(Special Section, Hymns Beyond the Congregation II): “We’ll Understand it Better By and By:” Nomenclature, Negotiation, and Naming our Neighbors

Emmett G. Price III

Berklee College of Music & Boston Conservatory at Berklee

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“We’ll Understand It Better By and By”
Nomenclature, Negotiation, and Naming Our Neighbors
Emmett G. Price III

By and by, when the morning comes,
When the saints of God are gathered home,
We’ll tell the story how we’ve overcome,
For we’ll understand it better by and by.2

In 1905, when Philadelphia Methodist pastor and hymn writer Charles Albert Tindley’s “We’ll Understand It Better By and By” was published in the first edition of Soul Echoes: A Collection of Songs for Religious Meetings, Black folks across the world and especially within the United States of America were struggling to recover from centuries of horrid and brutal exploitation, oppression, and unfathomable inhumane treatment. Tindley in a western sense was a self-made man. The son of an enslaved father and a free mother in Berlin, Maryland, Tindley was born on July 7, 1851, prior to the end of the Civil War and the formal end of enslavement in the United States.3 He died in 1933 at the age of 82. A former brick carrier (or hod carrier, as the occupation was called), Tindley was never formally educated as a child or adolescent. In fact, he was the sexton (custodian) on a volunteer basis for the parish that he would years later serve as the pastor.4 The generational, collective, and individual trauma of enslavement and the formal end of the Maafa, also known as the African Holocaust, deeply inspired and influenced Tindley’s hymn writing.5

From biblical Egypt, Athens, and Rome to the rise of the Anglo-Saxons, enslavement was a practice which predated the eleventh-century industry that grew as the Portuguese began trading human cargo from the African continent across the Atlantic Ocean during the fifteenth century.6 By the nineteenth century—whether referring strictly to the years 1800–99 or to the “long nineteenth century” (1789–1914)—Black people and other nonwhite individuals and communities remained terrorized by degrading, inhumane, and oppressive forces that, simply stated, were evil. During the nineteenth century, unbeknownst to many, Black people in the United States were making educational and economic strides even amid the oppressive reign of domestic terrorism led in part by white supremacist extremists such as the Ku Klux Klan.7 In 1837 under the name of the African Institute, what would later emerge as the first Historically Black College and University (HBCU), Cheyney University, was founded in Cheyney, Pennsylvania.8 In 1851 the Minor Normal School for Colored Girls was founded in Washington, D.C., and later was renamed the University of the District of Columbia. In 1854 Lincoln University, another prestigious HBCU, was founded as the Ashmun Institute by Rev. John Miller Dickey, a Presbyterian minister, and his wife Sarah Emlen Cresson, a Quaker.9 In 1856 Wilberforce University was founded by the African Methodist Episcopal Church in Wilberforce, Ohio.
During this same period Black Baptists and Black Methodists were expanding their reach, influence, and land holdings, particularly on the east coast and in the midwestern region.

As these institutes of higher education and churches were blossoming, public lynchings emerged as popular social spectacles for a population of individuals whose nomenclature for the *imago Dei* (image of God) was noninclusive. Although most of the tortured and tormented souls were Black, many whites, Mexicans, and Indigenous people were also lynched during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries within the United States. Our failure to tell the “whole truth, and nothing but the truth” in the United States and abroad is one symptom of false narratives and partial veracities. Our collective inability to courageously and honestly name things is part of the divisiveness that leads to division.

Even after the Emancipation Proclamation in the United States declared an end to slavery effective January 1, 1863, the corrective, yet nonrestorative gesture in Galveston, Texas, commemorated as Juneteenth—June 19, 1865—offers a unique insight into how we negotiate with intolerance, hate, and systemic oppression. Every time Black people made measurable progress, there was a backlash. Most statues honoring and glorifying the defeated Confederate leaders of the Civil War were purposely erected in neighborhoods and communities inhabited by people of color during the Reconstruction period, not during the war itself. These monuments mocked the inhabitants of resilient and healing communities with larger-than-life replicas of overarching oppressors who were overlording them once again.

During Reconstruction, as Black leaders were emerging as elected officials, voting rights were being subjected to standards resulting in certain groups of people being unable to gain access. Voting rights were literally and legally taken away. Laws were changed in favor of a rising white population, a conglomeration of peoples of various ancestries and nationalities who were never aligned nor fans of one another until their declaration of war on people of color and other minoritized and ostracized communities—an ironic double standard when the old country narratives and the various conflicts, if not wars, would tell that these newfound friends were long-time and long-term enemies beyond the shores of the aspirational articulated vision of the United States of America.

