

Preaching [and Teaching] Thurman's New Testament Spirituality

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Abstract: *The paper considers the hermeneutical and homiletical model of New Testament spirituality available through Howard Thurman's writings. The paper argues that at least three features distinguish Thurman's NT spirituality from dominant understandings of Christian spirituality that serve preachers, biblical and theological teachers, and the NT exegete. Attuned to the histories and contexts of African Americans and diverse understandings of spiritual experience, Thurman's approach to NT spirituality attends to matters of genre and biography, explores the activities of God's Spirit as attested in the Bible and the lives of faithful people, and utilizes diverse modes of African American rhetorical aesthetics from oral, literary, and visual materials.*

Sitting among homileticians as a New Testament (NT) biblical hermeneutician, I was struck by how infrequently such roundtable discussions occur. What a novel idea—scholars of preaching and interpretation, both of whom are lifelong students of the Bible and theology, talking to each other as equals! The consultation confirmed a hunch I had going into the event: homileticians and hermeneuticians are, at the very least, first cousins, if not siblings. We belong at the family table together. There is much we can learn in exchanges about methods and approaches, sources of interpretation for preaching, and the diverse audiences of concern that call us to interpret and proclaim. Seated among my roundtable collaborators, I felt our call was decisive, not general. We convened unapologetically to describe Black contemplative preaching as an undeveloped area of study that deserves conversation and definition within homiletics *and* biblical studies. I discovered something in that conversation as the sole biblical scholar. We share a common language, commitment, and aim.

One of the most memorable details from our collaboration was the diverse sources we packed in our satchels and showcased from our computer screens. Our discussions highlighted that the sources of Black contemplative preaching include the Bible and extend beyond it. Figures like Howard Thurman, James Baldwin, Pauli Murray, Amanda Gorman, and Jarena Lee are necessary commentators, supplying the interpreter's notes necessary for probing Black spirituality as a site from which we preach and interpret. Together with the Bible, the written texts of such figures forge pathways toward inner and outer meanings that inlay strands of Black spiritualities interweaving across the US American landscape. Those "inter-weavings" cross generations, regions, cultures, artistic expressions, and audiences. The Bible of Black contemplative preaching and its contributing interpreters come from here and there, yesterday and today, and they gaze in and out of themselves and their communities. Always guided by God's Spirit and the spirit of the age from which they interpret, practitioners of Black contemplative preaching faithfully mine meanings that look to futures afar off. I learned these insights while sitting at the consultation tables among my preaching friends. From our intellectual sharing, our diverse reference points shaped our understandings about not just what and how to preach but how to responsibly handle the Bible in dialogue with those wielding sacred words of contemplation.

The consultation was a needed table-talk community for me. It reset my understanding of what sprouts at the meeting place between preacher and interpreter within Black contemplative traditions when New Testament spirituality is in view. We bore witness to each other at that site. We watched and listened for the threads of Black contemplative traditions our seven-member group tracked. Among the visiting friends and respondents who joined us at the table, we shared testimonies not broadly heard in the fields of homiletics and biblical hermeneutics. Black contemplative preaching materialized as communally aimed. It moved from our personal inner selves and intellect to the webs of outer selves that constitute our communities. Our table talks mapped how approaches in Black contemplative preaching travel in the opposite direction, too. It moves from our outer selves and networks of community relations and histories to inner fashionings that are incomplete and continually uncoiling. Seated at the T-junction between Black contemplative traditions, preaching, and New Testament studies with new colleagues and a trustworthy “companion of old” named Howard Washington Thurman, I asked, what is Black contemplative preaching to New Testament studies and which way should we go?

Spirituality Studies: New Testament and Howard Thurman

I often tell students, especially those enrolled in my advanced exegesis or Howard Thurman interpretation courses, that before I was a biblical scholar, I was a preacher. I am one of those people who came from a household of preachers and turned preacher herself at 16. I knew the New Testament as a book of faith and a repository for exhortation, prayer, song, warning, and influence. My Baptist and Pentecostal preaching father, grandfather, uncles, and aunts carried the Bible to hospitals. They read it at the dining table and studied it while sitting in their offices to prepare for Thursday night's Bible study and prayer service. Raised in a household dominated by black pastors and preachers from the South, I knew how to preach the Bible before I learned about the critical tools of exegesis. I was unaware of how those tools can enrich or diminish the sacred Africana aesthetics of proclamation, exposition, and the inner workings of black faith.

What does the biblical scholar have to say about the preaching life? Focused on language, reception history, and the social history of ancient civilizations preserved in the canons of the Torah, the New Testament, and even other canons like the Quran or Pseudepigraphal writings, biblical scholars are known for being more concerned about “setting the text” and its past contexts than preaching. Traditionally, we aim first to identify the most plausible original wording, historical parameters, and theological soundings of sacred writings. We are not required to concern ourselves with how contemporary audiences understand biblical writings and whether the historical contexts fully align with our theological commitments by which we resource the Bible today. Many of us, however, can recall stories of biblical preaching and study in faith communities because such experiences were our initial introductions to vocations of interpretation.

