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Voddie Baucham and the Gnostics Who Have No Love: Boundary Work and a Rhetorical Exposé of Social Justice within Evangelicalism

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Abstract

Dr. Voddie Baucham warned of fractures within the evangelical community when delivering a sermon at the 2019 Southeastern Founders' Conference introducing a newly coined concept called "Ethnic Gnosticism." To Baucham and other leaders, the current social justice zeitgeist, which has influenced many evangelical leaders, is ideological in nature and rooted in ideas antithetical to the gospel. In what follows, I analyze the unfolding disagreement within evangelicalism regarding social justice and the boundary work currently ensuing. Through a brief review of James Cone's black liberation theology and its direct relationship with the religious discourse of anti-racism and social justice, evidence mounts to the formulation of a new religious orthodoxy within evangelicalism. Due to this communal disruption, I utilize Sullivan's (1999) *rhetorical exposé* to describe Baucham's translation of Ethnic Gnosticism and its contents before interlocutors to ultimately create disassociation via a scapegoat thereby purifying the community.

In 2020, following the death of George Floyd, a unique instance occurred at a live panel between evangelical figures Lecrae, Dan Cathy, and Louie Giglio. Although the discussion itself was supposed to signal actions of racial reconciliation within conservative evangelicalism, what occurred only heightened tensions as Louie Giglio, a white man, suggested mid-discussion that slavery was a “blessing” for the white community (Burke, 2020, para. 3). The social media storm that occurred as a result required Lecrae, an African American, to immediately post a response condemning Giglio’s framing. Likewise, Giglio took to social media apologizing for his unplanned description. The immediate attribution of racist intent and meaning to Giglio, however, troubled many evangelicals due to paramount work toward racial reconciliation throughout his career. Yet no quarter was given. In an interview with *AllHipHopTV*, Lecrae recounted his conversation with Giglio backstage in which he informed him that work would be needed to redeem the mishap by fighting his own internal white supremacist ideas: “An apology is not what people are gone, be like ‘oh, thank you’. No, you gone have to be consistent over some years of really leaning into this and dismantling white supremacy in your own life and in the culture as a whole” (Lecrae explains ‘white blessing’..., June 2020). What is to be made of this occurrence? Two Christians mutually attempting to speak about racial reconciliation instead resulted in Giglio’s possible cancellation because of a live mishap on camera. In many ways, the reaction was as if he had committed blasphemy. Such a response as well as the public commentary surrounding the event helps to illustrate emerging perspectives regarding social justice and anti-racism within evangelicalism and fractures within the community.

Interestingly enough, Dr. Voddie Baucham, recent author of *Fault Lines: The Social Justice Movement and Evangelicalism’s Looming Catastrophe*, warned of these fractures within evangelicalism when delivering a sermon at the 2019 Southeastern Founders’ Conference introducing a newly coined concept called “ethnic Gnosticism.”² This concept seeks to capture recent shifts in discussions over social justice. To Baucham and other leaders, the current social justice zeitgeist is ideological in nature and rooted in ideas antithetical to the gospel. Elsewhere, Baucham distinguishes between social justice and biblical justice arguing that, “Social justice is not the same as the biblical idea and the biblical concept of justice” (Andros, 2020, para. 12). From this perspective, he contends similarly to McWhorter (2018), that a quasi-religion has formulated within evangelical ranks promising racial redemption through acts of anti-racism: “Now the message is — the answer is something other than. . . the forgiveness that we find, through God in Christ” (Andros, 2020, para. 13). As a result, many evangelical leaders like Baucham question underlying motives regarding social justice. Ascol

² Sermon audio transcribed by the author and available upon request.

(2019), for instance, states, “My charitable judgment has led me to hope that most evangelicals who seem to be caught up in this are more like the well-intentioned but deceived Trojan King Priam than the beguiling Greek strategist Odysseus” (para. 23). From this information, it is clear that the topic of social justice has become a fault line within evangelicalism as some leaders adopt anti-racist lenses and sentiments, while others view such a system of thought as an alter ideology filtering into the church.

In what follows, I seek to analyze the unfolding disagreement within evangelicalism regarding social justice and the boundary work currently ensuing. To do so, research regarding James Cone’s theology of blackness will be overviewed, followed by a discussion regarding rhetorics of demarcation and the religious nature of the social justice movement. By doing so, the emerging rhetorical situation will become more pronounced and thus aid in the analysis of the artifact at hand.

