

## AN ANTI-RACIST THEOLOGY OF BAPTISM<sup>1</sup>

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*What then are we to say? Should we continue in sin in order that grace may abound? By no means! How can we who died to sin go on living in it? Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? Therefore we have been buried with him by baptism into death, so that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, so we too might walk in newness of life.*

*For if we have been united with him in a death like his, we will certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his. We know that our old self was crucified with him so that the body of sin might be destroyed, and we might no longer be enslaved to sin. For whoever has died is freed from sin. But if we have died with Christ, we believe that we will also live with him. We know that Christ, being raised from the dead, will never die again; death no longer has dominion over him. The death he died, he died to sin, once for all; but the life he lives, he lives to God. So you also must consider yourselves dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus.*

*Therefore, do not let sin exercise dominion in your mortal bodies, to make you obey their passions. No longer present your members to sin as instruments of wickedness, but present yourselves to God as those who have been brought from death to life, and present your members to God as instruments of righteousness. For sin will have no dominion over you, since you are not under law but under grace (Rom 6:1-14).<sup>2</sup>*

In this paper, I want to present baptism as a theological resource for integrating Christian faith and anti-racist activism. Drawing on Paul's letter to the Romans, I will show how "Sin" is a force that exercises dominion over all humanity, seeking to distort our imaginations and train our bodies to follow its will and eventually submit to death. Yet Christians profess that in baptism, we are united with Christ in Christ's death, and this death breaks the power of Sin in our lives, enabling us to walk in newness of life and to present ourselves to God as instruments of righteousness. Racism and white supremacy, as social forces that distort our imaginations and

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<sup>2</sup> All biblical quotations are from the NRSV unless otherwise stated.

constrain our possibilities for flourishing, function as Sin.<sup>3</sup> Therefore baptism is a moment of transition from life under the power of racism and white supremacy into life in Christ. The baptized Christian renounces the claims of racism and white supremacy and embraces the anti-racist life of Christ. Re-envisioned in this way, baptism becomes a theological, homiletical, and pastoral resource for exhorting Christians to take up the work of anti-racism as part of what it means to present themselves to God as instruments of righteousness.

For many Christians, sin is the central problem of the human condition which must be resolved. Though the doctrine of original sin--at least in its Augustinian formulation, which has been most influential in Western Christianity--acknowledges the fact that we are all born “into” sin, the popular Christian imagination depicts sin primarily as acts of individual transgression. The thing which separates us from God (and thus damns us) is our personal sin. Therefore, the solution to the problem of sin--namely, Jesus Christ--is also individualistic. Jesus must save “me” from “my” sin.<sup>4</sup> When I embrace divine grace, I am saved. Jesus removes the penalty of my sin, empowers me to sin less often, and eventually welcomes me into an eternal existence where I no longer sin at all.

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<sup>3</sup> I have intentionally chosen throughout this paper to refer to racism and white supremacy *together*, rather than to one or the other, or even to use them interchangeably. This is to acknowledge the difference between ideologies of racial superiority and inferiority (racism) and the racialized social structures which ground these ideologies (white supremacy). For more on this distinction, albeit with different terminology, see Eduardo Bonilla-Silva, *Racism without Racists: Color-Blind Racism and the Persistence of Racial Inequality in America*, 5th ed. (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2018), 8-9. Ibram Kendi makes a similar distinction between “racist ideas” and “racist policies” (Ibram X. Kendi, *How to Be an Antiracist* [New York: One World, 2019], 17-20).

<sup>4</sup> Here I am reminded of the oft-repeated sentiment of many (conservative) Christians that even if they were the only person to have ever lived, Jesus still would have died just for them. Such a sentiment encapsulates the hyper-individualist perspective on sin and salvation I articulate here.

Yet this individualistic interpretation of sin is inadequate for describing the theological problem of sin because it fails to account for the ways in which sin is more than just individual transgression.