Furthermore, biblical scholars are traditionally not trained to think of the NT in matters of “spirituality.” On topics like Christology, soteriology, eschatology, etc.—the NT exegete trains to distill from biblical writings and interpretive histories the threads of meaning and relevance that shape such theological concepts. We identify the *topoi* (or discussion places) in biblical writings and locate them in the histories of biblical interpretation, past and present. Much of our methodological inheritance derives from the interpretative agendas of German and European schools of thought from the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, which trained generations of

scholarly interpreters across fields.¹ However, when it comes to homiletics and its modes of communication and practices for contemporary cultural proclamation, and even more so when the discussion shifts to spirituality studies, the New Testament exegete is typically less prepared.

It would be almost a decade after I accepted my preaching vocation, which quickly transformed into a multi-vocational identity of scholar-teacher-preacher-writer—that I encountered Thurman as a preaching exemplar. By age 17, barely one year after I started preaching, someone gifted me with Thurman’s book, *Meditations of the Heart*. In my initial encounter with him, I thought of Thurman as a stirring and revelatory writer of Christian meditations and prayers. I did not learn he was an expositor in the tradition of Africana preaching until almost a decade later when my preaching vocation was in jeopardy.² I was poised to abandon the black preaching life for the life of the mind and the profession of a biblical scholar. Thurman became an exemplar of how I can hold the two together.³

Thurman’s approach to NT interpretation blended exegetical data, spiritual probing, and social reflections with practices of contemplative preaching. He supplied a model in which preacher and exegete, or biblical interpretation and matters of the Spirit coexist as epistemological frames that serve both faith communities and intellectual academies. Thurman’s model is on full display in his collection of meditations called *Deep is the Hunger*, his personal interpretation of America’s history of segregation in *The Luminous Darkness*, and his sermon collection in *Temptations of Jesus*, to name a few. In the epilogue to *Jesus and the Disinherited*, Thurman depicts the vocational life as a working paper: “The life working paper of the individual is made up of a creative synthesis of what the man is in all his parts and how he reacts to the living process.”⁴ Thurman’s working paper metaphor provides a means to reconsider the impactful and rhetorical blend of preacher and exegete in biblical spirituality.

Keeping the working paper in mind, Thurman’s NT spirituality appears to solve a fundamental problem that arises in traditional structures of theological schools and religious departments. Whereas biblical homiletics and hermeneuticians often function in separate fields of study within theological education, Thurman assumes their essential compatibility. Exploring Thurman’s NT spirituality brings studies in NT preaching, exegesis, and spirituality together. All three coexist in Thurman’s model of NT spirituality, which issues from preaching subjects tuned for pedagogical aims. Although Thurman did not systematically describe his NT spirituality, he nonetheless left guideposts in his sermons, essays, meditations, and recordings. The question becomes, what is Thurman’s NT spirituality, and how does it serve the preacher, the teacher, and the exegete simultaneously? Three features distinguish Thurman’s NT spirituality, which makes it preacher-teacher-ready. Thurman (1) leverages matters of genre and biography and (2) focuses on not just language and depictions of Spirit activity in the NT but its models of interiority that attend to social circumstances. He also (3) enacts, as a preacher, a particular mode of African American rhetorical aesthetic, which resources the materials of African American arts, such as the Spiritual songs or the tenor of his own voice, to foster awareness about a God that is both knowable and being revealed. With these three ingredients,

¹ Shively T. J. Smith, “Historical Criticism: Methods,” in *The New Cambridge Companion to Biblical Interpretation*, eds Ian Boxall and Bradley Gregory (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2023), 37–54.

² Martha Simmons and Frank A. Thomas, *Preaching with Sacred Fire: An Anthology of African American Sermons, 1750 to the Present* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2010), 491–492.

³ Shively T. J. Smith, “Thurman-eutics: Howard Thurman’s Clothesline for the Interpretation of the Life of the Mind and Journey of the Spirit,” in *Anchored in the Current: Discovering Howard Thurman as Educator, Activist, Guide, and Prophet*, ed. Gregory C. Ellison II (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2020), 71–83.

⁴ Howard Thurman, *Jesus and the Disinherited* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2022), 100.

Thurman is always looking for various interpretive outcomes and a medley of proclamations that transgress the boundaries that keep even human beings separate and distant from each other.

A Matter of Genre: What is the New Testament in Thurman's Spirituality?