THE UNEASY CONSCIENCE THAT SPARKED LIBERATION THEOLOGY

In 1947, Carl F. Henry penned his famous critique against evangelicals in a classic work entitled, *The Uneasy Conscience of Modern Fundamentalism*. Throughout the work, Henry condemns the lack of social care and progress by noting how an overemphasis on the next world has allowed evangelicals to completely overlook the one in which they currently lived thereby disengaging from all forms of social progress. To his dismay, Henry argues that the lack of social engagement by the church was due to reactionary tendencies in response to a trend of secularization in culture, leading him to argue that the mission of the church was being eclipsed: “The apostles were convinced not only that they possessed the one name under heaven whereby men must be saved, but also that they were the ambassadors for Christ *whose faithful service measured the impact of redemptionism upon their generation*” (p. 57; emphasis added). Therefore, Henry grapples with evangelical apathy toward society in hopes of steering the ship rightly. Twenty years later, James Cone, author of *Black Theology & Black Power*, similarly struck a chord within the Christian community and theological academy as he argued that the white church was, in fact, antithetical to the kingdom of God through its creation and participation in racial institutions: “Racism has been a part of the life of the Church so long that it is virtually impossible for even the ‘good’ members to recognize the bigotry perpetuated by the Church” (2018, p. 81). From this perspective, Cone concludes that the white church is guilty of blaspheming the Holy Spirit literally re-creating *whiteness* into a devil term representing the antichrist. More significantly, Cone reframes Christian theology and Christ’s crucifixion through a hermeneutic of *blackness* and *oppression* to chastise white religious institutions and, at the same time, encourage and motivate the movement.

In his final work before passing away, *The Cross and the Lynching Tree*, Cone (2011) recentralizes the blindness of White Christianity by noting the profound inability of even the greatest theologians, specifically Reinhold Niebuhr, to see the lynching tree as “the most symbolic re-enactment of the crucifixion” in American history (2011, p. 38).

Beyond Henry and Cone’s critiques of evangelicalism, there are noticeable theological differences that also persist to this day. While Henry argued for a change in perspective in mission among evangelicals, he was unwavering in his conservative theology. Cone, on the other hand, found himself at a point of pessimism toward formal theology in which a new perspective, namely liberation theology, was created. Nevertheless, both voices certainly display the rhetorical vernaculars persisting today, especially as the topic of social justice is negotiated and rhetorics of demarcation espoused.

Shots Fired: The Exigence of Ferguson and the Unraveling of Unity

A primary exigence occurred following the death of Michael Brown in Ferguson, Missouri between Pastors Voddie Baucham and Thabiti Anyabwile. Familiar to many, 18-year-old Michael Brown was shot by officer Darren Wilson in August 2014 resulting in rioting and protesting in the name of social justice. Like the community of Ferguson, Americans found themselves faced with more questions than answers. Many evangelicals looked to pastors for answers in the face of what seemed to be an obvious injustice. One such example was Pastor Voddie Baucham. Although his response came a few short months after the death of Brown, the potency of his message resonated among many; while, at the same time, seemed to anger and confound others. In his *Thoughts on Ferguson*, Baucham (2014) revealed his own personal coming to terms with the “system” in America as well as a refusal to decentralize the gospel in relation to political fads.³ In the article, Baucham (2014) underscores the plight of black men by noting crime statistics internal to the black community often created by rampant fatherlessness. Next, he affirms the existence of racism in society by retelling a story in which he and his uncle, a Vietnam war veteran, were stopped and humiliated by the police. Nevertheless, when similarly being held-up at gunpoint and humiliated by an

³ In *Fault Lines*, Baucham (2021) shares the trials and struggles of his single parent upbringing which began in California during desegregation. After being bussed to a new school in the Palisades, Baucham reminisces on being called the n-word by a boy in his class until he finally punched him in the chest. What he remembers most of his mother’s response was for him never to “resort to violence” even when called that name (p. 14). Some years later, after being held up at gunpoint, he and his mother moved from California to live with an uncle in South Carolina for a short time before finally putting down roots in Texas.

African American, Baucham (2014) saw the insufficiency of *systemic racism*: “However, I have come to realize that it was no more ‘the system’ when white cops pulled me over than it was ‘the system’ when a black thug robbed me at gunpoint. It was sin!” (para. 11). His strongest point comes later as he clarifies what he truly believes to be the motivating factor at the heart of contemporary movements toward social justice, namely a political ideology: “It does me absolutely no good to assume that my mistreatment was systemic in nature. ... I have a life to live, and I refuse to live it fighting ghosts. I will not waste my energy trying to prove the Gramscian, neo-Marxist concept of ‘white privilege’ or prejudice in policing practices” (para. 12). When concluding, Baucham (2014) reminds readers that Brown robbed a convenient store moments prior to his being shot which, in his mind, led to the most important lesson he could teach to his adopted sons: “God is not mocked, for whatever one sows, that will he also reap” (Gal. 6:7). Ending on such a strong note riled a few feathers within the evangelical community.

