: Reconstruction, White Supremacy, and the Rise of Jim Crow* (New York: Penguin Random House LLC, 2019),186.

<sup>12</sup> Henry Louis Gates Jr, *Stony the Road: Reconstruction, White Supremacy, and the Rise of Jim Crow* (New York: Penguin Random House LLC, 2019), 222.

Nigrescence theory and the Nigrescence theory expanded (NTE). “Nigrescence Theory presupposes there is not a single form or type of black identity and that a large sample of black adults reveals a broad range of identity orientations, resulting in a classification challenge.”<sup>13</sup>

Spiritual formation. “Is the holistic work of God in a believer’s life whereby systematic change renders the individual continually closer to the image and actions of Jesus Christ...the change or transformation that occurs in the believer’s life happens best in the context of authentic, Christian community and is oriented as service toward God and others.”<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Patrick S. De Walt, “Discourse of African American/Black Identity: engaging the expanded nigrescence theory with a diasporic consciousness, “*Springer Plus*, 2, 233(2013): <https://doi.org/10.1186/2193-1801-2-23>.

<sup>14</sup> Paul Pettit, *Foundations of Spiritual Formation* (Grand Rapids: Kregel Publications, 2008),19.

## Chapter 2- The Formation of Identity of African Descendants

### Introduction

In the simplest form of the word ‘identity’ is “the fact of being who or what a person or thing is.”<sup>15</sup> To discover who an individual is there are invisible attributes of a person’s being that must be revealed. According to Pettit, there are different elements or categories involved in identity development. In fact, there are many theories pertaining to identity, such as the cognitive theorist concept and system theorist concepts. Over the years many theorists have studied the identity of African Americans to set a foundation for understanding the development of the African American identity. These studies are important to have a better understanding of what influences the development of identity.

“Identities are the fundamental based upon which society, independent of the special and unique features of each individual, orders and arranges its members.”<sup>16</sup> A healthy identity is attained by a greater objectivity in reflecting upon oneself and others and by being able to understand and direct one’s life according to self-schemas.”<sup>17</sup> Healthy identity is linked to psychological wellbeing. In fact, studies have shown that “identity involves considering two aspects of the self, the ‘I’ and the ‘me.’”<sup>18</sup> The ‘I’ and the ‘me’ of identity represent different types of identity, or the social me, material me, and the spiritual me. “The material me consists of one’s body, clothes, family, home, and collections. Social me involves how one is seen and responded to by others.”<sup>19</sup> The spiritual me is defined as the true and permanent me. Spiritual

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<sup>15</sup>Dictionary.com, “Identity.”

<sup>16</sup> Duane F. Alwin, et al, “Measuring Religious Identities in Surveys,” *The Public Opinion Quarterly*, 70, no 4(2006): 530-64. <http://jstor.org/stable/4124210>.

<sup>17</sup> Justin Poll and Timothy B. Smith, “The spiritual self: Toward a conceptualization of spiritual identity development,” *Journal of Psychology and Theology*, 31, 2(Summer 20030: ProQuest.

<sup>18</sup> Justin Poll and Timothy B. Smith, “The spiritual self: Toward a conceptualization of spiritual identity development,” *Journal of Psychology and Theology*, 31, 2(Summer 20030: ProQuest.

<sup>19</sup> Justin Poll and Timothy B. Smith, “The spiritual self: Toward a conceptualization of spiritual identity development,” *Journal of Psychology and Theology*, 31, 2(Summer 20030: ProQuest.

identity will be discussed more in chapter 3. Social identities “involves the issue of continuity, whereby particular emergent identities are linked across time.”<sup>20</sup> Early childhood is when most of identity development takes place and remains stable over a lifetime. “It is during this early childhood that religious, sexual and political identities have their roots.”<sup>21</sup> These types of identities fall into the social or material category of identity.

Some of the visible identity markers are those of race and ethnicity. In the United States, the identity markers of race and ethnicity are the primary way in which individuals are categorized. These visible categories are the primary markers that the African-American community uses as identity.”<sup>22</sup> In realizing that the African-American community uses race as their primary identity marker, one must acknowledge that, historically, within the United States this identity marker is associated with oppression.

To understand the identity crisis of Blacks in the United States, it is important to consider the effects of acculturation and the historical events that contributed to the identity crisis. One should also acknowledge that the Black identity in the United States is distinctly different from other Black identities around the world. Patrick S. De Walt referenced the Nigrescence theory stated, “that there is more than one type of Black identity...that great variability exists in the way Black people make meaning of and interpret their social sense of self.”<sup>23</sup> His research notes, basically, that blackness in the US is very different from the forms of blackness or being black in a truly Pan-African sense, which results in a disconnect of Blacks in the United States because of

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<sup>20</sup> Duane F. Alwin, et al, “Measuring Religious Identities in Surveys,” *The Public Opinion Quarterly*, 70, no 4(2006): 530-64. <http://jstor.org/stable/4124210>.

<sup>21</sup> Duane F. Alwin, et al, “Measuring Religious Identities in Surveys,” *The Public Opinion Quarterly*, 70, no 4(2006): 530-64. <http://jstor.org/stable/4124210>.

<sup>22</sup> Donald B. Pope-Davis, et al, “African American Acculturation and Black Racial Identity: A Preliminary Investigation,” *Journal of Multicultural Counseling and Development*, 28 (April 2000): 98-112, [http://doi-prg/ex\[pxu.liberty.edu/10.1002/j.2161-191.2000.tb00610.x](http://doi-prg/ex[pxu.liberty.edu/10.1002/j.2161-191.2000.tb00610.x).

<sup>23</sup> Patrick S. De Walt, “Discourse of African American/Black Identity: engaging the expanded nigrescence theory with a diasporic consciousness,” *Springer Plus*, 2, 233(2013): <https://doi.org/10.1186/2193-1801-2-23>.

the U.S. centered frameworks that are based on U.S. Black Nationalist norms as opposed to those that offer a more globalized perspective.”<sup>24</sup> The disconnection that Walt speaks of is what W.E.B. Du Bois referred to as double consciousness. It is this double consciousness, the two-ness, that contributes to the identity crisis in the African American community.

The NTE suggest that “Black identity development results from a progression through levels of racial consciousness and identification demonstrated in response to political awareness and /or forms of oppression.”<sup>25</sup> The next section will explore the different levels of racial consciousness and oppression that contribute to the African American identity crisis.

### What About Ethnicity

Yeh and Kwang research notes that ethnic identity consist of an internal and external component. “Internal ethnic identity is divided into three dimensions: cognitive, moral, and affective. The cognitive dimension refers to a person's (a) self-images and images of his or her own ethnic group and (b) knowledge of the ethnic group's heritage, history, and values.”<sup>26</sup> External components of identity refer to those elements of an individual that can be seen through cultural and social behaviors. Ethnic language usage and maintaining traditions are a part of the cultural social behaviors that are outwardly observed. In the article ‘The relationship of Acculturation Strategies to Resilience: The moderating Impact of Social Support among Qiang Ethnicity following the 2008 Chinese Earthquake,’ speaks of the successful integration and assimilation of a multi-cultural and multi-ethnic people. The authors state that “there are

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<sup>24</sup> Patrick S. De Walt, “Discourse of African American/Black Identity: engaging the expanded nigrescence theory with a diasporic consciousness,” *Springer Plus*, 2, 233(2013): <https://doi.org/10.1186/2193-1801-2-23>.

<sup>25</sup> Patrick S. De Walt, “In Search of an Authentic African American and/or Black identity: Perspectives of First-Generation U.S. Born Africans Attending a Predominately white Institution,” *Journal of Black Studies*, Vol2, no4 (2011).

<sup>26</sup> Christine J. Yeh and Mary Y. Hwang, Interdependence in Ethnic Identity and Self Implications for Theory and Practice,” *Journal of Counseling and Development*,” 28 (2000): 420-29.



fifty-five ethnicities in China.”<sup>27</sup> The article also speaks of the process that was required for the formation of a healthy identity of a multiethnic people. It is from this article that one can draw a frame of reference for the formation of identity of African Americans concerning ethnicity and healthy integration.

Much like the Qiang people of China, who are comprised of many ethnicities, such is the case of the African Americans. Ethnicity involves cultural practices of a group, special foods, music, and customs that are markers of a person’s ethnic background and contributes to the identity of the individual. John Angus Martin, Joseph Opala and Cynthia Schmidt speak of at least nine nations or different tribes from Africa that participate in the Big Drum Dance. The Big Drum Dance is a festival that celebrates the heritage of the many ethnicity found among the African tribes on the island of Carriacou. Many of the nations or ethnic groups of the Big Drum Dance are of the same origin of the people who were enslaved in mainland America. It is from this point that one can draw a parallel to the difference in the ethnic backgrounds of many Black Americans that were enslaved within the plantation economy in the continental United States.

Specially, there is a connection between these ethnic tribes represented in the Big Drum festival and the Gullah people in South Carolina and Georgia. “Gullah or Geechee, describes a unique group of African Americans descended from enslaved Africans who settled in the Sea Islands and low country of South Carolina, Georgia, Florida and North Carolina.”<sup>28</sup> Leslie M. Alexander states concerning some of the celebrations of African descendants around the year of

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<sup>27</sup> Li Han, John W. Berry, Yong Zheng, “The Relationship of Acculturation Strategies to Resilience: The Moderating Impact of Social Support among Qiang Ethnicity following the 2008 Chinese Earthquake,” *PLoS ONE* 11, 10 (2016): e0164484. doi:10.1371/journal.pone.0164484.

<sup>28</sup> “M. Alpha Bah, Gullah,” University of South Carolina Institute for Southern Studies, Accessed Oct 17, 2020. <https://www.scencyclopedia.org/sce/entries/gullah>.

1809, “that processions incorporated African elements such as marching, drumming, singing in ‘the various languages of Africa’, and displaying colors and banners.’<sup>29</sup>

When comparing celebrations today that represent different ethnicities, such as that found in the Carnival festival, anyone can see that the ethnic element for Black Americans is not represented as it was in the past. Today, during festivals, African Americans do not display elements such as parading using different native languages, dances, and banners. Unlike those on the islands in the West Indies that persevered most of their ethnic identity, which is unique to their native African tribes, Blacks in the United States melded together to form a new African American people built prominently on racial identity.

African American ethnic identity, if one can call it ethnic, is an amalgamation of many different African ethnicities. “African Americans, whose ancestors were victims of U.S. enslavement, the element that constituted the African elements of their identity was reclaimed through the residuals of their cultural traditions retained from Africa, their imaginations, and the practice of myth-making (i.e., folktales, folklore).”<sup>30</sup> How does this contribute to the Black American identity crisis?