New Testament spirituality remains a relatively untouched area of study in critical biblical studies. Though it has pride of place in spirituality studies, it tends to be absent from the conversation within formal studies in the New Testament. One need only explore the current roster of program units and paper titles within the Society of Biblical Literature's annual meeting bulletin to notice how NT spirituality is unattended in intellectual discussions. In the annual meeting slated for 2023, only four sessions included the language of spirituality in conversation with matters of women's mysticism, Gnosticism, or rituals in the biblical world—none of those posted papers specifically named New Testament Spirituality as the subject. Interestingly, when the biblical field raises the conversation of NT spirituality, it is typically among Catholic biblical scholars, not Protestant or interfaith-identifying scholars. It is also surprising how rarely the phrase appears within current configurations and articulations of Africana biblical studies.

Though few, some helpful definitions of NT spirituality clarify Thurman's working understanding. A conservative biblical scholar, Gordon Fee casts New Testament spirituality as primarily exegetically oriented. Essential to understanding the meaning of spirituality, according to Fee, is mapping the language of Spirit deployed in biblical literature. He says, "In the New Testament, therefore, spirituality is defined in terms of the Spirit of God (or Christ). One is spiritual to the degree that one lives in and walks by the Spirit; in Scripture the word has no other meaning, and no other measurement" (Fee, *Listening to the Spirit in the Text*, 5). Fee's definition of NT spirituality derives from the activities of God's Spirit narrated in the New Testament. Therefore, he locates spirituality as an object of study and analysis. NT spirituality, described by Fee, is an orienting mode of study that should shape and guide toward a particular interpretive outcome: "...the aim of [biblical] exegesis: to produce in our lives and the lives of others true spirituality, in which God's people live in fellowship with the eternal and living God, and thus in keeping with God's purposes in the world. But to do that effectively, true 'Spirituality' must precede exegesis and flow from it" (Fee, *Listening to the Spirit in the Text*, 6). According to Fee, the spirituality expressed in the NT, when exegetically distilled, gives way to what he calls "true Spirituality." Rather than using phrases like multiple spiritualities, diverse spiritualities, or simply spiritualities in the plural form, Fee sees the outcome as singular and definitive.

In contrast, Sandra Schneiders, a Catholic biblical scholar, expands biblical spirituality beyond the processes of exegesis. Biblical spirituality, according to Schneiders, derives from and informs the quality of the preacher-exegete's interior selves and the quality of their interactions with each other:

Biblical spirituality is not an individual's invention of some pattern of Christian life decorated with biblical texts or an appeal to the Bible for some kind of extrinsic authorization. It is the spirituality, the experience of lived Christian faith, offered to us and modeled for us in Scripture. Nevertheless, this spirituality is not simply observed or admired or even exegeted and explained. It is interiorized by the contemporary reader... Scripture is not only a record of the spirituality of our forebears but a source and pattern of our own spirituality.⁵

Schneiders depicts biblical spirituality as part of the residue of ancestral lineages attached to a personal living pattern. It can reflect the state of interiority of ancestors and forebearers as much

⁵ Sandra M. Schneiders, "Biblical Spirituality," *Interpretation* 56, no. 2 (April 2002): 141.

as it does the individual or current faith community. Moreover, biblical spirituality satisfies more than the curiosities of intellect. It forms ways of being and knowing that surpasses methodical interpretative processes.

So, how might we describe spirituality in general? Eschewing matters of doctrine and exegetical process, Schneiders defines spirituality as a kind of “life integration” that creates human patterns of flourishing rather than human patterns of destruction, such as alcoholism and consumerism.⁶ Schneiders articulates “spirituality as lived experience,” which “can be defined as conscious involvement in the project of life integration through self-transcendence toward the ultimate value one perceives....”⁷

The spirituality Schneiders sets out to define from within the fields of biblical studies and doctrinal theology, Luther E. Smith supplies through describing the elements of Thurman’s biography and the tenets of his theological thought as a “mystic prophet.” In his book, *Howard Thurman: The Mystic Prophet*, Smith says, “Spirituality is a way of life committed to understanding the nature and urging of the spirit. Life organizes all its desires, energy, and resources so that they might be dominated by the spirit. Spirituality brings a harmony to living that is consistent with the peace and will of God.”⁸ Smith offers a definition of spirituality that gives context to understanding Thurman’s brand of mysticism and its contribution to formal theological studies.

Like Schneiders, the meaning of spirituality mediated through Thurman’s extant perspectives serves a pattern of life that leads to oneness and relationship. It is a seeking modality or, in Thurman’s preferred language, “a quest” that is ongoing and ever-changing. The language Thurman uses to discuss spirituality in this way is often “religious experience.” In his sermon collection *Temptations of Jesus*, Thurman says:

In the total religious experience, we learn how to wait; we learn how to ready the mind and the spirit. In the waiting, brooding, lingering, tarrying timeless moments, the essence of the religious experience becomes most fruitful. I work at preparing my mind, my spirit for the moment when God comes to Himself in me. When it happens, I experience His Presence. When this experience becomes an object of thought and reflection, it is then that my mind creates dogmas, creeds, and doctrines. These are the creations of the mind and are, therefore, always after the fact of the religious experience. But they are always out of date. The religious experience is always current, always fresh.⁹

Spirituality for Thurman is dynamic, ever-unfolding, and fundamentally a quest for what is Ultimate. Thurman uses other terms like Presence, God, Creator, and Transcendent to label the ever-escaping subject of spirituality. If God is always current and those who preach and exegete outdated, what is the NT as a mediating mechanism that serves the worship life of Christians and others across space and time? There are two points to consider.