Even after the Civil War, Black people continued to press forward, with the creation of Atlanta University in 1865, a mere three months after the end of the war, followed by Shaw University three months later. Institutions of higher learning kept pace with churches during the late nineteenth century. According to Carter G. Woodson’s important 1921 treatise *The History of the Negro Church*:

Comparing these statistics of 1906 with those of 1890, one sees the rapid growth of the Negro Church. Although the Negro population increased only 26.1 per cent during these sixteen years, the number of church organizations increased 56.7 per cent; the number of communicants, 37.8 per cent; the number of edifices, 47.9; the seating capacity, 54.1 per cent; and the value of church property, 112.7 per cent.

Yet the rise of Jim and Jane Crow laws and the various massacres that would emerge, often perpetuated by good ole wholesome
church folk, would be yet another blow to the morale and esprit de corps of Black Americans.\textsuperscript{12}

According to Woodson and Charles H. Wesley, in their monumental 1935 study \textit{The Story of the Negro Retold},

\begin{quote}
[\textit{a}mong the achievements of the Negro during these years was his participation in the Spanish-American War. When war began with Spain in 1898, the four regular Negro regiments were among the first to be ordered to Cuba. These regiments were increased through calls for volunteers and for other regiments.

Two brigades of these soldiers were commanded by Major General "Fighting Joe" Wheeler, formerly of the Confederate Army. These regiments charged up San Juan Hill with the Rough Riders under Colonel Theodore Roosevelt singing "There'll be a hot time in the ole Town tonight." In making his report later, Major General Wheeler said, of this battle, "the reports of all their commanders unite in commending the Negro soldier."\textsuperscript{13}
\end{quote}

Woodson and Wesley continue:

The Negroes' achievements, however, did not remove from them the stigma of an inferior status. That Negroes thrive rapidly, are anxious to be educated, and press forward in spite of handicaps made little difference with their traducers. There came a desire for concerted action against the Negro as if he were a menace to civilization.\textsuperscript{14}

Every time the Black community—and, by extension, other minoritized and ostracized communities—make progress, they are traumatized and terrorized by white supremacy and its progeny racism, discrimination, and prejudice. There is always a backlash—a constant push to systemically hold people back under the threat of violence, due solely to ethnic ("race") and gender difference. This is an abomination to God, although much of it over time has been masterminded and promoted by white Christians as well as Christians of color who have assimilated into the nomenclature of a white hermeneutic, which negotiates a white theology and by extension offers a white aesthetic that is devoid of and devalues nonwhite neighbors.

Whiteness has no unified national origin or ethnic ("racial") ancestry. Whiteness has no cultural precedents or unifying sociological, political, or phenotypical antecedents. Whiteness is an illusion of white supremacy—an unproven belief that individuals and, by extension, communities that identify under the covering of white are superior. The simple and plain articulation of this illusion is that those who subscribe to whiteness and its supremacist ideologies, hermeneutics, theologies, and aesthetics believe white people are God's chosen. It is this illusion and the negative experiences of the aforementioned time period that serve as a backdrop for much of the coded nomenclature, negotiating, and understanding of neighbor used by Charles Albert Tindley and many other Black hymn writers of his time. Black hymnists did not (and do not) have the privilege of exposing failures, flaws, or sins as spiritual exercises in humility. Black hymnists, particularly of the nineteenth century, were not allowed the space to complain, moan, or groan about inequities or unfairness, or to cry out for justice. Instead, there is a coded nomenclature that sounds and is as spiritual as it is deliberate in communicating the realities of life for Black people, and especially Black Christians. Inspired by the prophetic hope of Tindley, this
article will offer a reflective gaze on the intersection of hymnology and the study of race, focusing on how Black hymnody has cried out for Christological interventions to end shambolic and systemic oppression against Black people. Issues of unshared nomenclature, non-negotiated meaning, and unreconciled understanding will be explored with an eye toward equality, inclusivity, and redemption, not solely in the communal singing of select hymns but also in their canonization. Further conversation will be focused on how hymns, sung in congregations, become a form of community expression beyond the church. Finally, this article will offer insights and hopes for how scholars approach the study of race within their analytical research and interpretative scholarship on hymns.

We are tossed and driven on the restless sea of time;
Somber skies and howling tempests oft succeed a bright sunshine;
In that land of perfect day, when the mists have rolled away,
We will understand it better by and by. 15

Nomenclature
Hymns have power as religious expressions of divine presence. The power within hymns is encapsulated within the message that is transmitted through text, most often based in scripture or introspective spiritual reflection. In the fall of 1912, George Bennard composed the hymn “The Old Rugged Cross” while serving as a song leader for revivalist Ed E. Mieras. 16 Born in Youngstown, Ohio, and reared in Iowa, Bennard was a member of the Salvation Army before his conversion into the Methodist Church. Published in 1915, “The Old Rugged Cross” was popularized by Homer Rodeheaver and Virginia Asher, who led music as a duo for the Billy Sunday evangelistic campaign. Rodeheaver and Asher recorded the song in 1921. 17