“African American children have a more difficult time than White children with having positive feelings about their ethnic identity because the majority’s standards are prevalent in today’s society.”<sup>31</sup> In saying this, one can turn to W.E.B. Du Bois when he speaks of double consciousness for a better understanding. “In the Striving of the Negro People, De Bois...describes double consciousness in the following manner: These profound words were

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<sup>29</sup> Leslie M. Alexander, *African or American Black Identity and Political Activism in New York City, 1784 - 1861* (Chicago, Urbana & Springfield: University of Illinois Press, 2008).

<sup>30</sup> Patrick S. De Walt, “In Search of an Authentic African American and/or Black identity: Perspectives of First-Generation U.S. Born Africans Attending a Predominately white Institution,” *Journal of Black Studies*, Vol2, no4 (2011).

<sup>31</sup> Jas M. Sullivan, et al, *African American Identity: Racial and Cultural dimensions of the black Experience* (Blue Ridge Summit: Lexington Books, 2012), ProQuest Ebook Central.

attributed to one's thought of oneself. Blacks feel their two-ness, an American, and a member of the black community, two souls, two thoughts, two unrecognized strivings, two warring ideals. The phrase has a medical and psychological background."<sup>32</sup> Du Bois recognized that double consciousness was the product of racism and exclusion from the dominant society, and double consciousness "reflects the tension among the self, the world, the soul and nature."<sup>33</sup> It is this two-ness that effects the formation of identity. Why is this important in terms of ethnicity?

"Ethnic identity can influence goals set, govern behavior, serve as a reference point for evaluating oneself... endorse values and behaviors, and help to establish self-understanding."<sup>34</sup> Yeh and Hwang state concerning ethnicity that "due to the contrasting meanings of self and identity in the United States compared with interdependent cultures, trying to understand one's ethnic identity can often lead to identity confusion and crisis."<sup>35</sup> Ethnicity is a major component of one's identity, and the loss of an ethnic background contributes greatly to an identity crisis. African descent in the America loss language, cultural rituals, and history.

Black Americans today have lost much of their ethnic identity due to the institution of slavery, which has a direct impact on the current identity crisis. In fact, the continued desire of Black Americans to know their ethnic- tribal heritage has promoted such businesses as African Ancestry.com. "African Ancestry is the world leader in tracing maternal and paternal lineages of African descent having helped more than 750,000 people re-connect with the roots of their

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<sup>32</sup> Veronica F. Smith-Brown, "Du Bois and double Consciousness: Influence and Original Thoughts," *The Official Journal of the North Carolina Sociological Association*, Vol 12, Iss 2 (Fall/Winter 2014): [www.google scholar.com](http://www.google scholar.com).

<sup>33</sup> Veronica F. Smith-Brown, "Du Bois and double Consciousness: Influence and Original Thoughts," *The Official Journal of the North Carolina Sociological Association*, Vol 12, Iss 2 (Fall/Winter 2014): [www.google scholar.com](http://www.google scholar.com).

<sup>34</sup> Christine J. Yeh and Mary Y. Hwang, Interdependence in Ethnic Identity and Self Implications for Theory and Practice," *Journal of Counseling and Development*," 28 (2000): 420-29.

<sup>35</sup> Christine J. Yeh and Mary Y. Hwang, Interdependence in Ethnic Identity and Self Implications for Theory and Practice," *Journal of Counseling and Development*," 28 (2000): 420-29.

family tree. With the industry's largest and most comprehensive database of over 30,000 indigenous African DNA samples."<sup>36</sup> The continued success and expanding database of African Ancestry.com speaks to Black Americans search for a connection to an ethnic identity.

According to Paul De Walt, "many of the African ancestral traditions were lost or interwoven in some form into the dominant society."<sup>37</sup> This is important to note because it speaks to the two-ness, double consciousness, that has an impact on the identity crisis within the African American community. Ethnic identity is an important aspect of the identity formation process. For Black Americans, the distinction of an ethnic identity marker became almost non-existent and was ultimately replaced by race as the predominate identity marker for African Americans.

Next, the research will explore how racial identity contributes to the identity crisis of the African American. The thesis will evaluate labels, laws, and societal rules that shaped the formation of identity in the African American people.

### The Identity in The Label

The use of labels was a significant part of the political and social systems. Labels were used to shape the identity within the Black community. Labels were used by groups like the American Colonization Society, ACS, to fuel their agenda that Blacks were not American and should not have the rights of citizens. In fact, the ACS purchased what is now present-day Liberia, for the purpose of shipping Blacks in America back to Africa. Labels were tools of hate, used for gaining political and economic advantages by organizations such as the ACS and their supporters. However, this was not the case in the Black community.

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<sup>36</sup> African Ancestry.com.

<sup>37</sup> Patrick S. De Walt, "In Search of an Authentic African American and/or Black identity: Perspectives of First-Generation U.S. Born Africans Attending a Predominately white Institution," *Journal of Black Studies*, Vol 2, no4 (2011).

First, the Black community used labels as a strategic tool to promote unity. They used labels as a part of their naming conventions. An example on this was using ‘African’ in the titles and signage on schools, churches, and other institutions. The ‘African’ title “functioned as an ethnic identifier...serving to define a public identity.”<sup>38</sup> However, this label of unity was used to support claims of disloyalty to the United States and was used as a means to support claims for deportation of African Americans to Africa. “Given the threat represented by the American Colonization Society, most black northerners abandoned use of their standard term of self-reference, ‘African’ suddenly seemed to make a provocative and dangerous statement that black people were not entitled to the rights and freedoms of other Americans-that they were not even a part of America.”<sup>39</sup>

Public debates sparked controversy concerning the use of labels such as signage and titles with ‘African’, and it was the debates that led to the decline of the use of these types of naming conventions. “Many black northerners grew concerned that any professions of African affinities might supply fuel to colonizationists and others who argued that black people had no true place in the nation.”<sup>40</sup> Rael notes, “Uriah Boston, a prominent figure in the black community of Poughkeepsie, New York...expressed concern over the increasingly separatist tone of prominent black abolitionists...urging the colored people to preserve their identity with the African race. He feared that any claim of distinct national identity on the part of black people might lend credence to the propriety and necessity of African colonization.”<sup>41</sup> The decline in the use of ‘African’ was

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<sup>38</sup> Patrick Rael, *Black Identity & Black Protest in the Antebellum North* (Chapel Hill & London: UNC Press, 2002), 90.

<sup>39</sup> Patrick Rael, *Black Identity & Black Protest in the Antebellum North* (Chapel Hill & London: UNC Press, 2002), 90-91.

<sup>40</sup> Patrick Rael, *Black Identity & Black Protest in the Antebellum North* (Chapel Hill & London: UNC Press, 2002), 90.

<sup>41</sup> Patrick Rael, *Black Identity & Black Protest in the Antebellum North* (Chapel Hill & London: UNC Press, 2002), 237.

used strategically for gaining allegiance to African Americans' land of birth. The decision to not use 'African' also signifies losing a dimension of the African identity and cultural connection of their ancestors. Over the course of many decades, African descendants have gone through several labeling categorizations. The labels have a lasting psychological and sociological impact on the formation on the African American identity.

Secondly, the U.S. census used labels such as colored, white, mulatto, etc. These labels carried political and social impact on the Black American identity. Politically, as it pertains to labels of race, "aggregate-level racial identification is consequential for the allocation of political resources and the implementation of racial legislation."<sup>42</sup> This type of legislation for political resource allocation can be seen in the events concerning distribution of land following the civil war. While labels played a significant role in the political area, it also played a more impacting role socially, social-economically, and psychologically within the Black community.

"Votress (1971) theorized that African Americans conformed to three distinct subgroups: Colored, Negro, and Black. These subcategories represented decreasing levels of dependence on White society and culture as the source of self-definition and worth and an increasing degree of identification with Black society and culture."<sup>43</sup> The subgroups are markers in Black American history representing shifts in strategies to achieve acceptability within the dominant culture, as well as to forge a distinct African American identity that stressed 'American'. Votress subcategories are essentially markers of Black progress and are strategies partly created within the Black community, such as the label 'Black', or appropriated by the Black community as

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<sup>42</sup> Lauren D. Davenport, *Politics Beyond Black & White: Biracial Identity and Attitudes in America* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2018), 9.

<sup>43</sup> Christine J. Yeh and Mary Y. Hwang, Interdependence in Ethnic Identity and Self Implications for Theory and Practice," *Journal of Counseling and Development*," 28 (2000): 420-29.

steppingstones into stages of acceptance and inclusion. These subgroups will be referred to as labels throughout the remaining part of this section.

Labels defined individuals and groups of people, regionally and racially. Labels spoke to the expected behaviors, morals, societal class, and projected the image of the group to the dominant society. The most notorious and demeaning labels were those that spoke of the character and behavior of blacks collectively, such as ‘Nigger’.

‘Nigger’ was a derogatory label that carried very negative connotations and it still has ripple effects that are seen in the use of the word today. ‘Nigger’ was a term of disparagement to the greatest degree. “The transformation in what might be termed the ‘N-word complex’ embodied and illustrated broader processes of social change that had great implications-not simply for the controversy over racial names but for the class identities of its participants as well.”<sup>44</sup> As stated earlier, the United States Census used the term ‘colored’ in describing people of African descent. The label ‘negro’ was used in a more respectful manner than it’s more derogatory counterpart, that being the N-word. “While ‘negro’ became a term of neutrality or respect, and its use was acceptable in polite society, ‘nigger’ not only served as a term to denigrate people of African descent but increasingly mark in polite circles those who uttered it as lacking refinement.”<sup>45</sup>

The N-word with the negative, denigrating connotation had expanded beyond the borders of the United States. “A French visitor to the states reported in 1819 that contempt of the poor blacks, or niggers...seems the national sin of America, thus illustrating that ‘nigger’ had become not merely a word peculiar to America but also one dedicated to maligning African-descended

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<sup>44</sup> Patrick Rael, *Black Identity & Black Protest in the Antebellum North* (Chapel Hill & London: UNC Press, 2002), 92.

<sup>45</sup> Patrick Rael, *Black Identity & Black Protest in the Antebellum North* (Chapel Hill & London: UNC Press, 2002), 92.

people.”<sup>46</sup> The N-word was particularly denigrating to African Americans, and it distinguished between social classes in both the Black community and the dominant society.

The class distinguish can be best defined by the behaviors, economics and living conditions of people within a community. Classism was found within the Black community and the dominant society. An example of the intercommunity classist attitude can be seen in a statement by Alan Locke. “Alan Locke noted with brutal frankness in a letter to his mother about his African American Harvard classmates. ...All together about 9 in one house. He took me right up into the filthy bedroom and there were 5 niggers, all Harvard men...They are not fit for company even if they are energetic and plodding fellows. I’m not used to that class.”<sup>47</sup> Why is this important? Because it shows a shift in a part of the black community that viewed itself separate from the whole of society, as well as divided amongst themselves. This too contributes to the identity crisis of the black community. In fact, because of this type of inter-classism, it helped to form the persona of the ‘new-negro’.