There is . . . a 'theological and collective sin,' and it is to that sin that the proclamation of the death of Christ for our sins refers, not directly to our individual and ethical sins; it is a 'collective reality,' grounding and making possible individual sins. It is this theological and collective sin that destroys history and hinders the future that God wanted for history; this collective sin is what causes death to reign over the world, and hence, we must be freed from our collective work of death in order to form once more the people of God.<sup>5</sup>

In Romans, Paul acknowledges the significance of sin as individual transgression (Rom 3:23), but he presents this theological and collective sin—which I here call Sin—as the fundamental problem of the human condition. Jews and Gentiles alike exist under the reign and power of Sin, which prevents them from being justified (Rom 3:9, 19-20). Sin not only lives inside people but enslaves them to its will and prevents them from doing that which they know is right (Rom 7:14-25).<sup>6</sup> Ultimately, sin leads to death. Yet God sets before humanity an opportunity to receive grace through the person of Jesus Christ (Rom 3:21-25). This grace liberates the recipient from the power of Sin and brings them into a new kind of life in the present: life in the Spirit (Rom 8:1-17).

This tension between sin as acts of individual transgression and Sin as spiritual power also exists in the discourse surrounding racism and white supremacy. In popular discourse, racism and white supremacy are primarily described with the language of sin as acts of individual and interpersonal violence. Racism looks like a white person calling a black person

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<sup>5</sup> Ignacio Ellacuría, "The Crucified People," in *Mysterium Liberationis: Fundamental Concepts of Liberation Theology*, ed. Ignacio Ellacuría and Jon Sobrino, trans. Phillip Berryman and Robert R. Barr (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1993), 587.

<sup>6</sup> See also James D.G. Dunn, *Romans*, Word Biblical Commentary 38A (Dallas: Word Books, 1988), 288.

the n-word; white supremacy looks like someone putting on a white hooded robe and attacking a black person in their home. When racism and white supremacy are individualized, it becomes easy to assume that they are problems of the past. As with individualized salvation, the problems of racism and white supremacy were solved at a specific point in time; namely, the civil rights movement. Because of the civil rights movement, it is no longer socially acceptable to use racial slurs or commit hate crimes. Even when we expand the scope of interpersonal racism to include “microaggressions,” the fact remains that few people would claim to be racist.<sup>7</sup> So we need no longer devote our attention to these issues because we have arrived at a place of equality.<sup>8</sup> Our salvation from racism and white supremacy is secure.

The problems with this perspective are the same ones that emerge when sin is construed as the central problem of the human condition. While individual interpersonal racism causes real harm to non-white people, focusing on these sinful acts as the full expression of racism and white supremacy does not adequately acknowledge the “collective reality” which grounds and makes possible individual interpersonal racism or to the persistence of this reality beyond the moment of “salvation.” Racism and white supremacy are not just sin; they are Sin. They are both within us and external to us. They exist as social structures, policies, and norms that exert pressure upon our lives and constrain our possibilities for flourishing. Racism is not just a white person calling a black person the n-word; it is also redlining, gerrymandering and voter suppression, and the stigmatization of non-white neighborhoods.<sup>9</sup> White supremacy is not just

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<sup>7</sup> Bonilla-Silva, *Racism without Racists*, 1. Bonilla-Silva also notes that even members of white supremacist organizations have rejected the label of “racist” for “pro-white.”

<sup>8</sup> In fact, some (mostly white) people would argue that the real racist--the person who is making race a problem in society--is the person who claims that they have experienced racism! See Bonilla-Silva, 1.

<sup>9</sup> On redlining, see Kelly Brown Douglas, *Stand Your Ground: Black Bodies and the Justice of God* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 2015), 124, and Robert Jensen, *The Heart of Whiteness: Confronting Race, Racism, and White Privilege* (San Francisco: City Lights, 2005), 18–20. On gerrymandering and voter suppression, see

putting on a white robe and attacking a black person; it is the fact that “in the United States, a black applicant with no criminal record is less likely to receive a callback from a potential employer than a white applicant with a felony conviction.”<sup>10</sup> Racism and white supremacy as Sin distort the way we organize our collective life, making whiteness the standard we use to measure human flourishing.

Moreover, focusing on racism and white supremacy at the individual level is inadequate for explaining the ways in which people are racialized. Racism and white supremacy train white and non-white bodies to embody particular modes of being which uphold these Sinful realities.<sup>11</sup> They demand participation in whiteness, with the threat of violence as a means of coercion.