First, Thurman understands the NT as a diverse set of writings by various authors. He sees it as a spiritual anthology constituted by different types of writings, varying perspectives, and distinct experiences reflecting the arc of mortality: life and death. Sometimes, those human experiences are mediated by Spirit, God, the life of Jesus, nature, and the incidents Thurman

⁶ Sandra M. Schneiders, “Christian Spirituality: Definition, Methods and Types,” in *The New SCM Dictionary of Christian Spirituality*, ed. Philip Sheldrake (London: SCM, 2005), 1.

⁷ Schneiders, “Christian Spirituality,” viii.

⁸ Luther E. Smith, Jr., *Howard Thurman: The Mystic as Prophet* (Richmond: Friends of United Press, 1991), 19.

⁹ Howard Thurman, *Temptations of Jesus* (Richmond, IN: Friends United Press, 1978), 14-15.

deems “the daily rounds.” Most often, Thurman acknowledges persistently how human living is populated by and constantly colliding with other human beings and societies. He usually lists types of writings from the Bible he deems scriptural and even “holy.” Among his most frequently referenced places are the Gospels, Psalms, Proverbs, the prophets, and Paul’s letters.

While he rarely mentions the New Testament explicitly as “the New Testament” per se, when it does arise, Thurman has a specific understanding of its significance for the rhetorical moment—which is often the preaching moment. For example, in Thurman’s 1951 sermon on “Forgiveness,” available in *Sermons on the Parables*, he names the New Testament as a source of more than merely biblical references. It is a repository for moral insight and reflection. Yet, according to Thurman, the New Testament also expresses the prejudices and leanings of its authors and the communities to which it was initially intended, leaving other communities and perspectives unacknowledged or discredited. He says:

This morning we are dealing with two of the very striking parables of Jesus. And they have to do with forgiveness of sin. Very simple stories, they are. One of them has a dramatic setting. A Pharisee—and I hope that you will bear in mind that most of the New Testament references to the Pharisees are references that reflect a judgmental attitude toward the Pharisee that [does not acknowledge]... the genius of the Pharisaic movement in Israel. It is a reflection of another kind of attitude, [a] kind of prejudice, and this of course is nothing new, nothing radical; it’s an old familiar thing to those persons who have made any study of either the Pharisees or the Sadducees or of Israel or of the life of Jesus for that matter.¹⁰

Thurman thinks such biases, as articulated in the NT, should not only be identified as such but the historical record of their realities corrected for proper moral consideration. One of the tasks of the preacher of NT spirituality is to communicate the operative prejudices canonized in the Bible from different times and people. The other task is to heighten the awareness of the congregation and gathered community to how they may be interpreting the Bible in a way that does not account for the perspectives of the past that are no longer applicable today. In other words, the preacher of NT spirituality closes the distance between human behavior then and now while also widening the gap between cultural circumstances and differences.

Thus, for Thurman, the biblical text is an ideological collection of literature meriting sifting and weighing. Thurman’s considerations of the ideological entanglements within the NT as matters to address in the preaching moment expands the context of biblical study set out over 30 years ago by Itumeleng J. Mosala, a South African biblical scholar. In his 1989 volume, *Biblical Hermeneutics and Black Theology in South Africa*, Mosala describes the importance of context, particularly the Africana diaspora context in its global fullness, as the necessary starting point for exegesis:

In particular, I hope that black theologians will take black history and culture seriously enough that they will use it more to interrogate the texts of the Bible. I propose that in this appropriation of black history and culture for the purposes of appropriating biblical texts, the category of struggle will serve as a critical grid. It is necessary to take sides in the struggles inscribed in black history and culture as a

¹⁰ Howard Thurman, “Forgiveness” (Sept 30, 1951),” in *Sermons on the Parables* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2013), 37-38.

prior step to taking sides in the struggles that produced the Bible and are significant in it.¹¹

Mosala understands the Bible to take sides. He argues the Bible is a product of the ideologies of its compilers and that an uncritical acceptance of the Bible as the word of God leads to a notion that it has no ideology itself when it does. The Bible's collection as an authorized, canonized set of writings makes it inherently ideological. Furthermore, Mosala asserts biblical interpretation is potentially harmful to colonized peoples, especially people of African descent, who accept the Bible without interrogating its dominant uses. African people's reasons for adopting and adapting the Bible as a source of meaning and even divine revelation require description and definition. Thurman sees the work of NT spirituality, mediated through preaching, as a moment of interrogation and acknowledgment of reasons to adopt some viewpoints of the NT while rejecting others.