From the 18th century to the mid-20th century, ‘negro’ (later capitalized) was considered the correct and proper term for African Americans. It fell out of favor by the 1970s in the United States”<sup>48</sup> ‘Negro’...came to be extolled as the polite alternative to a word increasingly deemed offensive in refined society,”<sup>49</sup> that is ‘Nigger’. However, in the Antebellum North the label ‘Negro’ was not a suitable alternative, especially to the progress of Blacks in America. “For a self-styled respectable northern black elite, the shady history of the N-word complex rendered

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<sup>46</sup> Patrick Rael, *Black Identity & Black Protest in the Antebellum North* (Chapel Hill & London: UNC Press, 2002), 93.

<sup>47</sup> Henry Louis Gates Jr, *Stony the Road: Reconstruction, White Supremacy, and the Rise of Jim Crow* (New York: Penguin Random House LLC, 2019), 204-205.

<sup>48</sup> “Negro (the word) a brief history,” AAREG, accessed 8 April 2021, <http://aaregistry.org/story/negro-the-word-a-history/>.

<sup>49</sup> Patrick Rael, *Black Identity & Black Protest in the Antebellum North* (Chapel Hill & London: UNC Press, 2002), 93.



even ‘negro’ a poor candidate for what black activists needed: a term for the race that was both common yet unsullied by degrading imputations and which expressed their universalism, their Pan-Africanism, and their class aspirations.”<sup>50</sup> During this period in history, ‘Colored’ was the preferred label. However, the label ‘negro’ was not always viewed as negative and gain acceptance. In fact,” Colored was the preferred term for black Americans until W.E.B. Du Bois, following the lead of Booker T. Washington, advocated for a switch to Negro in the 1920s.”<sup>51</sup> Even though W.E.B. DuBois and Black leaders pushed the use of the label ‘Negro’, the label did not affect some organizations such as the NAACP, that continued to use the label ‘colored’ in title. “The NAACP, founded in 1909, declined to change its name during the DuBois revolution but did stop using colored in all other contexts.”<sup>52</sup> In the last century, the use of the term ‘Negro’ was acceptable until the Black power movement of the 1960s. “It started its decline in 1966 and was totally uncouth by the mid-1980s. The turning point came when Stokely Carmichael coined the phrase black power at a 1966 rally in Mississippi.”<sup>53</sup> ‘Negro’ dictated how Blacks were treated socially, but also the connotation of the label manifested in behaviors within the Black communities, which aid in shaping the Black identity.

Colored. Originally, the label ‘Colored’ was “used solely to describe African-Americans. In the late 20th century, the term “person of color” was adopted as a preferable replacement to non-white.”<sup>54</sup> The label ‘Colored’ or ‘people of color’ was first used in the French Islands in the

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<sup>50</sup> Patrick Rael, *Black Identity & Black Protest in the Antebellum North* (Chapel Hill & London: UNC Press, 2002), 99.

<sup>51</sup> Brian Palmer, “When did the Word Negro Become Taboo?,” Jan 11, 2010, Slate, <https://slate.com/news-and-politics/2010/01>.

<sup>52</sup> Brian Palmer, “When did the Word Negro Become Taboo,” Jan 11, 2010, Slate, <https://slate.com/news-and-politics/2010/01>.

<sup>53</sup> Brian Palmer, “When did the Word Negro Become Taboo?,” Jan 11, 2010, Slate, <https://slate.com/news-and-politics/2010/01>.

<sup>54</sup> Yolanda Moses, “Is the Term ‘People of Color’ Acceptable in This Day and Age?,” *Sapiens: Anthropology Magazine*, 7 Dec 2016. <https://www.sapiens.org/column/race/people-of-color>.

Caribbean. However, Blacks in the United States adopted the label so that it would include all people of African descent, whether free or slave, light or dark, and with no consideration of social status. “Far from abandoning a self-conscious affinity with Africa...’people of color’ constituted an impulse toward racial unity throughout the diaspora...the transition from “African to “colored” did not sacrifice racial unity on the altar of national loyalty.”<sup>55</sup> The term ‘colored’ was “free of derision and it had a more respectable history of usage.”<sup>56</sup> ‘Colored’ was a transitional shift in self-perception in the Black community. This shift signified a more positive self-perception and attitude that impacted the Black identity. The label ‘Colored’ shifted the Black community towards a more independent state of mind, lifted the lowest to the most elite to a more respectable status among their own community, and lessened the negative social behaviors launched by the dominant society towards the Black community, even though social injustice and inequality continued.

‘Black’ promoted unity and empowerment in the Black community. The ‘Black Power period’ clear delineation from prior impositions that promoted senses of inferiority, instead for purposes of empowerment.”<sup>57</sup> During this period of Black empowerment, black consciousness was at the forefront of thought in the Black community. Black consciousness could be seen in all aspects of society to include music, print imagery, and political advancements that led to voting rights and the Civil Rights Act of 1964. According to Davenport, “these movements, which sought to politicize group goals and defend against racial oppression, fostered minority solidarity. Racial identification became more than an objective statement affirming one’s

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<sup>55</sup> Patrick Rael, *Black Identity & Black Protest in the Antebellum North* (Chapel Hill & London: UNC Press, 2002), 106.

<sup>56</sup> Patrick Rael, *Black Identity & Black Protest in the Antebellum North* (Chapel Hill & London: UNC Press, 2002).

<sup>57</sup> Patrick S. De Walt, “Discourse of African American/Black Identity: engaging the expanded nigrescence theory with a diasporic consciousness,” *Springer Plus*, 2, 233(2013): <https://doi.org/10.1186/2193-1801-2-23>.

background...declaration of group attachment.”<sup>58</sup> It was ‘Black consciousness’ that shifted the African American community toward independences, more freedom, a conscious awakening and a sense of African pride, yet distinctly American. It was in this period that the African American community seemed to be less depended on the dominant culture and embraced what they knew of their racial, socially, and politically identity. “In 1988, after the black power movement had itself faded, many leaders decided another semantic change was required. Jesse Jackson led the push toward African American.”<sup>59</sup>

The label ‘new-negro’ can best be associated with W.E.B. Du Bois. It was during the 1920s and the Harlem Renaissance era that the ‘new-negro’ emerged. The characteristics Du Bois used to describe the ‘new-negro’ was the opposite of the ‘old-negro’. The ‘new negro’ was younger, educated and better equipped to fight the injustices of the Black community. The new negro was more progressive, which was not the perception of the so-called ‘old negro’, which was mostly associated with the label ‘nigger’. No matter old or new, these labels were used to project an image of Blacks in America. In essence, the ‘new negro’ was primarily to dispel the harmful and hateful images and thoughts that the dominant culture had projected concerning Blacks in America. “Du Bois’s Talented Tenth, his New Negroes, were fiercely engaged in a battle over interpretation, fighting back against the onslaught of popular images that rendered black human beings as things, as beasts.”<sup>60</sup> Why is this important to dispel the imaging of labels? “Based on a label, certain behaviors associated with a race is expected and enacted...people treat

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<sup>58</sup> Lauren D. Davenport, *Politics Beyond Black & White: Biracial Identity and Attitudes in America* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2018), 29.

<sup>59</sup> Brian Palmer, “When did the Word Negro Become Taboo?,” Jan 11, 2010, Slate, <https://slate.com/news-and-politics/2010/01>.

<sup>60</sup> Henry Louis Gates Jr, *Stony the Road: Reconstruction, White Supremacy, and the Rise of Jim Crow* (New York: Penguin Random House LLC, 2019), 200.

others in a specific way and expect certain behavior ...based on assigned racial identity.”<sup>61</sup>

Labels shaped the behaviors of the African American community and labels became engrained in the minds of the African descendant, which played a major role in shaping African American's self-perception and identity. The self-perception and behaviors are now almost exclusively associated with the identity of African Americans.

### **Section Conclusion**

Labels change over time from acceptable to unacceptable. The Black American labels changed as the self-perception and strategies of the Black American community changed. Labels such as 'negro' that was once acceptable but later would become synonymous with self-identification and images of a vulgar and denigrated people, because of the history of the term, became unacceptable. 'Colored people' or 'people of color' invoked a sense of unity or oneness, which is a major element of acculturation and identity. Blacks in America, especially during the civil rights era, invoked empowerment and pride through the label of 'Black'. Labels determine how blacks interacted, internally, in the Black community and with the dominant society. Labels, verbal or expressed through images, contributed to the shaping of the political and social identity of African Americans. Labels created images that defined African Americans, as well as attributed to the behavior and treatment of African Americans. Labels were an intricate part of the political and social agenda, structure, and advantages of the dominant society. The next sections will explore the political and social aspects of identity and the impact both had on the identity crisis of the African American.

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<sup>61</sup> Jaco Beyers, "Reconstructing black identity: The Black Panther, Frantz Fanon and Achilles Mbembe in conversation," *Teologiese Studies/Theological Studies*, 75, 4. <https://doi.org/10.4102/htsv75i4.5469>.

## What About Race and The Political System

Janet Helms defined race as a “sociopolitical term, which does not distinguish between true biological differences, but classifies people according to sociopolitical and economic categories, where membership is determined by phenotypic characteristics such as skin color.”<sup>62</sup> This statement of race is particularly true concerning African Americans, who were the victims of the sociopolitical and economic system due to skin color that defined a race of people within the United States. Helms says, concerning race, “it comes out of a history of assigning Native Americans and then people of African decent into conditions of servitude, and the basis for doing that was skin color...but that doesn’t necessarily have any implications for their behavior. But we tend to generalize from skin color to behavior. So, people think that if you are white that must mean that you are superior in terms of your behavior”<sup>63</sup> This is important because of the behavioral implications that caused mistreatment and negative perceptions of the African American.

“The racial identity markers that have been historically created within the United States carry with them many layers of oppression and... the markers that are used to identify African people still carry elements of the past for many reasons that today still need to be completely and honestly addressed.”<sup>64</sup> The Black American identity was shaped by many layers of oppression, to include centuries of lawful subjugation/Jim Crow and. The racial impact of such laws and subjugation had a lasting impact on the African American identity that can be seen today. “Race’s significance is derived from social and economic forces. But at their core, racial

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<sup>62</sup> Donald B. Pope-Davis, et al, “African American Acculturation and Black Racial Identity: A Preliminary Investigation,” *Journal of Multicultural Counseling and Development*, 28 (April 2000): 98-112, [http://doi-prg/ex\[rpxu.liberty.edu/10.1002/j.2161-191.2000.tb00610.x](http://doi-prg/ex[rpxu.liberty.edu/10.1002/j.2161-191.2000.tb00610.x).