The demand for loyalty marks the adherents of whiteness and the boundaries of exclusion. In this way the dark bodies of America are not excluded from participation or loyalty, rather they are forced into a participation from beneath, where their glances, desires, and daily lives are now enveloped within the terms of demand for loyalty and surrender. For dark bodies, these rules serve as the condition of an exclusionary participation. Their bodies and their loyalty are still necessary to uphold the system of belief for white fullness, but their participation is one that requires distance.<sup>12</sup>

Under the dominion of the Sins of racism and white supremacy, we are all racialized subjects.

We are all enslaved to the law of Sin and death. So how do we break free?

In Romans 6:1-14, Paul presents baptism as the point of transition from life under Sin to life in Christ. Baptism brings the believer through the site of grace which God has opened up in

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Bonilla-Silva, *Racism without Racists*, 30–31. On the stigmatization of non-white neighborhoods, see Kendi, *How to Be an Antiracist*, 169-70.

<sup>10</sup> Jensen, *The Heart of Whiteness*, 6.

<sup>11</sup> Brian Bantum uses the language of discipleship to describe how race “enacts, adopts, and implicitly absorbs certain practices, habits, and desires that allow the person to enter into this aim” (Brian Bantum, *Redeeming Mulatto: A Theology of Race and Christian Hybridity* [Waco: Baylor University Press, 2010], 18.

<sup>12</sup> Bantum, *Redeeming Mulatto*, 31.

Christ.<sup>13</sup> As the believer goes beneath the water, God’s Spirit unites them with Christ in his death.<sup>14</sup> This is the moment of liberation from the reign of Sin; “for whoever has died is freed from sin” (v. 7). As they are submerged and die, the power of Sin over them is broken. But as they emerge, they transition into a new life in Christ, rather than under Sin (v. 11).

If we understand racism and white supremacy as Sin, then baptism can become an important theological resource for resistance to its dominion in our lives. We point to baptism as a moment in which God’s Spirit unites us with the death and resurrection of Jesus, which liberates us from the reign of racism and white supremacy as expressions of the collective reality called Sin. Our life now exists within Christ himself, where racism and white supremacy as Sin have no power; indeed, we are called to consider ourselves dead to racism and white supremacy. We instead present ourselves to God as instruments of righteousness, which means actively pursuing and enacting God’s justice in the world. Baptism is a summons to a particular mode of action that is governed by opposition to the wickedness of racism and white supremacy (v. 13).

Baptism also resists the temptation to accept what seem to be easy, immediate solutions to racism and white supremacy. Paul moves back and forth between the present and future tense in this passage, illuminating the tension between what baptism accomplishes in the sacramental moment and what it promises for the future. In the present, baptism is a moment of crucifixion and union with Christ’s death, which means the baptized person is no longer enslaved to Sin.

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<sup>13</sup> Paul uses the Greek word *hilasterion* to describe Jesus’ role in the process of justification. There is considerable debate among biblical scholars as to the meaning of this word and its implications for how we understand Christ’s work of salvation. For a historical and theological perspective, see JoAnne Marie Terrell, *Power in the Blood? The Cross in the African American Experience*, The Bishop Henry McNeal Turner/Sojourner Truth Series in Black Religion 15 (Maryknoll, N.Y: Orbis Books, 2003), 17–22.

<sup>14</sup> While some traditions practice baptism by sprinkling, the burial imagery suggests that the earliest Christians practiced baptism by immersion (Wayne A. Meeks, *The First Urban Christians: The Social World of the Apostle Paul*, 2nd ed. [New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003], 150). My description of baptism as immersion is not an evaluative claim about other baptismal practices.