Although Bennard’s faith was in Christ and his affectionate conviction was to God, his focus was on the “old rugged cross,” “the emblem of suffering and shame,” as he writes. 18 Jesus, who died on this old rugged cross, does not enter the narrative until verse 2, and even then he is second in focus to the cross. As I sit with the depicted image of Bennard’s old rugged cross, I am struck by the opening words of James Cone in his penultimate work The Cross and the Lynching Tree, where he writes,

The cross and the lynching tree are separated by nearly 2,000 years. One is the universal symbol of Christian faith; the other is the quintessential symbol of black oppression in America. Though both are symbols of death, one represents a message of hope and salvation, while the other signifies the negation of that message by white supremacy. Despite the obvious similarities between Jesus’ death on a cross and the death of thousands of black men and women strung up to die on a lamppost or tree, relatively few people, apart from black poets, novelists, and other reality-seeing artists, have explored the symbolic connections. 19

Cone’s words invoke the life force of George Perry Floyd, Jr., whose graphic and unnecessary murder is as etched in our minds as Bennard’s “old rugged cross.” 20 The exorbitant tragedy of May 25, 2020 still evokes a host of feelings in me that are summed up in composer and publisher Kenneth Morris’s profound text published in 1944:

We are tossed and driven on the restless sea of time;
Somber skies and howling tempests oft succeed a bright sunshine;
In that land of perfect day, when the mists have rolled away,
We will understand it better by and by.
There are some things I may not know
There are some places I can’t go,
But I am sure of this one thing,
That God is real for I can feel him
dee p within.\textsuperscript{21}

Or perhaps composer and National Baptist
Convention Music Director Lucie E.
Campbell’s “Is He Yours?” better conveys
the sentiment:

I am not blessed with riches, am helpless
as can be;
I’m sometimes void of shelter and
of clothes;
I have this satisfaction as I sail this
stormy sea,
King Jesus is my pilot, Is he Yours?

He’s my water when I’m thirsty, when
hungry, he’s my bread;
My protection from the stormy wind
that blows;
My comfort when I’m lonely; when
other friends have fled;
This friend will never leave you,
Is he yours?

You may be poor and helpless, you may
be old and gray;
Like Job, from head to foot be full
of sores;
Just take your case to Jesus, and your
night will turn to day,
He’s my joy, my hope, my comfort,
Is he yours?

He satisfied my mother, when death
came stealing on,
She used to say when e’er my
eyelids close,
My Jesus will be with me, and take
me safely home,
For years he’s been my doctor,
Is he yours?\textsuperscript{22}

Rather than overspiritualizing these
deeply personal texts by profoundly spiritual
people, can we hear the practical pain? Do
we actually hear the clamorous pleas and
loud prayers not only for justice, but also
for equity? I would suggest that we cannot
and do not. Many of our ecclesial practices,
and certainly our performative scholarly
practices, lack an intense element of pastoral
sensitivity that is demanded by the text (and,
shall I add, the people) we study. These
texts are not mere prose stitched together
with scintillating subjects, action-oriented
verbs, and profound adjectives; these are
the honest and transparent musings of
individuals engaged in dialogue with God
while offering us the opportunity to look
over their shoulders. Campbell is not trying
to grip your heart when she writes, “King
Jesus is my pilot, Is he yours?”; she is availing
hers. Morris is not trying to stimulate your
emotions when he writes, “There are some
things I may not know / There are some
places I can’t go, / But I am sure of this one
thing, / That God is real for I can feel him
dee p within”; he is trying to share his. We
tend to take the text and make it ours rather
than to share in the experience of the author
or composer. We have a nomenclature
issue; we are not referring to things by the
same terms. We have been taught, in some
cases trained, or have taught ourselves to
sing hymns in a way where the composed
text becomes a portal to channel our own
emotions, feelings, and experiences. It takes
a courageously honest analyst to realize
that the “things” that Morris “may not
know” and the “places” he could not go
were very pragmatic reflections of Jim and
Jane Crow segregation during the 1940s,
especially within the Christian Church.
His expressions, although they make for
tremendously vivid analogies, were very
practical articulations of his experiences as a Black man who was also a Christian. Similarly, Campbell’s vivid images of King Jesus as her pilot, friend, comfort, and doctor provoke the Christian imagination in ways that can appeal to the creativity of spiritual people. But then we miss the reality that King Jesus had to be Campbell’s pilot, friend, comfort, and doctor because she did not have access to these resources as a Black woman who was also a Christian. Although named the same, our experiences are not always congruent.