<sup>63</sup> Janet E. Helms and Allen E. Ivey, “A Race Is A Nice Thing to Have.”

<sup>64</sup> Patrick S. De Walt, “In Search of an Authentic African American and/or Black identity: Perspectives of First-Generation U.S. Born Africans Attending a Predominately white Institution,” *Journal of Black Studies*, Vol2, no4 (2011).

categories are political constructions that have been carefully regulated by state and federal laws.”<sup>65</sup>

One can trace the political impact on the Black American identity back to the Antebellum Era. During the Antebellum era, people of African descent were deemed inferior and not viewed as human, which can be seen in the laws, policies, and lack of representation at the state and federal levels. “Racial classification has been controversial since the drafting of the U.S. Constitution, when the framers sharply disagreed as to how slaves should be enumerated for the purposes of white political representation.”<sup>66</sup> To resolve the disagreement of representation between the North and South, during the framing of the Constitution, the North opposed slavery and the South insisted that slaves be included to increase southern representation in Congress. This led to the ‘Three-Fifths Compromise’, which “sanctioned the second-class status of enslaved Blacks.”<sup>67</sup> Why is this important to the African American identity? It establishes the thought and agenda of the dominant society, and it supports the research of maltreatment, politically and socially, because of lack of political representation and citizenship.

During the Antebellum era the requirements for citizenship was established, particularly additions to the Naturalization Act of 1790. The Naturalization Act “established the explicitly racial nature of citizenship, ...he or she must be a free white person...of good character.”<sup>68</sup> The Naturalization Act denied Blacks, free or enslaved, from seeking citizenship. During this era, Blacks, especially free blacks, strived to establish a political identity which included citizenship

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<sup>65</sup> Lauren D. Davenport, *Politics Beyond Black & White: Biracial Identity and Attitudes in America* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2018).

<sup>66</sup> Lauren D. Davenport, *Politics Beyond Black & White: Biracial Identity and Attitudes in America* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2018), 22.

<sup>67</sup> Lauren D. Davenport, *Politics Beyond Black & White: Biracial Identity and Attitudes in America* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2018), 23.

<sup>68</sup> Lauren D. Davenport, *Politics Beyond Black & White: Biracial Identity and Attitudes in America* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2018), 23.

and all the privileges of any citizen to include voting rights and the basic human right of freedom. When it came to the Black public identity, “Black spokespersons built a concept of blackness constructed for the very purpose of arguing for their universal freedom before a hostile white public.”<sup>69</sup> Blacks during this period argued and protested from the primary tenets of the Constitution following the Revolutionary War, specifically, freedom and Christian values, and “The Fourth of July provided prime opportunities to expose the hypocrisies of the slaveholding republic.”<sup>70</sup>

In his 1853 Independence Day speech, Frederick Douglass expressed the major thought of Blacks concerning the political aspect of celebrating the 4th of July, which he called the celebration of liberty hypocritical and a mockery. The ‘Weekly Anglo-African Newspaper printed that, “The people generally do not understand why one should celebrate a day that ...brought freedom to the whites and slavery to the colored people.”<sup>71</sup> It was from this political backdrop of hostility, inhuman treatment, and little to no representation that Blacks formed their political identity. The Black American political identity was geared towards gaining citizenship and all the benefits of being an American citizen. How was the Black political identity formed?

The Black political identity leaned heavily on the strategy of respectability. “The politics of respectability stressed the embrace of white Victorian middle-class social and moral values...and they were careful to speak in standard English as opposed to black dialect.”<sup>72</sup> This strategy of respectability created an identity that was used as an attempt to achieve political

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<sup>69</sup> Patrick Rael, *Black Identity & Black Protest in the Antebellum North* (Chapel Hill & London: UNC Press, 2002).

<sup>70</sup> Patrick Rael, *Black Identity & Black Protest in the Antebellum North* (Chapel Hill & London: UNC Press, 2002), 78.

<sup>71</sup> Patrick Rael, *Black Identity & Black Protest in the Antebellum North* (Chapel Hill & London: UNC Press, 2002), 78.

<sup>72</sup> Henry Louis Gates Jr, *Stony the Road: Reconstruction, White Supremacy, and the Rise of Jim Crow* (New York: Penguin Random House LLC, 2019), 194.

advancements and citizenship. “Aware of the public attention that emancipation brought on the Black community, organizing committee likely wanted to prove that Black people could conduct themselves in an appropriate fashion.”<sup>73</sup> The strategy of respectability created an identity within the black community that also contributes to the African American identity crisis, especially concerning behaviors and mindsets that were based on a culture that was different from their African heritage. In fact, one can see the formation of the double consciousness in the African American community. The strategy of respectability was not as effective as the Black leaders had hoped. “Some white Americans lacked a sincere belief in the principles they claimed to value; others adhered to rival versions of them, versions that rationalized the enslavement of their brothers and sisters and the marginalization of those legally but not fully free.”<sup>74</sup>

Blacks recognized that image mattered, and “that through respectable behavior, they could advance the cause of abolition and gain citizenship.”<sup>75</sup> As apart of this political identity and strategy, Blacks sought representation and voting rights; however, many of their petitions and conventions did not produce any positive advancements, except for a few Blacks who gained some rights; however, those Blacks with rights were met with a lot of political opposition. There were many laws passed to denied citizen rights to Black Americans. An example of the laws can be found in states such as in New York, where “Judges and legislators, on the federal and state levels, dismantled black rights in a number of overlapping ways...United States v. Reese (1876),

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<sup>73</sup> Lauren D. Davenport, *Politics Beyond Black & White: Biracial Identity and Attitudes in America* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2018), 55.

<sup>74</sup> Patrick Rael, *Black Identity & Black Protest in the Antebellum North* (Chapel Hill & London: UNC Press, 2002), 285.

<sup>75</sup> Lauren D. Davenport, *Politics Beyond Black & White: Biracial Identity and Attitudes in America* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2018), 55.



the court struck down key sections of the Enforcement Act of May 1870, which had attempted to outlaw any interference with a citizen's voting rights.”<sup>76</sup>

It was shortly after the civil war, the freedman, especially in New York, following the National Convention of Colored Men, made land ownership a priority. It was during this time that Black leaders believed the federal government would support their quest for full citizenship, as well as landownership. However, laws were passed that tied landownership to voting rights and, ultimately, effected representation of Blacks at the state and federal level. After the civil war “Sherman issued Special Field Order No 15, which proclaimed lands in costal South Carolina and Georgia reserved and set apart for the settlement of the negroes now made free by acts of war and the proclamation of the President of the United States.”<sup>77</sup> The land transference was never realized because in the fall of 1865 Andrew Johnson reversed plans for land redistribution, and free Blacks never obtained landownership of the land that they and their ancestors had worked for many decades by way of slavery.

Other examples of laws that impacted the Black political identity include the “Civil Rights Act of 1875, which had band racial discrimination in the access to all manner of services and public accommodation.” Other cases include *United States v. Reese*, as well as “*United States v. Harris* (1883), where “the court struck down a key section of the Ku Klux Klan Act of 1871, ruling that the Thirteenth and Fourteenth Amendments did not allow Congress to punish acts of private persons, only the actions of the states.”<sup>78</sup> In the Jim Crow era, the restrictions and lawful subjugation had a profound effect on the mindset and behaviors of the Black community.

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<sup>76</sup> Henry Louis Gates Jr, *Stony the Road: Reconstruction, White Supremacy, and the Rise of Jim Crow* (New York: Penguin Random House LLC, 2019), 31.

<sup>77</sup> Henry Louis Gates Jr, *Stony the Road: Reconstruction, White Supremacy, and the Rise of Jim Crow* (New York: Penguin Random House LLC, 2019), 30.

<sup>78</sup> Henry Louis Gates Jr, *Stony the Road: Reconstruction, White Supremacy, and the Rise of Jim Crow* (New York: Penguin Random House LLC, 2019), 31.

Jim Crow or the Black Codes were the legitimization of racism towards Blacks. “Black codes were restrictive laws designed to limit the freedom of African Americans and ensure their availability as a cheap labor force after slavery was abolished during the Civil War.”<sup>79</sup>

Jonathan Scott Holloway states concerning Jim Crow, “one develops a very clear picture of the processes of racial formation, the effect of systemic racial discrimination, and, importantly, the functional and healthy decency of blacks and their desire to enjoy the full fruits of U.S. citizenship.”<sup>80</sup> The Black community began to lose their African heritage, in name, ritual, and the way in which they behaved, as a major consequence in seeking citizenship and basic human rights in America. Why is this important to the African American identity crisis?

The political system helped shape the way in which Blacks viewed themselves and behaved. Behavior is a primary component of identity and as Blacks began to behave differently from their normal way of life, especially with regards to restrictions that were established during Jim Crow and strategies deployed within the Black community for acceptance. Politically, African Americans did not have a political voice until the reconstruction era. However, many laws still placed restrictions on African Americans and the effects of the political system dictated major aspects of Black American life. It is the behavioral aspect of everyday life that inevitably impacted the social identity of the Black community. The next section will examine the African American identity crisis from a social aspect.

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<sup>79</sup> History.com, “Black Codes.”

<sup>80</sup> Jonathan Scott Holloway, *Jim Crow Wisdom: Memory & Identity in Black America since 1940* (Chapel Hill: UNC Press), 25.

## What About the Social Impact on Identity?

Social defined by Merriam-Webster is “relating to human society, the interaction of the individual and the group, or the welfare of human beings as members of society social institutions and tending to form cooperative and interdependent relationships with others.”<sup>81</sup> The definition points to the importance of human interaction, collectively and institutional, as it pertains to the impact, negative or positive, of identity development within the African American community.

The article by Han, Berry, and Zheng on acculturation is a good frame of reference for this section. The article states that social support is part of a healthy acculturation strategy and positive psychology. “Social support that is the perceived availability of resources provided by government, organization, family friends and peers that assist the person in everyday activities.”<sup>82</sup> When it comes to identity development in the African American community, it is important to see how institutions, government and schools, played an important role in the formation of identity within the African American community.

### **Social Institutions**

Institutional support is an important component of acculturation; however, this type of support was not extended to African Americans. In the case for the government, it was during the political identity section, which established that many laws denied full citizenship, proper political representation, and basic human rights. The government institution, through laws, dictated the treatment inflicted upon African descendants at the state and federal level. While

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<sup>81</sup> [www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary](http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary), “Social”.

<sup>82</sup> Li Han, John W. Berry, Yong Zheng, “The Relationship of Acculturation Strategies to Resilience: The Moderating Impact of Social Support among Qiang Ethnicity following the 2008 Chinese Earthquake,” *PLoS ONE* 11, 10 (2016): e0164484. doi:10.1371/journal.pone.0164484.

lack of state and federal support had an impact on the social identity of Blacks, it was more so at the local levels where social institutions significantly shaped the social identity of Blacks.