Indeed, the very purpose of baptism as a moment of crucifixion with Christ is to destroy the body of Sin (v. 6). But Paul repeatedly emphasizes that resurrection with Christ is a future reality; while it informs one's life in the present, it has not fully happened yet (vv. 5, 8). Even though the baptized person has transitioned from the reign of Sin to life in Christ, Paul--in exhorting his readers to resist the power of Sin--acknowledges the possibility that Sin can still "exercise dominion" over them (v. 12) while they are in Christ. Moreover, Paul also urges his readers to no longer present their bodies to Sin "as instruments of wickedness" (v. 13). This movement between present and future realities illustrates the struggle the baptized person faces as they embrace their anti-racist baptismal identity. In essence, the baptized person, while alive in Christ, can still find themselves seduced by the power of Sin; they can still choose to present themselves to Sin as an instrument of wickedness. Baptism ensures that one's life is secure in Christ (Col 3:3), but it does not ensure one's perfect adherence to the way of the Spirit. A theologically robust understanding of baptism embraces this tension by emphasizing the initial moment of grace and the ongoing challenge of that grace.

The baptismal moment is the ushering in of the radical presence of God that transforms its participants into something that they once were not. More profoundly the baptismal moment also transforms their lives into an extension of this moment. . . .

This transformative reality is complete insofar as Christ is its beginning and its end. We must still be reminded that such a transformation is also not fully realized within time, or that time does not yet recognize that which has happened to it. In the baptismal moment there is full work within us that we must still yet live into.<sup>15</sup>

When re-envisioned within the context of the struggle against racism and white supremacy, the present-future tension contained in baptism clarifies the relationship between the moment in which we commit to pursue righteousness through anti-racism and the ongoing choices we must make to fight against racism and white supremacy. As Ibram Kendi notes, "We

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<sup>15</sup> Bantum, *Redeeming Mulatto*, 142, 152.

can be a racist one minute and an antiracist the next. . . . The movement from racist to antiracist is always ongoing.”<sup>16</sup> Baptism embraces this movement as generative.

Baptism is entrance into the work of Christ’s person. It is the initiation into his body *and his people*. As such, this entrance marks the renunciation of the world’s claims upon the baptized as well as the renewal, or rebirth, of the person. It is an entrance that requires a departure from the racial economy of the West and its children. To be baptized is to enter into Christ’s . . . personhood and an economy of negotiation that such a presence is necessarily bound to.<sup>17</sup>

The language of renunciation above illustrates how baptism is also a rejection of racialized social organization. For example, one of the ways white supremacy reinforces itself is by creating hierarchies of racial value; African and West Indian immigrants look down on African Americans, while African Americans look down on African and West Indian immigrants in return.<sup>18</sup> Regardless of how any particular person or group situates themselves in a racial hierarchy, this sort of racial competition only reinforces whiteness as the organizing lens for social organization because the categories--and the stereotypes which form their boundaries--are created and promulgated by white racist ideologies. But in Christ, one is forced to view the racial other as a sibling, as part of the same body into which one has been baptized: “For in Christ Jesus you are all children of God through faith. . . . There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus” (Gal 3:26, 28). And no part of this body is more important than another (1 Cor 12:12-26).

The social reorganization which takes place in Christ does not erase the racial particularities of white and non-white people. Christ, in his own body, held together identities

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<sup>16</sup> Kendi, *How to Be an Antiracist*, 10.

<sup>17</sup> Bantum, *Redeeming Mulatto*, 142.

<sup>18</sup> Kendi, *How to Be an Antiracist*, 62.

which seemed to be in opposition to one another: born of flesh and Spirit; fully human and fully divine; innocent of sin yet sentenced to a criminal's death; savior and servant.<sup>19</sup> So while the Galatian baptismal formula quoted above is easily interpreted as the assimilation of difference into unity, racial differences can be retained in Christ, particularly as they relate to the different roles white and non-white people play in the work of antiracism to which they are called by their baptism. Specifically, white people have a responsibility to identify, renounce, and--to the extent that they can--instrumentalize their white privilege for the sake of justice; non-white people are called to identify and renounce the racist ideas which they have internalized and to embody a prophetic resistance to racism and white supremacy.<sup>20</sup> Yet whether white or non-white, baptism transforms racialized bodies into disruptive presences.<sup>21</sup>

Describing baptism in this way is not merely a theological move. It also has homiletical and pastoral implications. In the event of proclamation, the preacher "participates in a divine act of new creation that . . . preachers cannot fully comprehend, let alone predict, produce, or control."<sup>22</sup> That act of new creation, driven by the same Spirit at work in baptism, is grounded in the preacher's witness "against all that is deathly in the world."<sup>23</sup> Furthermore, good preaching

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<sup>19</sup> Bantum, *Redeeming Mulatto*, 99-100.