When we sing John Newton’s “Amazing Grace,” his text becomes a portal for our self-acknowledgment of our own blindness or our own life experience of being lost. We do not, however, position his text as a self-confession of his role as a former slave trader. That would be too heavy for most of us to acknowledge, and certainly is too heavy a reading for your or your parents’ favorite hymn. People of color do not have the privilege of using hymnody as a transparent confession of sins in a way where we are not further demonized, vilified, or injured.

Hymns are compositions used for religious contexts. They serve as expressions of transcendental reflection, often spiritual in nature. Hymns are historically revered for their divine and frequent redemptive nature. They are most often systematized by religious precepts that operate as inclusive faith filters based on a perceived hermeneutic that is assumed to be universal, although often it is not. Within the United States and in other national contexts, there is a historic conflation of godliness and nationalism that has matured into an abyss of questions as we reflect on what previous generations took for granted: that assimilation into the faith equates to assimilation into the national identity. The perfect conflation of visible racial disparities with visible gender and identity disparities during the Covid-19 pandemic, mixed with visible economic disparities and other clear signs of a lack of equity and inclusion, should have us all asking, not is God real, but are we really worshipping God?

Hymns are inherently meant to be sung in community. In fact, hymns are meant not only to identify a community, but also to build and hold the community together. That said, can Christians truly be a community if we refuse to see the connection between Bennard’s “Old Rugged Cross” and the lynching (murder) of George Floyd? Our nomenclature for community or church is out of alignment. The apostle Paul’s exhortation—“There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to one hope when you were called, one Lord, one faith, one baptism; one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all”—seems to ring hollow as we see the ever-increasing division within the Church of Jesus Christ worldwide. Mere denominationalism is not the concern; this is much deeper. This is human arrogance in defining for God who deserves and should receive God’s love, as if we were the divine entity that inspired John 3:16–17. As if we are the arbiters of how much and whom God so loves. In our eisegetical revision of the sacred text, we get to condemn the world rather than to participate in the promised divine salvation. In this revised biblical narrative, the focus on empire building and church-reinforced oppression (akin to the Ku Klux Klan) makes complete sense. In this revised reading of sacred scripture, the church’s participation and complicity in colonization and recolonization makes
complete sense. In this revised biblical narrative, replacing Indigenous expression with western exceptionalism for the sake of cultural imperialism makes complete sense.

Hymns can and should be used as a catalyst to draw the church back to the spiritual discipline of lament. As the Hebrew children used the Psalter, we, their Christ-following spiritual progeny, should use our created body of work to invoke healing and hope. The Church of Jesus Christ has deferred maintenance relative to generations and generations of missed opportunities to join together to lament the errors, ills, and evils of our own doing. “Communal lament in these and many other situations and seasons may certainly remind us all of the apostle Paul’s call to unity through his admonition in Ephesians 4:

There is one body and one Spirit–just as you were called to the one hope that belongs to your call–one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all. 25

As I have written elsewhere, “Our failure to gather together for communal lament has only led to further separation and segmentation, calling forth more tragedy, more division, and less hope.” 26

Although spectators around the world have seen the suffering of Afro-Diasporic people and have overwhelmingly acknowledged their resiliency, rarely do we understand Black people as a healing people. Black expression, whether via song, text, scripture, or creative genius, is a product of collective and communal healing, not just our resilience. Resilience is a prerequisite of survival; it is not a badge of honor. Unfortunately, when we call a people resilient, it means that they can “take it.” Here, resilience implies sturdy, rugged, and strong. It means that resilient people by nature are superhuman and do not hurt, they do not bruise, nor do they grow weary or worn. The expectation is that resilient people will endure and thus there is no urgency for intervention. Resilient people do not need immediate justice. Resilient people do not need immediate equity. Resilient people do not need to be freed from slavery on September 27, 1862, the actual date of the signing of Emancipation Proclamation; they can wait until January 1 of the following year, the date it was effective. The enslaved in Texas do not need to be freed with the enslaved from the rest of the nation, they can wait another two and a half years. Black hymnists were not writing from a position of resilience, they were writing from a position of urgency knowing that their help was not going to come from other human beings, thus the only hope was to truly wait on the Lord.

We are often destitute of the things that life demands,
Want of food and want of shelter,
thirsty hills and barren lands;
We are trusting in the Lord, and according to God’s Word,
We will understand it better by and by. 27

Negotiation

In Howard Thurman’s 1976 opus Jesus and the Disinherited, he recalls his childhood experience serving as his grandmother’s caregiver. As he shares, “she was born a slave and lived until the Civil War on a plantation near Madison, Florida.” 28 Thurman revealed that as her caretaker part of his responsibilities was to serve as her scribe and reader. He writes,
When I was older and was half through college, I chanced to be spending a few days at home near the end of summer vacation. With a feeling of great temerity I asked her one day why it was that she would not let me read any of the Pauline letters. What she told me I shall never forget. “During the days of slavery,” she said, “the master’s minister would occasionally hold services for the slaves. Old man McGhee was so mean that he would not let a Negro minister preach to his slaves. Always the white minister used as his text something from Paul. At least three or four times a year he used as a text: ‘Slaves, be obedient to them that are your masters . . . , as unto Christ.’ Then he would go on to show it was God’s will that we were slaves and how, if we were good and happy slaves, God would bless us. I promised my Maker that if I ever learned to read and if freedom ever came, I would not read that part of the Bible.”