African Americans relied on collective funds from within their community to build social institutions. This can be seen in the development of schools, associations, churches, and social societies. Even though the African Americans lived largely in poverty and inequality, the institutions that the Black community built were a symbol of pride and liberty. However, this was not the perspective of the dominant society. In fact, many of the black institutions were met with resistance and hatred. “Displeased with the growing number of Black people and institutions, Whites mercilessly attacked Black establishments...churches, in particular, were the most vulnerable.”<sup>83</sup> Many of the institutions that were built functioned as multipurpose centers, especially the church, which will be discussed in the last section of the chapter.

Some of the institutions in the black community were schools, societies, and theaters. The schools in the Black community had continued unwanted oversight by Whites. “Yet despite the school’s growth, Black leaders faced a challenging obstacle; it was still controlled by the White-dominated Manumission Society.”<sup>84</sup> The support received from the White community was limited and it did not benefit the growth or independence of the Black community. In fact, most times the support from the White community came with unwanted control and degrading treatment. Leslie Alexander states, “As the economic struggles among the African Society and the religious denominations attest, financial distress routinely prevented organizations from achieving the independence they desired.”<sup>85</sup>

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<sup>83</sup> Leslie M. Alexander, *African or American Black Identity and Political Activism in New York City, 1784 - 1861* (Chicago, Urbana & Springfield: University of Illinois Press, 2008), 31.

<sup>84</sup> Leslie M. Alexander, *African or American Black Identity and Political Activism in New York City, 1784 - 1861* (Chicago, Urbana & Springfield: University of Illinois Press, 2008), 44.

<sup>85</sup> Leslie M. Alexander, *African or American Black Identity and Political Activism in New York City, 1784 - 1861* (Chicago, Urbana & Springfield: University of Illinois Press, 2008), 13.

Theaters were an important fixture of the Black social community. Blacks could go to the theaters and socialize and interact freely. Theaters represented a safe space where Blacks could be themselves with little threat of harm. However, “Whites increasingly viewed it as a statement of black social and political equality.”<sup>86</sup> In 1822, a White mob stormed a prominent black theater and destroyed it because of fear of the increasing number of Black patrons. It was evident to the White community that the theaters were “evidence that Blacks were trying to create something permanent.”<sup>87</sup> This type of behavior of destruction, rioting, and intimidation would continue well through the Jim Crow era. Why is this important? “Identity and memory are intertwined”<sup>88</sup> The memory of violent attacks coupled with a sense of non-permanency all contribute to the formation of the Black identity and the identity crisis within the African American community.

There were other associations that pushed for equality and better social conditions within the Black community. While there was little government support, especially when it came to relocating those freed from the system of slavery, one early society that offered support was the African Society for Mutual Relief or the African Society. The African Society pushed for incorporation in a time where racism was open and violent, and blacks still had not secure citizenship. The pursuit of incorporation was to establish permanency within America. It was the societies in the Black community that informed the dominant society of the Black thoughts and concerns, as well as to help project a more accurate image of the Black community. “The African

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<sup>86</sup> Leslie M. Alexander, *African or American Black Identity and Political Activism in New York City, 1784 - 1861* (Chicago, Urbana & Springfield: University of Illinois Press, 2008), 32.

<sup>87</sup> Leslie M. Alexander, *African or American Black Identity and Political Activism in New York City, 1784 - 1861* (Chicago, Urbana & Springfield: University of Illinois Press, 2008), 32.

<sup>88</sup> Jonathan Scott Holloway, *Jim Crow Wisdom: Memory & Identity in Black America since 1940* (Chapel Hill: UNC Press).

Society's social and economic endeavors, racial solidarity was the organizations' motivating ideology."<sup>89</sup> Why is important for the Black social identity?

It goes back to a healthy and successful acculturation process. If every advancement is met with violence and destruction, the continued theme of poverty and inequality becomes a part of the African American identity, and a stigma. "One of the key points about a stigma...it assumes a larger role than simply being one of a number of characteristics an individual may bear. It is ... an identity-defining mark, one that the processes of social interaction and labeling make central to the designation of who or what someone is."<sup>90</sup> Jonathan Scott Holloway says, "that the Negro's conduct, his personality, his culture, his entire life flow naturally and inevitably out of the conditions imposed upon him by white America."<sup>91</sup> The treatment imposed on the Black community formed stigmas concerning poverty, race, permanency, and humanity, all of which impact the identity formation of African Americans.

By not fully realizing the institutional support from the dominant society, African Americans can never achieve a healthy acculturation process. Because of the treatment and the traumatic memories, stigmas developed upon the African American people. The stigmas are perpetuated by labels, language, laws, imagery, and treatment. The Black traumatic experience, with memories and stigmas, speak directly to the identity crisis within the African American community.

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<sup>89</sup> Leslie M. Alexander, *African or American Black Identity and Political Activism in New York City, 1784 - 1861* (Chicago, Urbana & Springfield: University of Illinois Press, 2008), 49.

<sup>90</sup>David G. Horrell, David G, "The Label.... 1 Peter 4:16 and the Formation of Christian Identity," *Journal of Biblical Literature*, Vol 126, Iss 2 (Summer 2007):ProQuest Central.

<sup>91</sup> Jonathan Scott Holloway, *Jim Crow Wisdom: Memory & Identity in Black America since 1940* (Chapel Hill: UNC Press), 34.

“Religion and religious institutions have played a principal role in the construction of identity for particular racial and ethnic communities.”<sup>92</sup> Before African descendants were permitted to read, God was presented to them through the eyes and words of their oppressors. Sermons preached to Blacks were distorted and were geared to keep African descendants in bondage with little to no resistance. What about the Black church?

The church was the center of the community providing spiritual, education, economic support, and meeting venues for political and social-economic matters. “In the African American community, the Baptist church has been an integral component of political culture and instrumental in forging beliefs about black group identity, interests, and leadership.”<sup>93</sup> The church was sought after as a place of independence and free from oversight within the Black community. “The fight for independence also influenced religious institutions during this period, because Black churches continued to be powerful strongholds and community centers in New York City.”<sup>94</sup> “For Black Methodist, independence meant the establishment of a self-sufficient institution...but entirely of their own creation.”<sup>95</sup>

The focus in the Black church was not primarily on spiritual formation or transformation which fosters a relationship with Christ. The religious institutions also promoted the racial, social, and political agenda of the Black community, essentially, to gain civil rights for Blacks. This perspective and agenda are still at play today, as many Black Christians are still experiencing the ripple effects of the institution and teachings of the church of the past.

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<sup>92</sup> Lauren D. Davenport, *Politics Beyond Black & White: Biracial Identity and Attitudes in America* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2018), 58.

<sup>93</sup> Lauren D. Davenport, *Politics Beyond Black & White: Biracial Identity and Attitudes in America* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2018), 59.

<sup>94</sup> Leslie M. Alexander, *African or American Black Identity and Political Activism in New York City, 1784 - 1861* (Chicago, Urbana & Springfield: University of Illinois Press, 2008), 45.

<sup>95</sup> Leslie M. Alexander, *African or American Black Identity and Political Activism in New York City, 1784 - 1861* (Chicago, Urbana & Springfield: University of Illinois Press, 2008), 11.

## Chapter Conclusion

The primary objective of this chapter was to identify what contributes to the Black identity crisis in the United States. The chapter pointed to several identity markers that shaped the African American identity, which included race as the primary identity marker within the U.S. Race has shaped every facet of the Black American life, and “it comes out of a history of assigning Native Americans and then people of African descent into conditions of servitude, and the basis for doing that was skin color...but that doesn’t necessarily have any implications for their behavior. But we tend to generalize from skin color to behavior. So, people think that if you are white that must mean that you are superior in terms of your behavior”<sup>96</sup>

The chapter expressed the importance of ethnicity as it pertains to identity formation. The lack of ethnicity for Blacks in America contributes to the identity crisis. “Due to the contrasting meanings of self and identity in the United States compared with interdependent cultures, trying to understand one's ethnic identity can often lead to identity confusion and crisis.”<sup>97</sup>

The chapter also introduced matters concerning the sociological and psychological trauma of the Black community. The chapter stated how trauma shaped the Black identity in the United States. Keeping in mind the words of Jonathan Holloway, “Memory and identity have always been intertwined.”<sup>98</sup> These words express that “psychological well-being is also linked to health identity in adults.”<sup>99</sup> The chapter pointed out the major role labels, whether verbal or images, had on shaping the social and political identity of African Americans. Labels, especially derogatory labels, shaped how Blacks were treated and viewed within their own community, as

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<sup>96</sup>Janet E. Helms and Allen E. Ivey, “A Race Is A Nice Thing to Have.”

<sup>97</sup> Christine J. Yeh and Mary Y. Hwang, Interdependence in Ethnic Identity and Self Implications for Theory and Practice,” *Journal of Counseling and Development*,” 28 (2000): 420-29.

<sup>98</sup> Jonathan Scott Holloway, *Jim Crow Wisdom: Memory & Identity in Black America since 1940* (Chapel Hill: UNC Press), 3.

<sup>99</sup> Justin Poll and Timothy B. Smith, “The spiritual self: Toward a conceptualization of spiritual identity development, *Journal of Psychology and Theology*, 31, 2(Summer 2003): ProQuest.



well as by White society, domestic and abroad. The research shows how labels are connected to memories of the past, past hurt, experiences, and behaviors, which produce stigmas. The chapter expressed how stigmas influenced the identity of African Americans.

Politically, the Black community was shaped by unjust laws, such as Jim Crow/Black Codes. The unjust laws perpetuated stigmas and propagated unjust treatment that directly impacted the formation of the Black identity and behavioral patterns within the Black community. The political identity of Blacks was that of no voice, lack of representation and a people relegated to a status not worthy of citizenship or human rights. The political identity of the black community spoke to the primary concern of racial inequality within the community, which can be seen today. In fact, today “Black Americans are more likely than Whites to identify with their racial group...and report that their racial identity influences their political identity more so than Whites. Due to their distinctive historical position and continued stigmatization, black voters are distinct even from other minority groups in the extent of their racial group cohesion.”<sup>100</sup> As the political overlaps with the social identity of Black Americans, the most notable overlapping aspect was the strategy of respectability. The strategy of respectability altered and dictated behavioral patterns and appearances, which speak to aspects of double consciousness that can be found within the Black American community.