Second, Thurman understands the NT as "a record of the spirituality of our forebearers," as Schneiders describes it. For example, Thurman resources his grandmother's understanding of the significance of the NT in his vocation as a preacher. The opportunities and challenges to biblical spirituality for Thurman were set out as a young child listening to the sage words of his grandmother. He rehearses repeatedly throughout his life as a preacher, teacher, and writer the story of his grandmother's sifting of NT writings as relevant or irrelevant to her faith life. He says:

During much of my boyhood I was cared for by my grandmother, who was born a slave and lived until the Civil War on a plantation near Madison, Florida. My regular chore was to do all the reading for my grandmother—she could neither read nor write. Two or three times a week I read the Bible aloud to her. I was deeply impressed by the fact that she was most particular about the choice of Scripture. For instance, I might read many of the more devotional Psalms, some of Isaiah, the Gospels again and again. But the Pauline epistles, never—except, at long intervals, the thirteenth chapter of First Corinthians. My curiosity knew no bounds, but we did not question her about anything.¹²

Capturing his grandmother's rejection of Pauline writings, Thurman depicts the writings of the NT as a contested space. It yields a diversity of NT spiritualities and behaviors, but not all behaviors are moral. For Thurman, many readings, interpretations, and practices stemming from NT spirituality are incompatible with the experiences and faiths of those identified as "disinherited." As Thurman states at the beginning of *Jesus and the Disinherited*, "MANY and varied are the interpretations dealing with the teachings and the life of Jesus of Nazareth. But few of these interpretations deal with what the teachings and the life of Jesus have to say to those who stand, at a moment in human history, with their backs against the wall." Preaching NT spirituality that does not start with the interiority and social realities colliding in the living of the oppressed risks offering a sounding not only out of step with Jesus but lacks the essential aim of spiritual matters—namely, to see those who are unseen.¹³

Interpretive Wrestling and Response

¹¹ Itumeleng Jerry Mosala, *Biblical Hermeneutics & Black Theology* (Grand Rapids: WB Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1989), 11–12.

¹² Thurman, *Jesus and the Disinherited*, 20.

¹³ Adapted from 2 Corinthians 4:18, "because we look not at what can be seen but at what cannot be seen, for what can be seen is temporary, but what cannot be seen is eternal" (NRSVUe).

Spirituality for Thurman is similar to what Schneiders proposes. What makes Thurman's working notions important, however, is how they were formed out of Black life in America in the early and mid-twentieth century in the US Spirituality, mainly as it is interpreted and expressed through the communicative work of preaching, according to Thurman's model, orients human beings to a non-intuitive way. Forged from the struggles and hopes of African American people—from those enslaved to those navigating the terrains of Jim Crow or cultural prejudice—Thurman's biblical interpretive play does not reach for sureness. NT spirituality uncovers and distills the tentativeness of spiritual understanding. It is at its best when it cultivates community spaces of interpretation that are comfortable, even expectant of "the waiting moment." NT spirituality, interpreted for the task of preaching, casts life as one of exploration and wonder. It leads the exegete, preacher, and hearers away from certainty and is suspicious of proclamations of certainty. Moreover, biblical spirituality is tied to the faith proclamations of others, especially kinspeople and ancestors, even as it looks forward to future generations.¹⁴ Thus, biblical spirituality is an interpretive endeavor, but it is not simply individual practice and outcomes, as it seems to unfold in Fee's thinking. Biblical spirituality, mediated through Thurman's ideas and experiences, is a public interpretive work.

One such site to see Thurman's notion of NT spirituality as public wrestling is in his study and interpretation of segregation and racism in America in his 1965 monograph, *The Luminous Darkness: A Personal Interpretation of the Anatomy of Segregation and the Ground of Hope*. Growing up and preaching in the segregated, Christian American context of the early 1900s, Thurman distinguished between interpreting "within the framework of American Christianity" and outside it.¹⁵ Thurman noticed and rejected the social outcomes in normative American Christian interpretive practice with its formal and informal segregation, separation, and inequality structures. He said, "The fact that the first twenty-three years of my life were spent in Florida and Georgia has left its scars deep in my spirit and has rendered me terribly sensitive to the churning abyss separating white from black. Living outside of the region, I am aware of the national span of racial prejudice and the virus of segregation that undermines the vitality of American life." Aware of the divisions that keep people separate, Thurman determined the matters of spirituality, religious experience, and responsible biblical interpretation of Jewish-Christian ethics requires a different commitment: "Nevertheless, a strange necessity has been laid upon me to devote my life to the central concern that transcends the walls that divide and would achieve in literal fact what is experienced as literal truth: human life, is one and all men are members one of another. And this insight is spiritual and the hard core of religious experience."¹⁶