From Thurman’s grandmother’s strong desire to stay away from the writing of Paul to the corrupt reduction of the liberation narratives and tropes of the Bible in the nineteenth-century Slave Bible, the sacred text has been weaponized to limit the strength of Black people’s faith, and yet the exact opposite has occurred. According to the Museum of the Bible in Washington, D.C., “About 90 percent of the Old Testament is missing” in the Slave Bible and “50 percent of the New Testament is missing. . . . Put another way, there are 1,189 chapters in a standard Protestant Bible. This Bible contains only 232.” Despite these awful tactics, according to the Center for the Study of Global Christianity, since 2018 there have been more Christians in the continent of Africa (631 million) than anywhere else on the planet. Latin America (601 million) comes in second. As of 2000, 62 percent of Christians globally were of people color, rising to 68 percent in 2015. Yet, many still believe that Christianity is the white people’s religion.

Whether we are wrestling with past trauma as a result of poor pastoral leadership or dealing with a lacuna of understanding due to a malnourished biblical diet, we are all negotiating the challenges of sacred people in a sinful world. This negotiation forces us to rethink, reconsider, and reimagine our proximity and alignment to the source of our faith. Although Thurman deeply loved his grandmother, he had the courage to rethink her own personal relationship with the writing of Paul as a former enslaved person. Thurman had to reconsider her emotional processing and potential misinterpretation of Paul’s writings, particularly those regarding enslavement. Further, Thurman had to reimagine the biblical writing in the context of what God desired and what Christ did in order to bring God’s will to fruition. This negotiation is not easy, nor is it quick work.

In 2015, Music Librarian David Hunter of the University of Texas at Austin released a well-researched yet controversial biography of the famed German composer George Frideric Handel. Hunter revealed the then little-known fact that Handel was an investor in the Royal African Company, one of two official British slave-trading companies. Transactions discovered from 1720 were not alone. Many scholars knew of transactions in the 1710s and 1720s, yet these facts were disregarded as “signs of the times.” During the advent season, I have since had to negotiate whether I would participate in the public singing of Handel’s Messiah, one of my longtime favorite
seasonal rituals. Like Thurman (and his grandmother), I am forced to negotiate my own feelings of participating in the singing of work funded by the slave economy. Handel's musical talents are undeniable; I will not dispute that. I just choose not to willingly participate in the slave economy that continues to generate profits without any sense of restorative repair to the progeny of the enslaved whose bodies were broken so that Handel could excel at his craft. The honesty of such negotiation often provokes fragility in the minds and hearts of those who may be offended, even now, by the words that I write. This fragility would pose my negotiation as a declaration of war, injuring individuals and perhaps institutions who feel singled out by their potential benefit from what I am referring to as the slave economy. This reaction causes a deep and permeating tension. Who gives me the right to defame and prejudice Handel’s character for future generations who will revere him as a fixture of a very narrow musical canon? By extension, who gives me the right to attempt to decenter or decolonize in a manner that may lead to recommendations to replace a canonized genius who is also a white male with a potential candidate of color, woman, or nonbinary human being who might be all of the above in some way? Who gives me the right/rite to replace one whom I perceive as an oppressor (or participant in an oppressive economic system) with a previously unknown and certainly unheralded candidate with no significant accomplishments, nor an equally measured body of work? This is the negotiation! Folks who have historically been minoritized or otherized were not given access to patrons, donors, or audiences, and certainly did not have their works commissioned or even programmed. This is why the negotiation must include not only rethinking and reconsidering but also, and most important, reimagining. We must reimagine a more diverse and inclusive canon as we come to a working understanding that God is not a white God who only loves, values, and blesses white people.