The last section of chapter dealt briefly with the social identity of Blacks in America. It expressed the nature of trauma and lack of institutional support by the dominant culture. As for lack of institutional support, it is linked directly to a healthy acculturation process. Because the circumstances of the African Americas were traumatic, Blacks did not have the benefit of a

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<sup>100</sup> Amy E. Lerman and Meredith L. Sadin, “Stereotyping or Projection? How White and Black Voters Estimate Black Candidates’ Ideology,” *Political Psychology*, Volume 37, Issue 2 (30 Oct 2014): <https://onlinelibrary-wiley-com.ezproxy.liberty.edu/doi/full/10.1111/pops.12235>.

healthy integration into the dominant society. The lack of a healthy acculturation process caused confusion concerning ethnicity within the Black community. Also, most institutional support was a collective effort from within the Black community. However, such support was not sustainable, and some social institutions were viewed as a threat and were often destroyed by violence. The violent destruction of Black American institutions has a direct link to memories that contribute to negative effects on identity formation because memory is intertwined with identity.

Lastly, the church institution was focused mostly on social injustices and not on spiritual formation. It was a place seeking independence and freedom, but also providing social, economic, and health care support to the Black community. The chapter briefly touched on the begins of the biblical foundation for Blacks, which was shrouded in distortion as it was given through the eyes, interpretation, and oversight of an oppressive people. The chapter showed how the Black American experience contributed to an identity crisis, as “memory and identity have always been intertwined.”<sup>101</sup> All the events of the past, which have been passed from one generation to the next, contribute to the identity crisis of the Black community. Today, many Blacks are looking for a connection to a homeland, Africa, which is shown by the successful rise of companies such as African Ancestry. Most Black Americans do not feel a sense of permanency due to past traumatic events. The sociological and psychological trauma that African Americans have suffered has contributed to the identity crisis in the Black community. Today, many in the Black community are turning to the government to heal the identity crisis, but the only proper solution, especially for the Black Christian, is found in revealing one’s true identity, that is the spiritual/Christian identity.

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<sup>101</sup> Jonathan Scott Holloway, *Jim Crow Wisdom: Memory & Identity in Black America since 1940* (Chapel Hill: UNC Press), 3.

## Chapter 3: Christianity: Spiritual Identity and The Scripture

### Introduction

“Human beings have no immediate knowledge of themselves but need to manifest themselves...in order to understand who they are.”<sup>102</sup> Black Christians and the Black community have historically identified themselves through the lens of race, and many have neglected their real identity; that is their spiritual identity. Today, this neglect can be found in many messages sent through broadcasts and electronic media. Many in the church seem to be preoccupied with the politics of the day and have not put the proper focus on the teachings of spirituality, spiritual formation, and spiritual transformation. “Dallas Willard asserted that organizations do not have spiritual formation as their central focus.”<sup>103</sup> Besides the lack of spiritual formation and transformation teachings, historically, African Americans were presented with a misrepresentation of the biblical worldview and God. Additionally, spirituality has often deteriorated into a lifeless series of scripted or traditional routines undertaken by sheer human will power.”<sup>104</sup> It is the teaching of spirituality, spiritual transformation and formation that help individuals reveal their Christian identity. “Spirituality is central to an individual’s identity development.”<sup>105</sup> The next section will explore how spiritual identity can solve the identity crisis within the African American Christian through the process of spiritual formation and transformation.

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<sup>102</sup> Chris A.M. Herman, “Spiritual Transformation: Concept and measurement,” *Journal of Empirical Theology*, 26, 2 (2013):doi:10.1163/15709256-12341275.

<sup>103</sup>Jeffrey P. Greenman, *Theology, Spiritual Formation and Theological Education*, ed George Kalantzis, (Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 2020). ProQuest Ebook Central.

<sup>104</sup> Jeffrey P. Greenman, *Theology, Spiritual Formation and Theological Education*, ed George Kalantzis, (Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 2020). ProQuest Ebook Central.

<sup>105</sup> Justin Poll and Timothy B. Smith, “The spiritual self: Toward a conceptualization of spiritual identity development, *Journal of Psychology and Theology*, 31, 2(Summer 2003): ProQuest.

## Christ, Scripture, Spirit

African Americans first experience with God and the biblical worldview was a misrepresentation of the relationship between God and all humans. God was presented through sermons that fostered a mindset for continued servitude. Earlier, the research stated that identity formed early in childhood and carry through to adulthood and inevitably shaped by aspects of one's culture. Robert Coles's research states that "psychologically God can take almost any shape for children...He can be a friend or a potential enemy...source of anxiety, fear, even panic...religious tenets, reinforcing a child's ongoing spiritual reflection can become an integral and persuasive part of a conscience."<sup>106</sup> This speaks to the relationship that African Americans first developed about God because God was presented in the image and favor of White slavers. "Spiritual identity development will be restricted to the degree that individuals perceive God as detached, punitive, judgmental., etc."<sup>107</sup> A large portion of the representation of God that was presented to African Americans was through the lens of race. In fact, it is the interpretation from a cultural context, including language, that leads to biblical misinterpretation of race, slavery, and inferiority. Randolph Richards and Brandon J. O'Brien has an excellent example of this in the book *"Misreading Scripture with Western Eyes."* Commenting on Moses's wife being a Cushite, which are people with dark skin, the authors point to how many commentaries equated her as being a slave because of skin color. "Older commentaries frequently assumed that dark skin denoted inferiority. J. Daniel Hays has shown that the assumption that Africans are a slave race has influenced the way we read every reference to Cush and the Cushites in the Old

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<sup>106</sup> Robert Coles, *The Spiritual Life of Children* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1990), 119.

<sup>107</sup> Justin Poll and Timothy B. Smith, "The spiritual self: Toward a conceptualization of spiritual identity development, *Journal of Psychology and Theology*, 31, 2(Summer 2003): ProQuest.

Testament.”<sup>108</sup> The notion of slave, especially concerning Cush, represents how the dominant society has operates in every aspect of life. The image of God was detorted, which restricted a true spiritual formation because “spiritual identity will develop best when individuals’ image of God is relevant to their own lives, benevolent and meaningful, and ultimately reciprocated through a relationship with God.”<sup>109</sup> Why is this important to the spiritual identity of African American Christians?

The lack of a true and relatable image of God hinders a true transformation process for the African American Christian. The emphasis on race focuses primarily on the temporal part of humans, and the God that was presented to Blacks was not relevant to the Black life except in terms of servitude, oppression, and violent and unjust treatment. This view of God contributes to the Black American identity crisis. However, the solution lies within the true meaning of spiritual transformation. Spiritual transformation reveals one’s spiritual identity. So, what about the spiritual identity of the Black American Christian?

“Basic Western beliefs have long distinguished between an invisible essence or soul and the visible person...identity was largely equated with the visible person.”<sup>110</sup> African Americans have historically determined their identity through the lens of race and not according to the spirit. However, the visible identity marker of race is not the most important part of someone’s identity. “An important and large part of the self was thought of as something that existed hidden away inside the person, to be revealed and even discovered only gradually and selectively.”<sup>111</sup> It is this

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<sup>108</sup> E. Randolph Richards and Brandon J. O’Brien, *Misreading Scripture With Western Eyes* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2012).

<sup>109</sup> Justin Poll and Timothy B. Smith, “The spiritual self: Toward a conceptualization of spiritual identity development,” *Journal of Psychology and Theology*, 31, 2(Summer 2003): ProQuest.

<sup>110</sup> Roy F. Baumeister and Mark Muraven, “Identity as adaptation to social, cultural, and historical context,” *Journal of Adolescence*, Volume 19, Issue 5 (1996): 405-416. <https://dio.org/10/1006/jadp/1996/0039>.

<sup>111</sup> Roy F. Baumeister and Mark Muraven, “Identity as adaptation to social, cultural, and historical context,” *Journal of Adolescence*, Volume 19, Issue 5 (1996): 405-416. <https://dio.org/10/1006/jadp/1996/0039>.

invisible part that African Americans, especially African American Christians need to reveal their highest self. “If we are to challenge our own already deeply embedded worldview assumptions with what God says, we must work toward developing our self-identity from the Scriptures.”<sup>112</sup> What does scripture tell us about identity?

For African American Christians, their highest form of identity is revealed through scripture and the work of the Holy Spirit. “Human beings have no immediate knowledge of themselves, but need to manifest themselves (i.e. assume a 'form') in order to understand who they are.”<sup>113</sup> More importantly, Psalm 139:1, 139:13-14, and 16, speaks of God knowing an individual even before birth. Passages such as this Psalm tell an individual that one is not first the human body but is known by God with worth and value in his image. This tells the individual that identity is known by God, and thus only through God can one truly know identity because identity was established before the created body. Psalm 139 tells everyone that God knew them, therefore, to understand identity and spiritual identity, one must first turn to God. The Book of Genesis informs humans about their origin. Genesis states “God created man in his own image, in the image of God He created him; male and female created he them.”<sup>114</sup> This passage informs the African American believer of an important component of themselves, that is spirit. “God is a Spirit: and they that worship him must worship him in spirit and in truth (John 4:24).” For the African American Christian, it is important to know that they are spirit and made in God’s image. More importantly, it is that part of an individual that needs to be revealed to truly know who one is, identity.

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<sup>112</sup> C. Fred Smith, *Developing A Biblical Worldview: Seeing Things God’s Way* (Nashville: B&H Publishing Group, 2015).

<sup>113</sup> Chris A.M. Herman, “Spiritual Transformation: Concept and measurement,” *Journal of Empirical Theology*, 26, 2, (2013):doi:10.1163/15709256-12341275.

<sup>114</sup> Unless otherwise noted, all biblical passages referenced employ the New King James Version (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, Inc, 1990).

Scripture also states that “God exists, human beings are children of God, humans possess temporal physical bodies and eternal spirits.”<sup>115</sup> For the African American Christian, they must embrace and identify themselves by the spirit part of the human being, which is the eternal part of humans, and they must not identify themselves primarily by the identity marker of race. The eternal spirit provides permanency, a belonging, for the African American. “The sense of spiritual identity, an individual’s belief that she or he is an eternal being and connected to God is an aspect of human spirituality thought to be effective in protecting and restoring psychological health.”<sup>116</sup> Why is this important for African American identity? Psychological well-being is also linked to a healthy identity in adults,<sup>117</sup> and for the Black American, it provides a connection of home or origin. How is spiritual identity formed?

To reveal an individual’s spiritual identity, it involves a power or agency, and for Christians that power is the Holy Spirit. “All Christians have an added dimension of the indwelling Spirit for power and guidance in living as people in whom the image of God is progressively being restored.” The Holy Spirit restores, meaning to set things back to the original intended state. “This changing power is both the source and the goal of transformation; it influences the change towards the desired state of being and at the same time it is the desired state,”<sup>118</sup> that desired state for the Christian is Christlikeness. For Christians, “transformation of the self in Christ, – crucified with Christ – does not destroy the I for the sake of the Father but

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<sup>115</sup> Justin Poll and Timothy B. Smith, “The spiritual self: Toward a conceptualization of spiritual identity development, *Journal of Psychology and Theology*, 31, 2(Summer 2003): ProQuest.