Thabiti Anyabwile, a fellow evangelical pastor, wrote a response to Baucham’s *Thoughts on Ferguson* arguing he lacked nuance and empathy. Whereas Baucham placed the onus on fatherlessness and internal strife in black communities, Anyabwile (2014) notes that “marriage is no magic bullet” (para. 9). Continuing on, Anyabwile directly references Baucham and his arguments on black-on-black crime claiming that the discussion lacks context: “We need to stop giving the impression that it’s as simple as African-Americans being more criminal by nature by telling more of the story for context” (2014, para. 14). Ultimately, Anyabwile concludes by arguing that Ferguson-like contexts are wrought both with individual responsibility; while, at the same time, systemic issues are at work: “Let me conclude by saying every tree can belong to a forest and every forest is inevitably made up of trees” (2014, para. 29). Following Baucham and Anyabwile’s back and forth online, an evangelical conference entitled #ATimeToSpeak was held at The Lorraine Hotel in Memphis for Christian leaders to discuss the ongoing issues of social injustice and racism. Ed Stetzer led the panel which included figures like Thabiti Anyabwile, Matt Chandler, Trillia Newbill, Voddie Baucham, and local-Memphis pastor Bryan Loritts. Of course, only coming a month after the heated online exchange between Baucham and Anyabwile, the panel was rife with tension as Stetzer urged honesty among the panelists. One revealing moment was when Stetzer requested a follow-up response from Baucham connoting a negative perspective toward his position: “In hindsight would you have done anything different in the article?” (Kainos, A Time to Speak). After humorously agreeing, Baucham responded by noting his main purpose when writing the article was to challenge others to consider the ideological framing of the conversation and how it inevitably results in division: “My other point here is that ... I think when we shape things in this way that’s what keeps the division among us and between us” (Kainos, A Time to Speak). However, such a response seemed to signal a boundary line

between Baucham and others especially as Pastor Brian Loritts requested clarification: “For the good of my own soul. ... This is very important. In your worldview, is there any place for *systemic* injustice?” (Kainos, *A Time to Speak*; emphasis added). After clarifying his rejection of “systemic racism,” Baucham seemed to find himself outside the fold due to his denunciation of this lens.

Boundary Work and the Religious Rhetoric of Anti-Racism

To illustrate rhetorics of demarcation, Pauley (2005) discusses the rhetorical situation that emerged in 2002 when a Christian worship tour was sponsored by Chevrolet. The notable line-blurring between the capitalistic market and overall religious intent of CCM artists was called into question not simply by the media but also by other CCM artists resulting in a *rhetoric of demarcation*. Pauley analyzed a letter of rebuke sent by Steve Camp, a notable CCM figure, to the artists to demonstrate that by their willingness to participate in said sponsorship with Chevrolet, they were inevitably beyond the boundaries of CCM. Significantly, Pauley sets forth three main criteria evident in most contexts in which rhetorical boundary work takes place within the community of Contemporary Christian Music. The first is the use of the *negative* for identity formulation. In other words, communities often establish and reaffirm their identity by pointing to specific behavior or beliefs that are deemed unworthy. Secondly, the context in which boundary work emerges is usually one of crisis whereby the “community must define itself and draw boundaries” (p. 75). Thirdly, the crisis moment within the community emerges because a legitimized figure *within* the community causes the rhetorical exigence. Therefore, when these themes are apparent within a community, *rhetorics of demarcation* begin to formulate boundaries and bolster identification, while at the same time disassociating those who possess the deviant belief. Pauley’s discussion of rhetorics of demarcation directly correlates with current discussions within evangelicalism concerning anti-racism and social justice and is thus a valid lens to make sense of the current rhetorical situation.

To understand the rhetoric of contemporary anti-racist and social justice movements, one must begin with James Cone’s *Black Theology & Black Power* which has been held as one of the most important theological works of the twentieth century. Cone sought to reframe theology from the perspective of the oppressed. In his mind, traditional systematized theology originating from the academy was unsuccessful socially because it failed to understand—or, more aptly, failed to consider—the plight and social woes of those still experiencing systemic oppression. Therefore, because the systematized understanding of God did not reach the true struggles of the oppressed, a new hermeneutic was sought. As a result, Cone reinterpreted scripture using the *hermeneutic of blackness*. Interestingly, this hermeneutic relied centrally on ontology because, he argued, the

then-system was one of absurdity which “arises as the black man seeks to understand his place in the white world” and is thus unable to be reasoned through (p. 13). From this perspective, the standpoint of the individuals and their community’s historic experience of oppression—or lack thereof—are essential to understanding. According to Bradley (2010), even Christ’s purpose in the incarnation is reformulated through ontology and oppression: “It is Christ’s shared victimology that uniquely binds him to blacks who have suffered under centuries of oppression by whites” (p. 58). Despite progress since the sixties, Cone’s initial discursive framing remains. However, to Hughes (2020) and other scholars, the resulting view is just as racially divisive because it creates an impenetrable dialectic on the part of whites who—through their mere being—suppress blackness. Cone argues that even when attempts are made the dialectic is too great for whites to overcome because of their situatedness, leading many minorities to “disengage with White America” (Linly, 2016, para. 17). Interestingly, Cone’s hermeneutic has become the primary vernacular used when discussing social justice. Such priestly rhetoric has crossed from the academic sphere through public figures like Robin DiAngelo and Ibram X. Kendi, even shifting the public verbiage and the debate’s framing.