¹⁴ Thurman, *With Head & Heart: The Autobiography of Howard Thurman* (San Diego: A Harcourt Brace & Company, 1979), 268. Thurman speaks about the work of future generations in the final paragraph of his autobiography, saying, "Therefore, failure may remain failure in the context of all our strivings, hatred may continue to be hatred in the social and political arena of the common life, tragedy may continue to yield its anguish and its pain, spreading havoc in the tight circle of our private lives, the dead weight of guilt may not shift its position to make life even for a brief moment more comfortable and endurable, for any of us—all this may be true. Nevertheless, in all these things there is a secret door which leads into the central place, where the Creator of life and the God of the human heart are one and the same. I take my stand for the future and for the generations who follow over the bridges we already have crossed. It is here that the meaning of the hunger of the heart is unified. The Head and the Heart at last inseparable; they are lost in wonder in the One."

¹⁵ Thurman, *With Head & Heart*, 104.

¹⁶ Howard Thurman, *The Luminous Darkness: A Personal Interpretation of the Anatomy of Segregation and the Ground of Hope* (New York: Harper & Row, 1965), x.

The popular and globally recognized brand of American Christianity distanced human relations and proximity based on artificial and arbitrary markers of race-ethnicity, nationality, and religion. American Christianity was layered with human race violence and differentiation that represented human, not divine, constructions and hierarchies, according to Thurman. His unique interpretive impulse within American Christian interpretive history and experience. It functioned from a different imperative and vision of what the Christian religion, if it is indeed seeking to live up to “the religion of Jesus,” should accomplish. In the preface of his 1949 book, *Jesus and the Disinherited*, Thurman articulates his Christian interpretive center by posing two questions, “Why is it that Christianity seems impotent to deal radically, and therefore effectively, with the issues of discrimination and injustice based on race, religion, and national origin? Is this impotence due to a betrayal of the genius of the religion, or is it due to a fundamental weakness in the religion itself?”¹⁷

Thurman's interpretive practice resourced the NT for what he calls “the religion of Jesus.” He shifts from the interpretive task of reconstructing the early Jesus movement's origins and understanding how God's spirit worked through him during his “living fact.” For Thurman, interpreting NT spirituality properly requires working outside the mainstream Christian social formations of separation, claims of exclusive hermeneutical superiority, and traditional doctrines such as the Incarnation. Rehearsing the significance of Jesus' birth, Thurman does not reach for incarnational claims but historical ones. “Stripped bare of art forms and liturgy, the literal substance of the story remains, Jesus Chris was born in a stable, he was born of humble parentage in surroundings that are the common lot of those who earn their living by the sweat of their brows. Nothing can rob the common man of this heritage—when he beholds Jesus, he sees in him the possibilities of life even for the humblest and dramatic a resolution of the meaning of God.”¹⁸

For Thurman, preaching NT spirituality is about doing something other than ignoring and even transcending the social markers that define Jesus and respective persons. By locating Jesus as one of the disinherited, for Thurman, the significance of Jesus for preachers in their current moment is rooted in his social realities. Jesus proclaimed—preached even—from a particular social, economic, and political location as one among a people. He taught, healed, fellowshiped, and was guided by God's Spirit within his faith community, not outside and counter to it. As Jesus stated in the opening of the Sermon on the Mount discourse, he is fulfilling what was possible, not destroying or upending it. The revelation of Jesus is one that cast the vision—even call—for a community defined by love and populated by tremendous diversity and difference. Jesus is the “instance of mind of God” in the world.¹⁹

Thurman's interpretive endeavors bridge distances of meaning without seeking to influence people to switch their religious and ancestral allegiances. Characterized by studies about Jesus' interiority formed by the social realities of his day, Thurman's Christian interpretive endeavor departed from the purposes of normative, white Christian readings of the New Testament at the time, with its twofold effort to proselytize and colonialize. Thurman attempted to see more bodies and hear more voices from the global world with diminishing bias and radical inclusion, using the religion of Jesus as a guide. He saw Spirit activity in every action Jesus took to care for those who were outcasts, marginal, oppressed, imprisoned, silenced, and overlooked.

¹⁷ Howard Thurman, *Jesus and the Disinherited*, 7-8.

¹⁸ Howard Thurman, *Mood of Christmas & Other Celebration* (Boston: Friends United Press, 1985), 11.

¹⁹ Thurman, *The Creative Encounter: An Interpretation of Religion and the Social Witness* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1954), 82-83.

He relies heavily on Gospel texts like Luke 4:18 to set an interpretive agenda of NT study for the preacher who sought the commitment to care for all. According to Thurman's perspective, widespread American Christian interpretive practice had the capacity to produce a corrupted sense of exceptionalism and selective inclusion. Such approaches transformed NT spirituality into something more like Fee's version—an attempt to secure “true spirituality” as if only one singular experience eclipsed all others.