<sup>116</sup> Justin Poll and Timothy B. Smith, “The spiritual self: Toward a conceptualization of spiritual identity development, *Journal of Psychology and Theology*, 31, 2 (Summer 2003): ProQuest.

<sup>117</sup> Justin Poll and Timothy B. Smith, “The spiritual self: Toward a conceptualization of spiritual identity development, *Journal of Psychology and Theology*, 31, 2 (Summer 2003): ProQuest.

<sup>118</sup> Chris A.M. Herman, “Spiritual Transformation: Concept and measurement,” *Journal of Empirical Theology*, 26, 2, (2013): doi:10.1163/15709256-12341275.

reconstitutes it in new life.”<sup>119</sup> What does this new life entail? Like any life it has a culture of its own, a language of its own, and built upon laws and principles. So, the reconstituted life also involves a new culture that is not of the earth.

This new life also constitutes a newness in self. 2 Corinthians 5:17 declares “Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, the new creation has come: The old has gone, the new is here!” The newness the Bible speaks of reaches beyond race, sociological and psychological effects of the past, and speaks to an identity revealed in Christ. Also, Galatians 3:27-28, states, “for all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.” For African American Christians, this passage of scripture explains how race is viewed from a biblical perspective. God does not identify humans according to race, class, or nationality. This passage of scripture dismantles all socially constructed identity markers.

1 Corinthians 12:27, states, “You are the body of Christ, an individual member of it.” To be the body is to be a part of something greater than the individual. In the past, African Americans were presented a worldview that placed the African American as second class and subservient rather than joined together in a community with one common cause. This passage of scripture speaks to the aspect of acceptance and purpose to Black Christians. The scripture tells of a new life, but many Black Christians have not put the proper focus on revealing the new life and Christian identity. So how is this accomplished?

The process of revealing one’s identity is achieved through spiritual formation. Spiritual formation is a process that is ongoing through a lifetime. “Spiritual formation is what God does to and for us, along with all he makes available to make this transformation possible, a process

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<sup>119</sup> Charles Marsh, “In Defense of a Self: the theological search for a postmodern identity,” *Scottish Journal of Theology*, 55, n o 3 (2002): 253-82, <http://ezproxy/liberty.edu>.



that never ends until he brings us to himself.”<sup>120</sup> Spiritual formation goes hand and hand with one being in Christ. One cannot achieve what 2 Corinthians 5:17 speaks of without the process of spiritual formation. “Spiritual formation in Christ as portrayed in the Bible and seen in the great ones is not primarily behavior modification, though modification of behavior certainly is an outcome of it.”<sup>121</sup> Spiritual formation is very different from the behavioral modification strategies such as that of respectability that the African American community used to help establish an identity. Spiritual formation deals with the renewing of the mind. Romans 12:2 states “be not conformed to this world: but be ye transformed by the renewing of your mind, that ye may prove what is that good, and acceptable, and perfect, will of God.” This scripture speaks to the mind, behavior, and morals of an individual.

According to Robert Coles, “children’s mental life can and does connect with their religious and spiritual thinking.”<sup>122</sup> He further asserts that “psychologically God can take almost any shape for children...He can be a friend or a potential enemy...source of anxiety, fear, even panic...religious tenets, reinforcing a child’s ongoing spiritual reflection can become an integral and persuasive part of a conscience.”<sup>123</sup> For the African American Christian, this renewing of the mind restores a correct image of themselves in God, and it restores a right relationship with God. This is important for the African American worldview that dictates how one interacts with the world. “Africans worldwide have had to contend, to varying degrees, with the following strategies of subordination: elimination of all personal identities; the separation of language groups a...forced religious conversion to the Europeanized version of Christianity.”<sup>124</sup> “Some

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<sup>120</sup> Paul Pettit, *Foundations of Spiritual Formation* (Grand Rapids: Kregel Publications, 2008), 105.

<sup>121</sup> Jeffrey P. Greenman, *Theology, Spiritual Formation and Theological Education*, ed George Kalantzis, (Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 2020). ProQuest Ebook Central.

<sup>122</sup> Robert Coles, *The Spiritual Life of Children* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1990), 108.

<sup>123</sup> Robert Coles, *The Spiritual Life of Children* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1990), 119.

<sup>124</sup> Allen, Richard, *Concept of Self: A Study of Black Identity and Self-Esteem*, (Wayne State University Press, 2001). ProQuest Ebook Central.

people identify with biblical worldview mostly with moral behavior.”<sup>125</sup> “There is a natural overlap between the moral life and the religious life of children, as is the case with grownups.”<sup>126</sup>

African Americans in the past have appealed to what was considered biblical principles to gain acceptance from the dominant society. However, in truth, the African American community was only appealing to what was displayed as moral behaviors in which they imitated. This is seen in the strategy of respectability. Of course, this type of strategy comes in direct conflict with their own real identity because respectability, originates from a social construct and the other, spiritual identity, is from the eternal realm. “The Christian lifestyle is much more than mere respectability.”<sup>127</sup> For African American Christians to truly be in Christ, it starts in the mind. The mind is where an individual’s belief system is developed. So now what?

“Spiritual formation begins with calling on the name of the lord; that is, it begins with becoming a worshiper of the only true God,”<sup>128</sup> which leads to transformation. Spiritual transformation has not been at the forefront of biblical teaching in the church. “You will rarely meet an individual Christian who is seriously engaged in the transformation (spiritual formation) depicted in the Bible and in church history...you might think that Christian organizations would have such transformation as their central focus, that simply turns out not to be true.”<sup>129</sup> Most teaching do not focus on Romans 12:1-2 that speaks of transformation. “Our renewed mind (Rom. 12:2) must be active in evaluating our identity, our gifts and ourselves”<sup>130</sup> Why is this important to the African American identity?

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<sup>125</sup> C. Fred Smith, *Developing A Biblical Worldview: Seeing Things God’s Way* (Nashville: B&H Publishing Group, 2015), 3.

<sup>126</sup> Robert Coles, *The Spiritual Life of Children* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1990).

<sup>127</sup> C. Fred Smith, *Developing A Biblical Worldview: Seeing Things God’s Way* (Nashville: B&H Publishing Group, 2015), 3.

<sup>128</sup> Paul Pettit, *Foundations of Spiritual Formation* (Grand Rapids: Kregel Publications, 2008), 60.

<sup>129</sup> Jeffrey P. Greenman, *Theology, Spiritual Formation and Theological Education*, ed George Kalantzis, (Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 2020). ProQuest Ebook Central.

<sup>130</sup> Paul Pettit, *Foundations of Spiritual Formation* (Grand Rapids: Kregel Publications, 2008), 204.

“The in-Christ identity is portrayed as not being an anthropological reality, but as a theological reality, which points to God’s work in Christ, who provides believers with life and identity”<sup>131</sup> Galatians 3:26 tells the Black Christians that we are now sons of God through faith. It is by faith that one’s identity in Christ is being transformed into sons of God. So, the ultimate point of a Christian identity is to become sons of God. Black Christians should live according to a biblical worldview. “We must learn to see things God’s way, as he revealed his mind to us in scripture.”<sup>132</sup> This is important because Black Christians must understand the new life, which includes the kingdom culture in which the Christian is now born into. Why is this important to the African American Christian?

The Christian identity mean that one has a culture that is very different from the world in which they live. Christians draw their morals, values, language and lifelong principles from the Bible and guidance of the Holy Spirit. Christians are called to impact and effect change in the earth, not conform to the ways of the world. So, living in the spirit and by the spirit is an identity marker that show that individuals are in Christ. What are steps of spiritual formation/transformation?

#### Identity Transformation in Christ

“We live in a culture that holds to a decidedly nonbiblical worldview in many respects. Many churches, and Christians, are much more influenced by the larger culture than by the Scriptures.”<sup>133</sup> Black American Christians who realize that their identity is formed by race, family, and current cultural norms should take appropriate steps to genuinely express the image

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<sup>131</sup> Philip Du Toit and LA Grange, “Ethnic Reasoning and Early Christian Identity: A Pauline theological Perspective,” *Hervormde Teologiese Studies*, 76, no 1 (2020): <http://exproxy.liberty.edu>.

<sup>132</sup> C. Fred Smith, *Developing A Biblical Worldview: Seeing Things God’s Way* (Nashville: B&H Publishing Group, 2015), 19.

<sup>133</sup> C. Fred Smith, *Developing A Biblical Worldview: Seeing Things God’s Way* (Nashville: B&H Publishing Group, 2015), 149.

of God and reveal their highest form of identity. The next few paragraph will give some practical steps of the formation/transformation process to reveal spiritual/Christian identity.

## **Salvation**

“Spiritual formation begins with calling on the name of the lord; that is, it begins with becoming a worshiper of the only true God,”<sup>134</sup> To become a true worshiper the individual must take hold of salvation. Some important components of salvation are confession, repentance, surrender one’s life to Christ, and baptism of the Holy Spirit. Jesus taught that those who confess their sins would be forgiven of sin and cleansed from all unrighteousness (1 John 1:9). “Jesus calls us to a righteousness that ‘exceeds the righteousness’ of the respectable crowd in our time.”<sup>135</sup> Righteousness puts the believer in correct alignment with God that allows the believer to cultivate a relationship with God. To repent is to “change one’s mind, to turn from sin and dedicate oneself to the amendment of one's life.”<sup>136</sup> According to Luke 24: 46-47, repentance for the forgiveness of sin would be preached in Jesus’ name. “There’s a recognizably Christian view of salvation—one prominent in Scripture and history—that does have spiritual formation as a natural part or outgrowth of “salvation,” understood to be an identifiable status (sometimes, at least, associated with a specific event... and it comes in the form of the theological concept of regeneration.”<sup>137</sup>

Acts 2:38 says, “Peter replied, repent and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins. And you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.”

The Holy Spirit is the agent that leads and guides in the regeneration, new life, process. In

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<sup>134</sup> Paul Pettit, *Foundations of Spiritual Formation* (Grand Rapids: Kregel Publications, 2008), 60.

<sup>135</sup> C. Fred Smith, *Developing A Biblical Worldview: Seeing Things God’s Way* (Nashville: B&H Publishing Group, 2015), 149.

<sup>136</sup> [www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary, “repent”](http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/repent).