DiAngelo’s (2018) *White Fragility: Why It’s So Hard for White People to Talk About Racism* and Kendi’s (2019) *How to Be an Antiracist* reveals that Cone’s hermeneutic is much more mainstream than it was two decades ago. Not only that, but the use of *confession* in both works illustrate the current movement’s underlying religious motive. DiAngelo’s work seeks to enact *metanoia* within white readers as they educate themselves about *whiteness* and their own innate racist behaviors. Significantly, however, such readers are never able to fully empty themselves of said whiteness and implicit racial bias; rather, the battle with one’s demons parallels the Christian process of sanctification minus redemption (Murrell, 2020). Similarly, Kendi’s work illustrates the potency of antiracist sentiments as readers are persuaded to adopt a liberation perspective. Akin to Cone, Kendi begins by reframing reality using definitions. “Racist: One who is supporting a racist policy through their actions or inaction or expressing a racist idea. Antiracist: One who is supporting an antiracist policy through their actions or expressing an antiracist idea” (p. 13). Notably, such definitions filter all of life through one variable—race—creating a type of priestly rhetoric (Lessl, 1989). Kendi amplifies the religious framing when recounting a conference speaker named Tom Skinner. To readers, Skinner’s rhetoric reflects a liberation orthodoxy capable of motivating others to centralize liberation while turning away from the manufactured Christ they had come to believe: “‘The liberator has come!’ [Skinner yelled] Students practically leapt out of their seats in an ovation—taking on the mantle of this fresh gospel. The liberators had come” (p. 16). Uniquely, a catechism of sorts is given to aid new proselytes: “I stop using the ‘I’m not a racist’ or ‘I can’t be racist’ defense

of denial. I admit the definition of racist ... I confess ...” (p. 226). From this perspective, one can view the inherent religious properties within contemporary social justice rhetoric fueling its growth in recent years. Hailing from Cone’s ontological reformulation of Christian theology, current priest-like figures encourage *metanoia* and *confession*.

In *Atonement as Activism*, McWhorter (2018) affirmed the religious nature of the social justice movement. In addition, he illustrates how the movement has reformulated the Christian mythos for influence specifically through the acceptance of terms like “white privilege” and “systemic racism.” These terms, he contends, reformulate the doctrine of original sin inevitably shifting the tone and motives within contemporary racial discussions. Rather than speakers who might make others feel uncomfortable by calling out racist actions, McWhorter (2018) argues that the current mood has a religious air to it, particularly among white audiences. Pointing to certain public figures and their blanket arguments regarding *whiteness* and *privilege*, McWhorter (2018) finds it odd how such rhetoric is met with praise strangely akin to an “amen!” in church: “I have seen whites owning up to their white privilege using the hand-in-the-air-palm-out gesture typically associated with testifying in church” (para. 6). Arguably, this transference of religious meaning for political action may help explain its influence even among evangelicals.

To make matters worse, confusion and disinformation continue to fuel tensions around racial injustice. Whereas the media has led the public to believe that racial tragedies at the hands of the police occur daily, numerous scholars see the data saying differently. Hughes (2020), for instance, argues that the underlying premise of social justice movements like Black Lives Matter—namely that unarmed black men are being killed by police every single day because of their race—is false.⁴ This position, he maintains, is supported by numerous independent research studies which found no evidence of racial bias among deadly police shootings.⁵ In fact, Hughes, posits that the silence surrounding white victims seems more questionable considering the numbers. Likewise, McWhorter (2016) notes parallel occurrences of white victims and critiques the lack of media sensitivity toward their deaths. Rather, he notes that the public’s underlying assumptions about culture must instead be based on statistics rather than feelings: “We can all agree

⁴ Hughes contends that the total number of unarmed Americans killed by police (55 in 2019) reveals great progress in American society when considering three variables: the vast population of the US when compared to other countries, the fundamental ownership of guns, and the filming of police misconduct via smartphones. However, the public misperception regarding racial injustice, he argues, will only continue to fuel protests and riots even as progress is clearly evident in the data.

⁵ Of the four studies mentioned by Hughes, the most well-known and publicly discussed is that of Harvard economist Roland G. Fryer, Jr. which was funded by the *National Bureau of Economic Research* (NBER).

that the police kill too many innocent people, but at this point, we can disagree—as eminently reasonable minds—that the cops kill out of bigotry” (para. 16). More recently, McWhorter (2021) freshly labelled social justice advocates as “the Elect”, arguing that this leftist form of fundamentalism is an ideology “under which white people calling themselves our saviors make black people look like the dumbest, weakest, most self-indulgent human beings in the history of our species...” (p. xiv). To him, this movement epitomizes neoracism. Hughes (2020) concurs, raising awareness as to how this movement is challenging the public morality as it elevates the moral stature of some ethnic communities in light of historic oppression, while at the same time, receding the moral stature of others in light of historical guilt: “But I would submit that if this new “anti-racist” bias is justified ... then everything that I thought I knew about basic morality ... should be thrown out the window” (para. 7). As more and more of the public become activated through this religious rhetoric, one is left to question what has been the overall influence on the church?