A Matter of African American Rhetorical Aesthetics and the Arts

For Thurman, the aesthetic quality of biblical spirituality is also not cast as a single truth articulated in the NT. Nor is biblical spirituality dependent on the certainty expressed in organized Christian religions' doctrinal and creedal languages or even fixed worship experiences. Much of Thurman's preaching life as Dean of Chapel at both Howard University and Boston University's Marsh Chapel was defined by his attempts to fiddle with the fixedness of worship experiences that narrowly defined what spirit encounters could be by engaging in what he called “teaching experiments” or “worship experiments.”²⁰ These experiments shifted the work of the sermon and bible reading, assigning it as elements of the potential spiritual encounters possible instead of the singularly most important moments of a worship program. Below, I quote Thurman's description of the experience at length to capture his notion of spirituality deriving from what I call “experimental pedagogies.”

At Howard, I began to experiment with forms of worship other than usual religious services. The sermon was not always the centerpiece. Within the regular order of service, I provided stretches of time for meditation, a quiet time for prayers generated by silence. I also wanted to develop a service that would permit greater freedom for the play of creative imagination, a vesper service; these were called Twilight Hours. Each Twilight Hour was different in form and texture. I knew there was a felt need in the congregation, with its diversity of religious backgrounds, for a sense of the majesty of Holy Writ. The very first service was devoted to “The Ancient Heritage of Man's Quest for God,” using both Old and New Testament passages that addressed this theme, some dramatically, some even rebelliously, and others, as in the great Psalms, with a sublime sense of redemption. These selections were typed and mimeographed as a single connected story. As shadows gathered in Rankin Chapel, after an organ prelude, I began to read aloud, the tones of the organ weaving in and out in muted accompaniment. There were periods of silence here and there to allow the inspiration of the words to hold full sway. When the service was over, I left the pulpit, but the audience remained in their seats, in total silence, for several minutes. When they rose to leave, the ushers gave each of them a copy of the reading.²¹

In an essay on Thurman titled, “Hearing the Aesthetic Dimension of Howard Thurman, the Interpreter,” I described the aesthetic dimension of Thurman's NT spirituality as articulated in not only what he says about the NT and where he goes but how Thurman preaches in general. Skilled in the rhetorical arts of communication, Thurman wrote and verbalized his proclamations, prayers, and inquiries. As I stated, “He spoke with the vocal range of a sonorous and musical tenor. Much like how the trumpet-master, Miles Davis, took his listeners on an odyssey through sound, Thurman's oratorical mastery played jazz with images that invite

²⁰ Thurman, *With Head & Heart*, 44, 92–93.

²¹ Thurman, *With Head & Heart*, 92.

listeners to embark on a journey." He often started his expository moments with an even tone that carried a hint of levity. Playful, dry humor was a common starting point for Thurman to build a rapport with his audience. It was so natural and so well conducted that it was easy to miss how Thurman put his audience at ease while also readying them for the interpretive journey. "Thurman's voice lulled a listener into a still attentiveness, easing her into a space of introspection and wonder. To hear him engage matters of head and heart is to experience a spiritual genius drafting a working paper in social intervention and human relations."²²

Thurman's NT spirituality was a creative synthesis between subjects, objects, context, and exploration. Listening to him, sermons embodied an aesthetic quality of the playful inner life that is sensory rich and attentive to both the human being and their society of the past, as well as the human being in their present society (mainly if that human being was one of the many with "their backs against the wall"). Thurman's preaching of NT spirituality evoked the full range of human bodily experiences defined by hearing, seeing, feeling, tasting, and touching. Thurman's speech connotes an "aesthetic consciousness" that Hans-Georg Gadamer identifies as a work of art that "has its true being in the fact that it becomes an experience changing the person experiencing it."²³ Yet, Thurman is not changed alone. As he wrestles with expressing his inner life publicly, his listeners and viewers are "swept up" to belong more fully to the world they share. Thurman's pregnant pauses and surprising verbal asides, coupled with their effects on listeners, find affinity with Gadamer's descriptions of the interplay between a work of art and "the world of real existence." Together, they produce generative settings for meaning-making (interpretation) for both artist and audience, with the writings of the NT as the artistic media of choice.²⁴

Conclusion

In his collection of sermons, *The Growing Edge*, Thurman defines preaching as public wrestling "with a great idea." The preacher's goal is not "to preach a great sermon" but to fashion the conditions and supply the material that can instigate introspection and extrospection.²⁵ Thurman's experience as a preacher and interpreter informs his reflection when he says, "For me the sermon is an act of worship in which the preacher exposes his spirit and mind as they seek to reveal the working of the spirit of the living God upon them. It is a searching moment! The atmosphere is one charged with the dynamics of worship and the surrender and commitment which worship inspires."²⁶ According to Thurman, who is a preacher, interpreter, and teacher, practices of interpretation intended for public soundings among congregations, eager students, and curious lay audiences should bear one's spirit and mind as testimonial evidence of the unending working of God's Spirit.