<sup>137</sup> Jeffrey P. Greenman, *Theology, Spiritual Formation and Theological Education*, ed George Kalantzis, (Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 2020). ProQuest Ebook Central.

scripture, the Apostle Paul says, “John baptized with the baptism of repentance, telling the people to believe in Him who was coming after him, that is, in Jesus. When they heard this, they were baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus. And when Paul had laid his hands upon them, the Holy Spirit came on them, and they began speaking with tongues and prophesying.” The Holy Spirit brings power and change. Jesus promised the gift of the Holy Spirit that would come to teach all things. “I am sending forth the promise of My Father upon you; but you are to stay in the city until you are clothed with power from on high (Luke 24:49).” “I will ask the Father, and He will give you another Helper, that He may be with you forever; that is the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive, because it does not see Him or know Him, but you know Him because He abides with you and will be in you (John 14:16-17).” Regeneration, true regeneration, cannot be achieved without the Baptism of the Holy Spirit. “Spiritual formation consists of the trinitarian work of God in the lives of genuine believers in Christ through the presence and power of the Holy Spirit.”<sup>138</sup>

So, an important step in the transformation process begins with true worship of the living God, and the starting point is confession of sins, a repented heart, and surrendering of one’s life to Christ. A repented and surrendered life is giving up one’s own beliefs, as well as beliefs taught by an individual’s culture and family. It is to pattern one’s life after Jesus. And one final aspect of salvation is the baptism of the Holy Spirit. The baptism of Holy Spirit allows for the regeneration/transformation process to truly manifest in the believer’s life. Once a believer receives salvation, it is the believer’s responsibility to continue to cultivate a relationship with Christ. This is accomplished through discipleship.

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<sup>138</sup> Paul Pettit, *Foundations of Spiritual Formation* (Grand Rapids: Kregel Publications, 2008), 52.

## Discipleship

Discipleship. Spiritual formation cannot be achieved without proper discipleship. “Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all things that I have commanded you (Matt 28;19-20).” Making disciples was a command from Jesus. Discipleship is about the following of Jesus. It focuses on what we do in following Jesus and growing in the word.”<sup>139</sup> Christians should include the following aspects of discipleship to continue to cultivate a relationship with God.

Obedience. Obedience is adhering to God’s commands and precepts. The most important command given by Christ was the command to ‘Love’. ‘Love’ is an essential part of being a disciple of Christ. “By this all people will know that you are my disciples if you have love for one another (John 13:35).” Love is primary to the identity of the Christian. In fact, it is a commandment of God. “You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind. This is the first and great commandment. And the second is You shall love your neighbor as yourself. On these two commandments hang all the Law and the Prophets (Matt 22:37-40).” Scripture tells the believer that obedience is better than sacrifice. To be in Christ and of Christ is to follow him, and the best way to do so is to follow his commands. “The practical aim of the person who takes obedience seriously is not to obey, but to become the kind of person who easily and routinely does obey as a result of devotion to Jesus and consequently of taking him as Lord, teacher and friend.”<sup>140</sup> How does one know his commands?

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<sup>139</sup> Paul Pettit, *Foundations of Spiritual Formation* (Grand Rapids: Kregel Publications, 2008), 104.

<sup>140</sup> Jeffrey P. Greenman, *Theology, Spiritual Formation and Theological Education*, ed George Kalantzis, (Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 2020). ProQuest Ebook Central.

Studying Word of God. Studying the word of God/scripture is an important part of discipleship. Studying provides the believer with an understanding of the commands and precepts of God. Scripture exposes Christians to a biblical worldview. “We are commanded to ‘meditate’ on God’s word day and night...this is so much more than simply reading a passage in the morning...God wants us to impress his Word onto our minds, so that we are thinking about it, applying it, mulling it over, all the time.”<sup>141</sup> Studying scripture helps to impart the culture of the kingdom of God into the believer and to continue to cultivate the relationship between themselves and Christ.

It is through studying of the scripture that the Word is imputed into the believer and allows the believer to understand the language, proper behavior, and mindset of the kingdom of God. “All Scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, thoroughly equipped for every good work (2 Tim 3:16-17).” This is important because Christians are called as ambassadors on earth to effect change in the earth.

Prayer. Prayer is a spiritual discipline. It is the way Christians commune with God. The Bible teaches Christians that they should pray in all things. In fact, prayer is the method in which believer approach God. Hebrews 4:16 tells Christians that they should go boldly to his throne in their time of need. Romans 8:26 informs Christians when they are weak and do not know what to pray, that the Holy Spirit who intercedes with groaning. Prayer is an essential to the life of the followers of Christ. Acts 1:14 says, “They all joined together constantly in prayer, along with the women and Mary the mother of Jesus, and with his brothers.” This passage of scriptures points to a community of believers, which is the next step in cultivating a relationship in Christ.

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<sup>141</sup> C. Fred Smith, *Developing A Biblical Worldview: Seeing Things God’s Way* (Nashville: B&H Publishing Group, 2015), 165.

## Fellowship

Fellowship. “Christian community is based not on what its members have in common in the world, but on what they share in Christ.”<sup>142</sup> Biblically, individuals are called the ‘Body of Christ or the Bride of Christ’. This signifies that there are many that make up one entity. 1 Corinthians 12:23, tells Christians that all are baptized by one Spirit. According to Matt 18:20, tells the believer that in is in fellowship of prayer that the Spirit of the Lord dwells. Also, Heb 10:25 reminds the believers to forget not to meet to encourage on another. Acts 2:42, where the Apostles expressed the doctrinal teaching and practice of fellowship. It was in this passage of scripture that several spiritual practices were observed, that is prayer, fellowship, and devoting themselves to study/teaching, and communion/breaking of bread. “Christian life is not to be pursued in isolation. The image of Christ has a communal expression. Even our knowledge of God is incomplete without one another.”<sup>143</sup>

## Chapter Conclusion

This chapter presented the Christian identity that is revealed through spiritual formation and transformation. The chapter pointed out that there is a lack of teaching in the church concerning spirituality, spiritual transformation, and spiritual formation. Also, the chapter pointed out the misrepresentation of biblical teachings in the past that were delivered to the Black community. The chapter then drew a connection to God and a healthy psychological state, and the importance of spirituality in identity formation. The chapter explained that humans do not know themselves, but the Christian identity allows the believer to reveal their identity through the process of spiritual transformation by the work of the Holy Spirit.

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<sup>142</sup> Paul Pettit, *Foundations of Spiritual Formation* (Grand Rapids: Kregel Publications, 2008), 80.

<sup>143</sup> Paul Pettit, *Foundations of Spiritual Formation* (Grand Rapids: Kregel Publications, 2008), 46.



The chapter expressed that the new life in Christ overlaps with the moral life, which produce behavior modifications as a part of the new life. The African American Christian should live according to God's principals, and Christians are responsible for effecting change and the culture of the world because they are called as ambassador to for the kingdom of God. The African American Christian does not seek acceptance from the world system but live according to the biblical worldview. In fact, holistically, having a connection with God is pivotal to a healthy identity. The chapter connected the renewing of the mind in Christ with the psychological state of an individual, and thus an African American does not identity according to the race marker, but through their spiritual self in Christ.

The chapter ended with some practical steps in the spiritual formation/transformation process. The steps included salvation that consisted of confession, repentance, and surrendering one's life to Christ. The section spoke of the importance of the baptism of the Holy Spirit in the transformation/formation process. The section went on to list additional steps of obedience, discipleship, and fellowship for cultivating a life in Christ.

## Conclusion and Recommendations

The intent of this thesis was to examine the identity crisis within the African American community, as well as provide Christian/spiritual identity as a solution to the crisis. The thesis provided argument that supported the formation of the identity crisis within the African American community. The research provided helpful insight on the formation of identity within the Black American community, but it is only a tentative study of the cause of an identity crisis within the African American people. The researcher hopes that this is a starting point for future studies on the effects of psychological and sociological trauma on the Black American identity, to include PTSD, which all can be transgenerational trauma.

The research expresses how a healthy identity is formed within individuals that go through a successful acculturation process, which was referenced in the article ‘The relationship of Acculturation Strategies to Resilience: The moderating Impact of Social Support among Qiang Ethnicity following the 2008 Chinese Earthquake.’ Due to the lack of a healthy and successful acculturation process, the African American people experienced sociological, physical, and psychological trauma that significantly contributed to the identity crisis within the Black American community. The thesis gave examples of two major identities within the African American community. The thesis expressed the significance of the race marker in the overall African American identity, but more importantly, the thesis showed the negative effects that stigmas have on identity, to include what W.E.B. Du Bois called double consciousness. “One of the key points about a stigma...it assumes a larger role than simply being one of a number of characteristics an individual may bear. It is ... an identity-defining mark, one that the processes of social interaction and labeling make central to the designation of who or what someone is.”<sup>144</sup>

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<sup>144</sup>David G. Horrell, David G, “The Label.... 1 Peter 4:16 and the Formation of Christian Identity,” *Journal of Biblical Literature*, Vol 126, Issue 2 (Summer 2007): ProQuest Central.

The thesis drew a connection between stigmas, labels, and the development of identity of the African American people. The thesis is not a comprehensive study of the psychological and sociological trauma of African Americans but provided examples of traumas that are passed down trans-generationally.

The thesis supports the argument that unjust treatment by way of laws, verbal labels and imagery played a significant role in the social and political identity of African Americans. It is the dominant society's projected perception and treatment that shaped a large part of the identity of Black Americans. Also, a sense of non-permanency, due to violence attacks and lawful subjugation and Black Codes by the dominant society contributed to the identity crisis. However, the thesis asserts, for the Black Christian, that there is restoration in Christ. When speaking of the new life, the thesis asserts that it is a mindset and belief system that changes the Black American's self-perception, worldview, and primary identity marker, to include behavioral modifications. In fact, the thesis asserts, that there is a cultural shift that takes place in the life of the Black Christian which causes the Black Christian to assume a new culture that positively affect the cultures on earth.

The thesis recommends that Black Christian who want to reveal their identity should engage in spiritual formation practices. These practical steps include tenets of discipleship, fellowship, and ensuring salvation, to include the baptism of the Holy Spirit. "Spiritual formation, in turn, is about how to actually go about engaging with the presence of God, walking with him day by day, moment by moment, in worship, prayer, obedience, witness, spiritual disciplines, or whatever."<sup>145</sup> These practices are essential to cultivating a meaning relationship

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<sup>145</sup> Paul Pettit, *Foundations of Spiritual Formation* (Grand Rapids: Kregel Publications, 2008), 64.

with God. It is by these practices that God calls the individual into a deeper walk with him and ultimately revealing the individual's identity and purpose.

The thesis concludes that Black Christians have a higher identity that is not tied to any human construct. African American Christians are not defined by race, or traditions passed down generationally. The spiritual/Christian identity is the eternal identity of an individual and it does not solve all the sociological or psychological trauma of African American Christians. However, for the Christian, spiritual transformation by The Holy Spirit enables individuals to live according to the spirit, by the spirit rather than by social constructs. The identity crisis in Black Christians can be reconciled by choosing Christ over politics, Christ over race, Christ over family. By becoming more spiritually/God centered, through spiritual formation and transformation, individuals take on a new identity, and realize their eternal ancestry, as well as the fact that they are called to effectively change the culture and the world they live in, and they are instructed on how to navigate with people and systems in the world around them.

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