Evangelicalism, Social Justice, and a Rhetorical Exposition

One of the greatest demonstrations of social justice influence is the recent rhetorical shift within evangelical leadership. The first and most influential is none other than Bishop T. D. Jakes who, through his overwhelming social media presence, can reach a larger audience than most other evangelicals (House, 2018). Significantly, House notes how Jakes has sacralized various communication mediums beyond the physical pulpit to reach millions regarding social justice and, more specifically, the Black Lives Matter movement. Likewise, a Christian musical artist, Lecrae, who has held a strong voice in the Christian community since his initial album release in 2004, is also a social justice advocate. Considering him not having grown up in Church, Lecrae often speaks as an external voice to illuminate what he sees as inconsistencies within the Christian world, especially on the topic of race. As a result, his music has met resistance and consternation by a largely white evangelical community. Though, a lesser known figure, Ekemini Uwan has also recently caused waves within evangelicalism. At the 2019 Sparrow Conference, Uwan made numerous remarks about *whiteness* and the need for evangelical women to divest themselves of this sin: ““Because we have to understand something — whiteness is wicked,”” Uwan said. “It is wicked. It’s rooted in violence, it’s rooted in theft, it’s rooted in plunder, it’s rooted in power, in privilege” (Menzie, 2019, para. 18). Such unexpected and direct comments resulted in numerous women leaving the conference as Uwan spoke and, ultimately, a public apology by the conference directors.

Despite this influence, other evangelical leaders remain opposed. One such figure, Pastor Voddie Baucham, argues that the social justice perspective furthers inequality and oppression rather than solving it by creating an imbalance among

brothers and sisters in Christ. To do so, he notes how recent occurrences have revealed a type of pseudo-unity within evangelicalism. Rather than biblical dogma being the line of demarcation for disassociation, social justice has taken precedence, resulting in a contemporary form of excommunication—cancellation: “The fact that there’s been a false unity that has been exposed through these controversies and people who, you know, were brothers from another mother. And now this comes up, and if you say the wrong thing or come down on the wrong side of a particular issue, all of a sudden you are anathema” (Baucham, 2019, p. 6). In other words, due to social justice, many faithful Christians—like the aforementioned Louie Giglio—have lost their ministries and livelihoods because they refuse to heed the current social justice zeitgeist: “I get email several times a week from people, pastors, church members, leaders of ministries who for years, for decades, have been faithful. Who are found to hold the wrong position on some case in the media. ... And now all of a sudden: you’re done” (Baucham, 2019, pp. 6-7). By sharing this with the community, Baucham illustrates how the alter ideology already possesses internal influence and, more significantly, poses a danger to the communal fellowship. He continues by uncovering how such advocates view others through inherited guilt or innocence based on the historic experiences of the community in which they find themselves. Like Hughes (2020), Baucham believes this ideology skews one’s moral vision when judging the ethicality of another’s action. The most obvious example highlighted is the indignation surrounding the homogenous nature of many contemporary white churches which, to social justice advocates, illustrates racism. On the other hand, homogenous African American churches are deemed to be free of sin. “So, a predominately white church that doesn’t have black members is a sin, but a predominately black church that doesn’t have white members is? It just is” (Baucham, 2019, p. 7). Baucham even explicitly uses McWhorter’s (2018) earliest label of the movement—a *religion of racialism*—to underscore how this new orthodoxy is distorting the gospel. “[A]pparently Christ can transform us and deal with all other sorts of sins, but, this one, this one somehow evades the cross” (2019, p. 2).

Relating directly to rhetorics of demarcation, Sullivan (1999) created a theoretical formulation called a *rhetorical exposé* after analyzing Irenaeus’ *Against Heresies*. Building off his previous research and formulation of *rhetorics of orthodoxy* within epideictic discourse, Sullivan proposes that specifically in such contexts the discourse enacts more than a mere identification between participants in the moment, but eventually progresses by “defin[ing] and protect[ing] the boundaries of ideological and socially cohesive groups” (p. 53). Because of the emergence of new ideas within the group by internal agitators, *secrecy* is evident as the faithful find themselves mystified by new teachings. As a result, one of the specific roles of the orthodox rhetor is to expose these new, mystical ideas often through satirical characterizations. Thus, the religious rhetor who exposes and

demystifies the heterodox ideas can be viewed as a *translator* shining a light, rhetorically speaking, on the problematic ideology.⁶ Sullivan's (1999) formulation also demonstrates how identification and disassociation emerge in these moments through a utilization of Kenneth Burke's previous work. Of the various meanings of identification by Burke throughout his corpus, Sullivan proposes that "killing" or "scapegoating" is the most apt in the context of *rhetorical exposé* because it deals with the "subject of the discourse rather than with the audience" (p. 56). Importantly, identification occurs with the sacrifice while disassociation occurs via the scapegoat: "And so the rhetorical act of scapegoating is an identification of self with otherness and then a disassociation from it" (p. 56). From his analysis of Irenaeus' work, he concludes that rhetorical exposes are defined by four criteria: community conditions, primary actors, rhetorical tactics, and iconographic display.