This is not solely a challenge in the United States of America. The British-born Black liberation theologian Anthony Reddie poses the question of negotiation in this manner: “can Christianity be remade so as to shed its collusive relationship with oppression, domination, and exploitation?” Reddie suggests that in many ways Christianity has been “infected” by nationalistic and supremacist ideologies which cause “cultural dissonance” in places where there should be harmony and equity. This infection causes trauma, as experienced by Thurman’s grandmother. This infection manifests in redacted versions of sacred texts that are used to proselytize human beings with an ailing religion based in a partial truth and framed through an oppressive lens. This infection causes harm and leads to unjust and inequitable treatment of people and their expressions. This infection leads to an unbalanced negotiation that ultimately devalues nonwhite creation and generates an unfair economic system that offers inclusion on the surface yet never offers an equitable return on participation. Participating in the singing of Handel’s Messiah offers a sense of belonging to a seasonal ritual that builds community and creates equitable space, yet the financial proceeds reveal otherwise. This infection leads to hymns from around the world being coopted, appropriated, and gentrified. Perhaps a more localized manner of looking at this infection is...
revealed through the treatment of “ethnic” hymns. Anyone who has ever sung “Kum Ba Yah” will find it interesting that a number of hymnals ascribe it as “African.” At least one hymnal identifies the selection with origins in Angola. Yet, a selection as such should have a note or two at the bottom of the page to give more clarity to the cultural and historical context from whence it came. Most have not really done the research on the three potential origin narratives of the song. Rather than relying on assumptions and well-intentioned cultural tropes and stereotypes, we must see each other as equal in order to honor each other’s cultural artifacts as equal.

Trials dark on every hand, and we cannot understand
All the ways that God could lead us to that blessed promised land;
But He guides us with His eye, and we’ll follow till we die,
For we’ll understand it better by and by.

**Naming Our Neighbors**

All over the world, progeny of the African Diaspora have held fast to the understanding of community as an aggregation of individuals by invitation (more than just ancestral bloodline). Oftentimes, what Black people call community is much different from what non-Black or non-Afro-Diasporic people call community. Within Afro-Diasporic people, alignment, proximity, and intimacy are essential elements of community. If you are invited to join, you are not invited to be peripheral, you are invited to the core of the community. Community elders invite you into proximate, intimate relationships as descendants. Community mentors invite you into proximate, intimate relationships as mentees. Community members invite you into proximate, intimate relationships as siblings. It is this nomenclature that is realized as a pragmatic, relational commitment rather than an aspirational or assumed connection.

Our alignment, proximity, and intimacy are part of how we build shared language, shared tradition, shared aesthetics, and shared spiritual experiences. I define spiritual as a unique relationship between a being (often human) and their assigned or ascribed deity (often God). This unique relationship has nuances that are often not communicated widely or openly as a systematized understanding. Spiritual beings, however, create meaningful spiritual expressions and engagements through the organization of religion, a systematized manner of expressing shared beliefs, shared rituals, shared traditions, and shared aesthetics. Our honesty about our religious experiences helps us to be truthful about not just what we call each other but also how we negotiate the inherent differences between intention and experience. Nineteenth-century missionaries intended to spread the love of God, yet the experiences of the communities they were spreading the love of God to did not experience it as love.

Within Afro-Diasporic communities, personal agency is yielded on behalf of the greater good within the intimate space of alignment and proximity. Within these spaces we use the metaphor (and philosophy) of the open hand. What I have, I place in my hands to give. When I am in need, I open my hands to receive. Grounded in the Old Testament scriptures found in Deuteronomy, believers in the philosophy of open hands are guided by the command,
“but you shall open your hand to him and lend him sufficient for his need, whatever it may be.” A second passage offers additional insight: “For there will never cease to be poor in the land. Therefore I command you, you shall open wide your hand to your brother, to the needy and to the poor, in your land.” Throughout the Diaspora open-hand societies, whether formally named or not, exist within the depths of communities not just for community members but also for external visitors who are sponsored into the community by any community member.

In many ways, this follows the tenets of Jesus, who taught us to pray using collective, communal language:

Our Father, who art in Heaven,
Hallowed be your name.
Your Kingdom come,
Your will be done,
On earth as it is in heaven
Give us this day our daily bread.
Forgive us our trespasses,
As we forgive those who trespass against us.
Lead us not into temptation,
But deliver us from evil.
For thine is the kingdom, the power
and the glory forever and ever.
Amen.

It is interesting to do an analysis of the words of Jesus and to study his desired notion of community, which is clearly in line with Afro-Diasporic understanding of alignment, proximity, and intimacy. This is despite the fact that Afro-Diasporic people have been seen as not worthy of Christianity due to a perceived emphasis on ancestral worship and other presumptions that reflect believed racialized tropes. Ancestral worship is often touted as pagan, ritualistic worship, although calling the names of the ancestors has always been a discipline of remembering from whence one came. It is interesting to note that Jesus quotes and honors those who came before him numerous times. In the Gospel according to Matthew, Jesus quotes from Deuteronomy, Exodus, Hosea, Isaiah, and the Psalter.