Perhaps there is no greater sense of Thurman's eclectic blend of NT preaching, exegesis, teaching, and spirituality—particularly its impetus—than his frequently rehearsed dialogue with Gandhi from 1936. Thurman would often retell the story in writing or orally to different

²² Thurman characterizes his personal story as one of head and heart in the title of his autobiography: Thurman, *With Head & Heart*.

²³ Howard Thurman, "'I Can See It. Now, How to Say it?': Hearing the Aesthetic Dimension of Howard Thurman, the Interpreter," in *The Unfinished Search for Common Ground: Reimagining Howard Thurman's Life and Work*, ed. Walter Earl Fluker (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2023), 34; Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 2nd ed., trans. Joel Weinsheimer and Donald G. Marshall (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2013), 107.

²⁴ Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 135.

²⁵ Howard Thurman, *The Growing Edge* (New York: Harper & Row, 1956), x.

²⁶ Thurman, *The Growing Edge*, ix-x.

audiences to model the interreligious dialogues necessary for the Christian faith to cultivate true kinship that genuinely reflects the life of Jesus of Nazareth. One stirring moment occurred in 1972 as a series of reflections offered to the Black Ecumenical Commission of Massachusetts, which convened at Eliot Congregational Church in Roxbury, Massachusetts. Thurman gave a 40-minute lecture titled “Black Pentecost and the Black Experience,” rehearsing his meeting with Gandhi at the end. In this version, Thurman references his encounter with Gandhi as an example for understanding the relationship between Black spirituality—particularly Black Christian spirituality—and its shared links to the spiritualities of others who identify as those with their backs against the wall.

Thurman recalls that after three hours of conversation, as they are turning to leave, Gandhi asks Thurman and his party to sing the Spiritual, “Were You There When They Crucified My Lord?” Thurman describes the moment in these terms:

So here we were, standing in this bungalow tent in a field, singing a song that sprang right out of the Heart of our Idiom. And as we sang Gandhiji, his secretary, and the other man with him, bowed their heads in prayer. And when we finished, Gandhi closed it with a prayer in his own language. And then we sat for about five minutes in a silence that was drunk with the presence of God. And then we got up and departed. God speaks with many tongues, but with one voice--one voice.²⁷

It is unclear what shocked Thurman the most at that moment. First, he was surprised that Gandhi knew the spirituals enough to identify one of them by the title and its opening verse. Second, Thurman was startled to discover that from Gandhi’s Hindu perspective, there is religious truth and revelation contained in the song’s interpretation of crucifixion. Thurman listened as Gandhi assigned value and relevance to the spiritual song for African American people and Gandhi’s Hindu people’s faith and social struggle as a testament to resources of Black Spirituality that even he may have underestimated or, at least, taken for granted. Gandhi illustrated that spiritual resources for worship and insight are available within African American religious life and history and serve humanity in broad diversity.

Last, Gandhi caught Thurman off-guard by asking them to sing the Spiritual extemporaneously. Yet, Gandhi’s request and insight into the song’s significance for Christian African Americans and Hindu Indians emboldened Thurman’s party to satisfy the request. Moreover, it deepened Thurman’s growing hunger to understand better the importance of Jesus for the Christian preacher and believer, but also beyond them. What are the resources of community, fellowship, dialogue, and presence available through interpretations of Jesus’ life as it interacts with the lives of Africana peoples across the world and others? For the rest of his career, Thurman repeatedly returned to this conversation with Gandhi and the treasured insight that “God speaks with many tongues but with one voice.”

Thurman’s model of NT spirituality involves preaching subjects of various spiritualities in conversation. These conversations are expressions of a diversity of pedagogical objectives in spiritual exchanges that change the landscapes of social reality. Thurman understands the work of NT spirituality as mediated through dialogue and proclamation shared in worship spaces and spaces of generosity of listening, consideration, and welcome. Preaching and teaching Thurman’s NT spirituality requires the boldness to be involved in the religious experience as a

²⁷ Howard Thurman, “Black Pentecost #2: Reflections on the Black Experience,” May 30, 1972, Black Ecumenical Commission of Massachusetts at Eliot Congregational Church, Roxbury, Massachusetts, Gottlieb Archival Research Center, Boston University, box 118; box 10, folder 26, digitized cassette.

series of experiments, instigations, and “crossing great divides.”²⁸ NT spirituality is mediated through Thurman’s writing, preaching, and experiences, necessitating the coexistence of biblical exegesis, preaching, and spirituality rather than separation.

²⁸ Part IV in Thurman's autobiography rehearses his travel across India and his meeting with Gandhi. He titles that part of his story “Crossing the Great Divide—India.” Thurman, *With Head & Heart*, 103-137.