When discussing community conditions, Sullivan contends that Irenaeus penned his work to differentiate Gnosticism and disassociate their views from the faithful. The second variable dealing with community conditions was that of specific teachings of Marcus, a gnostic disciple, who "advocated sexual promiscuity, made love-potions, and enticed women in the Church into having relations with him" (p. 59). Next, Sullivan notes that primary actors must be identified. For the context of Irenaeus, there are three actors: Irenaeus, the priest who seeks to expose the contamination; the scapegoat Valentinus; and the audience, spectators who watch the rhetorical ritual unfold. After appropriating the actors, rhetorical tactics are developed. Irenaeus first strategically identifies with gnostic readers by revealing his own learnings of Gnosticism, even assuming the role of the gnostic teacher. Such a tactic, Sullivan explains, illustrates the *stamp/impression* on Irenaeus creating one of the more important moments of the *exposé* for those spectating, who become "fascinated with the forbidden teachings now being displayed openly ..." (p. 63). After creating identification, he then immediately seeks to differentiate, and thus *disassociate*, their differing values. One of the final strategies occurs as Irenaeus attacks the *gnostic hermeneutic*, which "leads their teachers to [take] the elements of a king's image, which had been beautifully fitted together, and reassembles them to make an image of a dog or fox" (p. 65). In other words, the gnostic interpretation of sacred Christian doctrines were utilized for profane ends. Finally, Sullivan notes an inherent form of iconography, or figurality, often displayed in these contexts whereby a biblical allusion is depicted. For example, Sullivan argues that Irenaeus embodied the mosaic figure

⁶ Sullivan importantly notes how Irenaeus' rhetoric emphasizes protection of that which is internal to the community. Therefore, the ideas that were being kept in secret were of utmost importance to his analysis. Rather than being countercultural, a norm when opposing the Roman empire for the early church, Irenaeus was utilizing a *bureaucratic rhetoric* by challenging secret teachings counter to orthodoxy.

who raised up the bronze serpent—Valentinus—to enable others to gaze upon it, whereby they were saved.

Disruptions in the Fellowship: MLK50, T4G, and The Statement on Social Justice & the Gospel

In early 2018, a major disruption occurred at two back-to-back conservative evangelical conferences creating a clear divide and need for differentiation among evangelical leadership: MLK50 and T4G (Together for the Gospel). Garnett (2018) contends that the topic of race and politics were advanced in a uniquely political form calling into question leaders' underlying motives. The first major incident occurred when Pastor Matt Chandler explicitly stated that many of his white, Texan congregants were partly to blame for the racial strife whether through naivety or apathy at MLK50: "They don't know what they don't know and they are part of a system that encourages their not knowing" (Garnett, 2018, para. 5). The very next month at T4G, panels seemed to be divided among those who centered their talks and sermons on social justice and those avoiding the topic altogether. Garnett (2018), in fact, argues that, "The tension between the two programs was palpable to those familiar with the players" (para. 7). David Platt's sermon at T4G was the final straw as he encouraged members to recognize the lack of diversity in the church resulting in many attendees feeling as if they were being called racists. In a genuine reply to T4G's overall connotation, Schaal (2018) writes: "I get what they are saying. But when you, at the same time, imply that every white person in America is inherently racist, then you are saying that every church in America is betraying the gospel (para. 8).

As a result, Dr. John Buice, Founder of G3 Ministries, gathered several leaders together to discuss the controversial nature of such teachings and, ultimately, take steps to disassociate themselves. To do so, they published *The Statement on Social Justice & the Gospel* on September 4th, 2018. The first line clarifies their purpose in the statement: "In view of questionable sociological, psychological, and political theories presently permeating our culture and making inroads into Christ's church, we wish to clarify certain key Christian doctrines and ethical principles prescribed in God's Word" (para. 1). As could be guessed, the statement was met with a significant internal response. For instance, at *SBC Voices*, King (2018) questioned the underlying intentions of the framers even providing a list of influential leaders when writing, "Purporting to address an alleged shift . . . I would like to believe are well-meaning but frankly not at all 'getting' what those whom it primarily addresses are saying. That is at best" (para. 2). Following the statement's publication, Baucham, a framer and signer of the *Statement*, sought to

embody the communal values of the evangelical community by arguing that the shift toward social justice poses a danger to the church.

