

Foreward

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The essays in this volume, and the empirical research that undergirds them, have become in 2025 even more critically important to the future of homiletical theory, pedagogy, and practice than when they were first conceived.

Using empirical methods and data, these projects take stock of the adequacy of pedagogical practices in North American homiletics to the realities and demands of our present historical moment. These scholars' work tests the mettle of our teaching practices for an increasingly diverse student population in today's seminaries, divinity schools, and lay training programs. Most importantly, these authors point ahead to the future of homiletical pedagogy, raising pressing questions about the adequacy of homiletical pedagogy to an ever-more challenging reality: voices in high places are urging us to mask and forget the social, economic, political, and spiritual legacies of chattel slavery in the U. S. and of colonizing imperialism abroad.

In the U. S., the ongoing legacies of slavery continue to shape the communities in which our homiletics students will preach and teach. Likewise, the ongoing legacy of American or European imperialism is felt by colonized peoples across the globe. Telling and owning the truth about these legacies is, in fact, a crucial spiritual discipline for anyone who hopes to preach with integrity in North American churches, whether north or south, east or west.

It was my duty as 2019 president of my academic guild, the Academy of Homiletics, to specify the theme of that year's annual meeting. The Executive Committee joined me in planning a meeting focused on "unmasking" white bias in homiletical theory, theology, pedagogy, and praxis. It was true that many scholars in our field, including white scholars, were regularly drawing on the theoretical work and sermons of persons of color in our teaching plans and syllabi. Yet, whiteness tended to dominate the theoretical center. Papers presented in our workgroups often continued to pay *homage* either explicitly or implicitly to our guild's white founders.

The Academy of Homiletics had been established in the mid-1960s by a handful of highly creative and influential homileticians—nearly all of them white males (a reflection of the demographic in our profession at that time). The theoretical and theological work, as well as sermons, of homileticians and master preachers of color informed many projects as the field developed; yet the impact of non-white traditions tended, in the final analysis, to be muted and "supplementary." Not only preaching traditions, but theoretical and theological perspectives, arising from communities of color, remained on the margins.

My determination to plan a meeting where these issues could be confronted developed, in part, as I wrestled with the results of an historical audit conducted in 2015 by the institution at which I taught, Princeton Theological Seminary (Princeton, New Jersey).¹ The audit had one main purpose: to investigate the relationship of the seminary, especially its faculty and student body in the 19th century, to the economic and social facts, and moral issue, of the ongoing

¹"Princeton Seminary and Slavery: A Journey of Confession and Repentance," <https://ptsem.edu/princeton-seminary-and-slavery/>, accessed August 18, 2025. For critical analysis of Princeton Seminary's efforts to respond to its ongoing struggle with racism, see Mark Lewis Taylor, "Seminaries and Slavery: An Abolition Paradigm for Research," *Theology Today* 76 no. 4 (2016): 308-321.

practice of chattel slavery in the United States.² The results of that audit were, truth be told, unsurprising. They were also disheartening and disturbing.

A handful of early faculty members had indeed had one or more enslaved persons in their households. In most cases, these faculty members had married women from the southern states. As was customary in the American south at the time, one or more enslaved people were included in these women's dowries. Particularly distressing to the auditors (and, later, the readers of the report) was the discovery that a past president of the school had had his salary paid, in part, by his home church in the south. The church covered this expense by renting out enslaved people owned by the congregation's members.

Equally disturbing was the seminary faculty's prominent role as promoters of the concept of deporting Black Americans to Liberia. Members of the Princeton faculty continued to promote this "back to Africa" scheme long after other early proponents had abandoned it. Their rationale was twofold. First, the supporters suggested, Black people could put down roots in Africa (presumed to be their "native" home, although the vast majority of Black people in America had been born in America). In Liberia, they could become property owners, establish institutions and businesses, and advance their education. Then, said the "Liberian homeland" promoters, they could return to the United States, should they choose to do so, having achieved parity with white Americans in terms of education, business acumen, and wealth. Perhaps to make the whole business less morally distasteful, this deportation scheme was glossed with a second, spiritual rationale: while they "improved themselves" in Liberia, Black deportees could spread the Christian faith across Africa!