Jesus’s teaching on community is focused on his command “that you love one another just as I have loved you, you also are to love one another.” Inspired by Jesus’s use of the phrase “one another,” the apostle Paul amplifies this teaching on community by utilizing the same phrase over and over again in the New Testament. Guided by Jesus’s focus on community, Paul challenges the believers to “be devoted to one another,” “live in harmony with one another,” “care for one another,” and “be patient with one another.” A close reading of the New Testament will reveal roughly 100 uses of “one another,” with the majority occurring in the writing of Paul as he attempts to train the believers in the teachings of Jesus Christ.

Jesus instructs us about the neighbor in his teaching on the greatest commandment and sums it all up with his teaching in John 13:35. To paraphrase, “they will know you are my disciples by your love.” We have not historically loved our neighbors well. I offer these words, previously published in There Is A Balm in Gilead: A Call to Lament Together, as a closing thought:

In our current season, defined by hashtags and slogans referencing realized pain and trauma, our collective engagement with God must shift toward a greater awareness of what it means to be a part of the Christian body and what it means to worship in community. Communal worship that fails to acknowledge the pain, suffering, and trauma of some tends to do more harm to the whole.
Temptations, hidden snares often take us unawares,
And our hearts are made to bleed for a thoughtless word or deed;
And we wonder why the test when we try to do our best,
But we’ll understand it better by and by.\textsuperscript{50}

Tindley’s text and tune for “We’ll Understand It Better By and By” amplified and in many ways inspired Christological interventions to systemic and oppressive evils. Within the Black community, Tindley was an anointed vessel of God. His narrative is not linear and as much as he had exceptional accomplishments and phenomenal accolades, Tindley suffered much. Revered as the “Prince of Preachers” for his dynamic oratory savvy, he was also known as the “Progenitor of African American Gospel Music,” due to his phenomenal gift at capturing the senses and sentiments of the community from which he came in ways that spoke truth to power.\textsuperscript{51}

Tindley understood the complexity of the tensions illuminated in the historical, social, political, economic, and spiritual narratives of Black people in the United States and throughout the African Diaspora. Tindley’s reflection on his own experiences as a Black man guided his creative and ministerial process and career. As for many of his day, the experience of lynching was not a historical activity for him; it was a real-time occurrence that put him in direct proximity to the tension between Bennard’s “The Old Rugged Cross” and Cone’s \textit{The Cross and the Lynching Tree}. Tindley was a real-time commentator on the visceral evil of the day and was able to articulate his experience and prophetic hope through nomenclature that spoke volumes and resonated powerfully with the various Black communities within the United States and beyond. Through his text and tune, Tindley negotiated the space between respectability and responsibility while staying grounded in and girded by the biblical text (1 Corinthians 13:12) that served as the muse for his emphatic declaration that “we’ll understand it better by and by.” Tindley’s sincere and transparent vulnerability refused and in some ways refuted the characterization of Black people, especially Black Christians, as not loved, cared for, or kept by God’s grace, as often depicted, mentioned, and imaged in white supremacist ideations of Black Christianity.

Tindley’s words when decoded offer a unique insight into a world where a George Floyd is lynched every day. Unfortunately, outside of the Black community, many are unable to hear or understand what is going on, even though they sing and perhaps even enjoy the music on a weekly basis. Tindley negotiated the tension of serving the Methodist Church, and not the African Methodist Episcopal or the African Methodist Episcopal Zion traditions (often known as the Black Methodists). Tindley also negotiated the reality that as his sermons and hymns emerged as iconic, the meanings behind his words were altered for purposes beyond his (or perhaps God’s) desired effect by people unfamiliar with the context from which he wrote. In essence, the academic study of Tindley has been gentrified and whitewashed in order to emphasize his Methodism and diminish his Blackness.

Tindley knew who his neighbors were, and he knew how to name them. Tindley
understood that much of what was going on at the time of the writing of his hymn would be reconciled by God, “when the saints of God are gathered home.” Then, and perhaps only then, “we’ll understand it better by and by.”

NOTES

1 An earlier version of this article was presented as a keynote lecture for the virtual Study Day on “Hymns and Race: Agency, Mobility, Coloniality” curated by Erin Johnson-Williams and Philip Burnett and hosted by Durham University Oct. 22, 2021. I am grateful for the thoughtful and insightful comments of two unidentified peer reviewers.

2 First published in the first edition of Soul Echoes: A Collection of Songs for Religious Meetings (Philadelphia: Union Publishing Company, 1905), Rev. Charles Albert Tindley’s well-known hymn “We’ll Understand It Better By and By” serves as both muse and cicerone for this article. Here, the chorus of the hymn is used as an epigraph.


4 Ibid.

5 “Maafa” is a Kiswahili word for disaster. The term has been used to offer an Africancentric perspective on the effects and impact of the Atlantic slave trade as well as the events that preceded it and occurred thereafter. Scholars such as Maulana Karenga, William Wright, Delores P. Aldridge, Carlene Young, and Omari H. Kokole use “Maafa” and/or “African Holocaust” to recenter the slave trade’s impact on African heritage, culture, and legacy across the diaspora.