Primary Actors: A Priest, a Polluted Community, and Spectating Public

As a leading cultural apologist, Baucham's writings span the course of the last two decades and are often the focus of debates within evangelicalism. More recently, Baucham is known for his 2021 national bestseller *Fault Lines: The Social Justice Movement and Evangelicalism's Looming Catastrophe*. However, his first work, *The Ever-Loving Truth*, was published in 2004 and offered even-then a nuanced perspective on the topics of pluralism and secular culture encouraging Christians to stand firm despite social changes. In this work, he also discusses the death of a close friend and cousin Jarmal Walker from inner-city violence: "The two of us were inseparable, or so we thought, though he had not left the mean streets of L.A.. In fact, he had gotten caught up in 'the life.' He had become a drug dealer. One day, during a drug deal in Oakland, someone walked up to Jarmal and shot him..." (2004, p. 88). Baucham's conversion would come shortly thereafter. Nevertheless, this new turn in his life would still be intricately connected to the death of Jarmal and the pangs he felt having escaped the life that his cousin did not. In many ways, one can see Baucham's personal experiences of inner-city violence, social justice, and generational prosperity all being inherently connected to his stand against ethnic Gnosticism. Additionally, Baucham's training as an apologist allows him to fulfill the role of priest and translator in a unique way going so far as to see similarities between social justice advocates and early Gnostics. Throughout the sermon, his considerable knowledge of the ideology's roots is apparent resulting in his ability to identify and disassociate it from orthodoxy. Whereas Sullivan argues that Irenaeus was the "only person in the area who could fill the role of the priest exposing the heretical scapegoat" due to his travels and esteemed status, Baucham similarly is suited to confront this ideology because of his experience. More specifically, his experiences as an African American pastor in conservative evangelicalism—which has *stamped/impressed* his perspective counter to the narrative of ethnic Gnosticism—allows him to act as a unique challenge and voice in the discussion.⁷

⁷ Baucham is perceived by many to be naïve of the American Black Experience even though his earliest ministry days can be described as Afro-centric while serving exclusively in black churches. This focus, however, shifted after finding a welcoming fellowship among Southern Baptists. It was during this time that he was challenged by the emphasis of racial reconciliation among white churches not previously experienced: "I am not saying that was the entirety of the black church experience, or that those leaders were evil or ungodly—only that for the first time, I was coming face-to-face with

To demonstrate his *impression* of ethnic Gnosticism, he shares his own personal struggles as an African American to demystify the teachings, specifically regarding his education. Uniquely, when pursuing his doctoral degree, he chose to study abroad, rather than in the U.S., because he saw the negative effects of affirmative action upon the ethos of minorities. “You know one of the main reasons that I did that it’s because, if I left the United States and went to a school in the UK, no one could accuse the institution of granting me my degree because of tokenism or affirmative action” (2019, p. 7). In other words, his impression of the social justice agenda was negative. Rather than building up minority communities, he notes how these actions often resulted in a more negative view of minorities. Baucham’s unique perspective amplifies much of what he deems to be wrong with the ideology whereby ethnic minorities are exalted *because* they are deemed to be weaker: “I was sick and tired of the assumptions that people make because of this attitude that says, ‘your skin color makes you the weaker brother and we have to lower the standard for you’” (2019, p. 7). Therefore, Baucham, in this sermon, seeks to translate and impress these deficiencies upon interlocutors; while, at the same time, pointing to the sufficiency of scripture even in matters of racial conflict.

Next, to demystify the variant teachings before the church, the pollutant is first discussed abstractly. Although a specific figure is not called out initially to embody the scapegoat, Baucham’s focusing on this alter ideology is consistent with Burke’s notion of identification as it centers upon the *discourse* (Sullivan, p. 56). That is, the *discourse* is the problem that Baucham seeks to bring into the light and demystify in front of the faithful. This is even noticeable in his language as he explicitly talks of “shedding some light” on the things “we’re dealing with” (2019, p. 1). He first describes the ideology through its language and jargon—oppression, oppressed, and privilege—ultimately labelling it with hostility:

This idea that somehow because of my ethnicity because of my position as a minority I know what oppression is and feels like and don't have to necessarily have evidence for it. And because of other people's position of not being minorities and not being oppressed, they actually oppress people without thinking about it and without knowing it. They have privilege that they're not even aware of. ... That's ethnic Gnosticism and it's a problematic idea. (2019, p. 1)

By articulating the ideology, he gains identification prior to offering admonishment and purification through the sermon. Ultimately, Matt Chandler, a valid insider within evangelicalism, is specifically addressed regarding his statements during a

brothers who, through tear-stained eyes, were begging God to diversify His church, and all of them were white” (p. 34).

sermon at MLK 50. Therefore, he embodies the scapegoat figure eligible to cleanse the community.

The audience, being the final actor, embodies the role of spectator. Much of Baucham's (2019) discourse reveals explicitly his differentiation between the ideology itself and the audience present at the Founder's Conference. —“*That's ethnic Gnosticism and it's a problematic idea. It is rooted...*”. With this language, the ideology of ethnic Gnosticism metaphorically becomes a pollutant whereby Baucham can disassociate the faithful from what he deems to be an unorthodox perspective: “Let *us* trust the word of God. Not *our* feelings. Not *our* inclinations. Not *our* own personal assumptions or assertions. The word of God. Let *us* do what the book says...” (2019, p. 9). Additionally, Baucham's language uniquely illustrates the audience's role in watching the ritual. For example, one moment following a hostile description of ethnic Gnosticism and, therefore, a moment of sacrifice, he urges them to look at the ideology in its nakedness: “*Do you see what I'm saying? ... This is the problem that we run into here*” (2019, p. 3). In other words, by recontextualizing and translating ethnic Gnosticism for interlocutors, it is as if he is holding the ideological content in front of the audience so that they might *watch* and *participate* in the sacrifice.