Needless to say, those who conducted the audit and everyone who received the report—which was made accessible immediately to the whole seminary community—shuddered at the enmeshment of Princeton Seminary's 19th-century faculty in practices of enslavement. Additionally, the audacity, patronizing tone, and sheer naivete of the deportation proposal were galling. Outrage spread across the campus. Faculty and students alike could draw slight comfort from the fact that, unlike some of Princeton Seminary's most influential faculty members in the mid- and late-nineteenth century, the student body of the seminary at the time had no interest in the "back-to-Africa" deportation scheme. In fact, most students spoke out in support of abolition.³

Reading the report left me troubled about my institution's past and present; it also left me troubled about the past and present of the Academy of Homiletics. I could imagine no more urgent task for us to address at the 2019 meeting than an "audit" of our guild's practices, one in which we who identified as white would take up the work of exposing the whiteness of many of the theoretical and theological assumptions that continued to shape our research as well as our pedagogies and standards of assessment.

As the 2019 meeting of the Academy of Homiletics got underway, there was a palpable sense of determination among those of us who identified as white to tear away blindfolds and scrape away layers of denial about the entrenched white-centrism of many assumptions hallowed as "seminal" for ongoing theory and practice. Through workgroups and major presentations, white scholars began to unmask the pervasive, dominating influence of white-centric theology and theory in the design and content of our field's literature and, to our chagrin, in the overall

² For a more comprehensive summation of the results of the "slavery audit" at Princeton Seminary, see Gordon Mikoski, "A Failure of Theological Imagination: Beginning to deal with the legacy of Princeton Seminary on matters of slavery and race," *Theology Today* 73, no. 2 (2016): 157-67.

³ Gordon Mikoski, Presentation to the faculty; Fall Faculty Conference, August 31, 2015.

design of our masters- and doctoral-level programs. We began to examine our programs' core subject matter and reading lists: should the *de rigueur* standard reading lists in Ph.D. seminars on the history of homiletics be discarded and replaced? Or was it necessary for future teachers of preaching to be well aware of the Eurocentric and overwhelmingly white story of our discipline? Each new discussion session seemed to expose yet another layer of complexity.

In the months and years after that meeting, it has been gratifying to witness the determination and courage with which both early-career scholars and seasoned ones have leaned into research that exposes the "webs of whiteness." This work reveals that whiteness pervades our theoretical constructions and theological frameworks, raises critical questions about current practices, and requires us to imagine and undertake reconstructive initiatives.

Call this perhaps a typically "white" failure of imagination—but I confess that in 2019, I could not have imagined the assault on critical theory in general, and critical race theory, in particular, that has been launched in 2025 against universities, public schools, research centers, museums, and libraries in the United States. Much of this has been undertaken under the guise of a "patriotic" concern that children should not learn the worst that their country has been, but only the "best." Unsurprisingly, "best" is defined as a slavery-denying, white-exonerating version of history that attempts deliberately to erase decades of evidence that the damaging legacies of slavery and colonialism have continued, unabated, to this day. Among those legacies are ongoing efforts to redraw voting districts to the disadvantage of populations of color, a pattern of inferior educational opportunities and resources allotted to schools where students of color are in the majority, and economic policies and trends that make it difficult for families of color to build trans-generational wealth.

As I write, libraries and museums are being purged of evidence—whether in books, papers, recordings, or visual art—that for over 250 years (1619-1865), this country not only condoned, but eagerly embraced chattel slavery, while touting itself as "the land of liberty." Stolen labor, particularly in the cotton-producing southern states, greatly advanced the prosperity of the colonies that later gave birth to the United States. In churches, prior to 1865, there were pockets of protest and bursts of moral outrage, but on the whole, churches passively tolerated and often actively maintained the institution of slavery. Long after, black worshipers remained segregated in church balconies—some of them painted black.

After the Emancipation Proclamation of 1865, the economies of both North and South and the expanding West prospered through reliance on underpaid laborers of color and immigrants for nearly another century. Reconstruction briefly lit a beacon of hope, but ultimately, weak enforcement of its provisions for Black land ownership, Black representation in state and federal government, and Black education left Reconstruction vulnerable to manipulation. It was steadily undermined at the state and local level and efficiently dismantled across the South. Jim Crow laws in state after state and in the territories of the West were designed to keep Black Americans—as well as native peoples and non-white immigrants—socially, economically, and politically weak.⁴