<sup>20</sup> Kelly Brown Douglas says, "As black people have lived into their identity as free beings, they have mocked with their very living the narratives of Anglo-Saxon testimony that betray the creation of God. Black people, as they defy Anglo-Saxon narratives, have been embodied realities of a prophetic resurrection tradition" (Brown Douglas, *Stand Your Ground*, 220). Here I want to extend that possibility to all non-white peoples who have been denied an identity of "free being" on account of their race. Roxanne Dunbar-Ortiz, for example, describes how this resistance has been embodied by the indigenous peoples of North America (Roxanne Dunbar-Ortiz, *An Indigenous Peoples' History of the United States* [Boston: Beacon, 2015], 79).

<sup>21</sup> Bantum, *Redeeming Mulatto*, 143.

<sup>22</sup> Sally A. Brown and Luke A. Powery, *Ways of the Word: Learning to Preach for Your Time and Place* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2016), 1.

<sup>23</sup> Brown and Powery, *Ways of the Word*, 9.

appeals to the experiences of the congregation as a resource for gaining “Spirit-sight,” the ability to “discern the outlines of new creation amid the powers and structures of the ‘old age.’”<sup>24</sup> Baptism, therefore, becomes a homiletical resource for connecting the lives of a congregation to the transformative work of the Spirit in the world. The preacher need not convince the hearer to commit to anti-racism; instead, they can point to how the hearer’s baptism *has already initiated them into that work*, regardless of whether they have acknowledged or embraced it. Preaching baptism in this way also reinforces the relationship between divine and human activity in the work of anti-racism. It prevents us from believing that we are our own saviors by pointing to our baptism into Christ’s body and Christ’s life as the ground of our resistance.<sup>25</sup> This homiletical move could also be particularly fruitful for the preacher who wants to help their congregation begin to assume an actively anti-racist identity because it avoids overtly political rhetoric.<sup>26</sup>

Baptism re-envisioned as a resource for anti-racism also has pastoral implications. For example, churches that practice “believer’s baptism” often ask those who wish to be baptized to go through confirmation courses or some other form of Christian education. This presents an opportunity for the pastor to make the connection between baptism and resistance to racism and white supremacy in the early stages of a person’s faith. In a congregation that is already committed to anti-racist work, the pastor can remind parishioners of their baptism as an encouragement to remain faithful to the struggle. Anti-racist struggle--whether it is focused on

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<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

<sup>25</sup> Bantum suggests that this is a widespread problem: “That we have all imagined Christ’s body as ours allowed us to mistake our own bodies for salvific bodies; failing to see our bodies as problems, we could not see the answer Christ’s body offered us” (Bantum, *Redeeming Mulatto*, 9).

<sup>26</sup> This is not to say that political rhetoric is inappropriate for preaching; indeed, all preaching is political (insofar as it involves imbalances of power between God, the preacher, and the listener) and it is often important for the preacher to speak directly to political issues. Rather, this acknowledges the fact that explicitly political speech is often a barrier for the listener, particularly when it comes to matters of race and justice.

overcoming one's own internalized racism or resisting structures of white supremacy--is tiring work. Yet baptism, which is made effective by the work of the Spirit rather than our own effort, is a reminder that we do not have to do this work alone or by our own strength. The pastor can find comfort in this for themselves or use it to comfort others. Similar connections can be made when an infant or young child is baptized, because in the moment of baptism, the church community also makes promises to live out the work of the Spirit and care for the child. Pastors can write baptismal liturgies which reflect the interconnectedness of faith and anti-racism and invite the congregation to re-affirm their commitments through the baptismal promises.

This paper has sought to show how baptism can be re-envisioned as a transition into a life of anti-racist activism. The Spirit unites the baptized person with Christ's death, breaking the rule of the Sins of racism and white supremacy on their lives. It also becomes a moment which calls them into the ongoing active work of presenting themselves to God as an instrument of righteousness, which stands opposed to racism and white supremacy. This re-envisioning of baptism has implications beyond abstract theology; it also affects the way we preach and pastor.

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