7 Founded in 1865 by six former Confederate Army officers, the Tennessee-based social club Ku Klux Klan grew to about 3 to 6 million members during its peak (1924–25). Over the generations, the Klan’s target list has grown to include Black people, Jews, Latinx, Asian Americans, Catholics, Indigenous, immigrants, LGBTQ, Muslims, and atheists.

8 Historically Black Colleges and Universities were created to provide access to education to Black students during the height of segregation when Blacks were legally prevented from attending colleges and universities.

9 Reverend Dickey and his wife Sarah admired the work of religious leader and reformer Jehudi Ashmun, a member of the American Colonization Society that colonized Liberia and resettled freed Blacks from the United States on African soil.

10 Confederate holdovers in Texas refused to acknowledge the end of the Civil War and thus did not recognize the Emancipation Proclamation, thereby continuing the practice of slavery and indentured servitude until Union Army Gen. Gordon Granger marched into Galveston, Texas, with General Order No. 3 on June 19, 1865, proclaiming an end to enslavement in Texas. After generations of advocacy, the Juneteenth (June 19) National Independence Day Act was signed into law on June 17, 2021 by President Joe Biden, making Juneteenth the eleventh federal holiday in the United States.


12 Jim Crow laws were local and state laws reestablishing and enforcing segregation during the late nineteenth century in order to remove the political and economic progress of Blacks in the southern states of the United States. Trailblazing lawyer, civil rights, and women’s rights activist and Episcopal priest Anna Pauline “Pauli” Murray coined the term “Jane Crow” to acknowledge the intersectional prejudice and discrimination due to ethnicity (“race”) and gender as felt by Black women due to the oppressive laws.


14 Ibid., 198.

15 Verse 1 of Tindley’s “We’ll Understand It Better By and By.”


17 Ibid.


20 On May 25, 2020, two months after the COVID-19 pandemic shut down the United States and much of the world, George Perry Floyd, Jr. (George Floyd) was accused of using a counterfeit twenty-dollar bill at a Minneapolis corner store. During the arrest, police officer Derek Chauvin aggressively knelt on Floyd’s neck and back for 9 minutes and 29 seconds, causing his death. Floyd’s last words were, “I can’t breathe.”

21 Verse 1 of Kenneth Morris’s “My God Is Real” (also known as “Yes, God Is Real”) as published in The National Baptist Hymnal, 249. Morris was born in 1917 and died in 1989.

22 Verses 1–4 of Campbell’s “Is He Yours?,” National Baptist Hymnal, 291. Campbell was born in 1885 and died in 1963.

23 Ephesians 4:5–6 (NIV).

24 “For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life. For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him” (NIV).

25 Ephesians 4:4–6 (ESV).


27 Verse 2 of Tindley’s “We’ll Understand It Better By and By.”


29 Ibid., 20.

30 Originally published in London (1807), the Slave Bible was used to proselytize enslaved people in the British Caribbean colonies with the goal of teaching them a white supremacist theology. See https://www.museumofthebible.org/exhibits/slaive-bible-for-more-information.


32 The Center for the Study of Global Christianity is located at Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary and produces annual studies, research data collections, and infographics such as this one: https://www.gordonconwell.edu/wp-content/uploads/sites/13/2019/04/GlobalChristianityinfographic.pdf (accessed Sept. 22, 2021).

33 Ibid.

34 Ibid.


38 Ibid., 53.


40 Praise Ways (Don Mill, ON: Presbyterian Church in Canada, 1975), no. 45.


42 Verse 3 of “We’ll Understand It Better By and By.”

43 Deuteronomy 15:8 (ESV).

44 Deuteronomy 15:11 (ESV).

45 Known as “The Lord’s Prayer,” this is the most recited and memorized liturgical prayer across the generations of Christianity. Its antecedent is recorded in the Gospel according to Matthew (6:9–13) and in the Gospel according to Luke (11:2–4).

46 Matthew 4:4 (Deuteronomy 8:3); Matthew 4:7 (Deuteronomy 6:16); Matthew 4:10 (Deuteronomy 6:13); Matthew 5:21 (Exodus 20:13); Matthew 5:27 (Exodus 20:14); Matthew 9:13 (Hosea 6:6); Matthew 15:7–9 (Isaiah 29:13); Matthew 21:16 (Psalm 8:2); Matthew 21:42, 44 (Psalm 118:22, 23); Matthew 27:46 (Psalm 22:1).

47 John 13:34 (ESV).

48 Romans 12:10; Romans 12:16; 1 Corinthians 12:25; Ephesians 4:2 (ESV).

49 Price, There Is a Balm in Gilead, 8.

50 Verse 4 of “We’ll Understand It Better By and By.”