⁴ My understanding of the dynamics of slavery in the United States and its aftermath, from south to north, and from the east coast to the west, has been shaped by two works in particular: Isabel Wilkerson, *Caste: The Origins of Our Discontents* (Random House, 2020); and Heather Cox Richardson, *How the South Won the Civil War: Oligarchy, Democracy, and the Continuing Fight for the Soul of America* (Oxford University Press, 2020). A helpful summation of the intentions, limitations, and sadly predictable unraveling of Reconstruction in the southern states can be found in Richardson, chapter 3. I am likewise indebted to Kenyatta R. Gilbert, *The Journey and Promise of African American Preaching* (Augsburg Fortress, 2011). Gilbert's insights into the dynamics of the Great Migration, laid alongside Wilkerson's sweeping saga of migration north and west from the American south (Isabel

It is this historical record that persons in positions of power are currently determined to at least mute—and if possible, entirely expunge—from museums, libraries, and public educational curricula. Efforts are underway to erase evidence, written and otherwise, of the brutality the enslaved suffered, along with the historical record of both the struggle that led to the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and ongoing white resistance to its implications.

This is not only a political, historical, and educational problem; it is a theological problem and, as a corollary, a homiletical one. Our theological identity is inevitably shaped, for better or worse, by our political, historical, economic, and cultural experience and self-understanding. Any attempt at systematic and strategic erasure of the inconvenient truths of the American past undermines the historical truth-telling that has an essential role to play as persons of faith arrive at a truthful *theological* understanding of who they are and where they have come from.

Arriving at truthful theological self-understanding has a long history going back to the origins of Jewish and Christian faith. Over centuries, Jewish worshipers came to the Temple at the festival of Shavuot to present the first fruits of the harvest to the Lord. That presentation was accompanied by a confession which began, “My father was a wandering Aramean,” and then continues with a historical recital that includes the memory of their 400-year enslavement in Egypt and goes on to celebrate God’s acts of deliverance from captivity. Centuries later, the apostle Paul testifies to his Christian faith by rendering an account of his personal history. As a devout and educated Pharisee, Paul had persecuted followers of the Way. His blinding encounter with the risen Lord on the Damascus road shattered his false self-understanding. He who had been so sure of the correctness of his views was actually fighting the redemptive trajectory of divine action, rather than advancing it.

Today, truthful theological self-understanding for Christians in the United States is impossible without alertness to the socio-economic realities, and particularly the economic inequities, of our social context. We who profess Christian faith, in particular those who identify as white, can only render an honest accounting of our theological identity when we have clarity about social, economic, and political vectors that have favored the aspirations of white persons and frustrated the aspirations of all others. In other words, our theological self-understanding will be false precisely to the extent that we—wittingly or unwittingly—fail to examine ways that the inequitable distribution of social, political, and economic power across racially and ethnically defined populations has shaped our religious experience, our theological vocabularies, our religious practices, and our openness to the theologies and experiences of others.

In the present moment, it is exponentially more critical than ever before that we and our students should be equipped with imperial-critical—and more specifically, post-colonialist—interpretive lenses that radically shift our readings of both texts and contexts. In addition, our students need to emerge from our classrooms keenly alert to the impacts of racism and colonialism on their *prospective listeners’* historical, cultural, and socio-economic contexts, as well as their own. Emerging preachers must be equipped to do the work of developing reconstructed (that is, no longer white-centric) hermeneutical lenses as they work with biblical texts. This includes reading more critically commentaries informed by white-centric theories and theologies.

Wilkerson, *The Warmth of Other Suns* (Random House, 2010).), present a helpfully stereoscopic and granular orientation to the ways that slavery’s legacies of inequity have impacted, and continue to impact, the social, political, economic, and ecclesial dynamics of life in the United States—south and north, east and west.

The research presented in this volume demonstrates that, while we have made progress in the effort to de-center white preaching traditions, theologies, and theories, there is much distance yet to be covered.

I am grateful for the work of these colleagues. They call upon us to face inconvenient truths that others are actively attempting to bury or erase today. Their work takes up the mission Jesus entrusted to his followers: to grant new vision, to liberate captives, and set free the oppressed (Luke 4:16-19).

Those of us who identify as white must actively embrace the work of deconstruction and Reconstruction of our theological self-understandings, theoretical assumptions, and pedagogical practices. Whether we are just beginning to wrestle our way free from white-privileging assumptions, both theoretical and theological, or are well on our way to radically changed thinking and praxis, these essays will shed welcome light on our path.

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