Identification and Disassociation: Making a Sacrifice and Cleansing the Community

The first rhetorical tactic relates to how Baucham calls attention to the *crisis* inside the community. He foreshadows this idea early when previewing his direction and invitation to speak on the topic by a friend and colleague, pastor James White. He then turns to the historical roots of this philosophy by explaining how “[Ethnic Gnosticism] is rooted, I would argue, in cultural Marxism that reduces everything to race, class, sex, gender, that divides people up. ... in cultural Marxism, you divide the world between those who establish and benefit from the cultural hegemony and everyone else who is oppressed...” (2019, p. 2). By pointing to the underpinning philosophy, he is hoping to demonstrate how Christian philosophical roots have already shifted. Yet, many interlocutors would have questioned Baucham's meaning and relevance. To clarify, he states that through ethnic Gnosticism, if one is a member of a perceived “oppressed” group, *insight* is naturally possessed regarding racism. This type of gnosis, or enlightenment, therefore, gives some a superior viewpoint over others. However, if one is a member of the dominant group, the exact opposite occurs, meaning they are blind to these issues even their own participation in the cultural hegemony. Baucham implicitly creates identification here with ethnic Gnosticism, by reappropriating Matt Chandler's exact wording from the T4G conference. “And being in a dominant group where you don't have to worry about such things, puts you in a

setting...*where you literally don't know what you don't know*. You are a racist... Whether you were aware of it or not" (2019, p. 2). For those closely connected to the internal happenings of the community, they understood Baucham's implied reference which illustrated the level of influence already gained. To others, however, the relevance was not yet clear as they saw such a philosophy as being external to the community. Yet, Baucham continues to push the audience subtly to create identification with the *Other-ness* of ethnic Gnosticism.

To do so, Baucham briefly talks about stereotypes and how they are a "normal part of life" (2019, p. 2). He then shares a recent story to rhetorically aid him in exposing this shift. "We were with our children the other day and walking with the seven youngest children and my buddy looks at them ... [and starts] talking about how big they are getting and asks: 'They play any sports?' And I said, 'No, actually they're musicians. ... 'Ha! Looks like you ought to have a basketball team'" (2019, p. 3). Unknown to interlocutors, the story itself was a rhetorical trap to expose and identify this shift in their own lives. Knowing that many would be sensitive to possible forms of racism, Baucham uses it to his advantage: "Now, I say that and I see some you shaking your heads, right? Because you're thinking stereotype, right? You're thinking it's racist, right?" (2019, p. 2). After revealing the friend to be a black family member, Baucham calls the racial difference into question: "Now let me ask you the next question. Why is it that a black family member can say that to me and it's not racist, but if a white person said it to me...? Do you see what I'm saying?" (2019, p. 3). Through this anecdote, Baucham's subtleness creates a moment of intense identification in which interlocutors saw themselves polluted in *Other-ness*. In that moment, ethnic Gnosticism was no longer deemed as *Other*; rather, the community was revealed as being symbolically contaminated thereby requiring disassociation through a scapegoat.

Finding the Scapegoat: Translation, Differentiation, and Cleansing the Community

After showing the depth of this alter-ideology's infiltration, Baucham explicitly points to MLK50 to validate his claims and the discourse of Matt Chandler. He first underscores the biblical desire within Christians to see reconciliation amongst ethnic groups. Yet, in Baucham's estimation ethnic Gnosticism pollutes those genuine desires for justice by twisting them into profane forms even amongst evangelical leadership. Therefore, Baucham settles his attention on the disruptive comments of Matt Chandler at MLK 50 to begin the process of disassociation.

Tom alluded earlier to a statement that was made by Matt Chandler at MLK 50. Where Matt just openly in one of his presentations talked about their desire in their church planting to have black leaders of their church plants.

And said, ‘If I have to choose between a white guy who’s an eight and a black guy who’s a seven, I’m going to take the black guy’ (2019, p. 7).

In the same moment, Baucham clearly notes the deceit of this ideology when stating that Chandler “would never intend [these efforts to reflect tokenism], but to many that’s exactly what he said” (2019, p. 7). Just as Baucham discussed the immoral nature of social justice acts toward minorities in education, he reveals Chandler’s attempts at justice to be similarly immoral. In hoping to lift minorities up, Chandler is inadvertently revealing his perspective of them as weaker through *tokenism*. Through his translation, Baucham is hoping to stamp interlocutors with this negative perspective: “Because again, one person’s social justice is another person’s atrocity” (2019, p. 7).

To deepen the wedge of disassociation, Baucham distinguishes explicitly between the variant hermeneutic of ethnic Gnosticism and orthodoxy revealing the alter ideology as “morally and epistemologically inferior” (Sullivan, 1999, p. 55). In fact, when using scripture, he first *translates* how ethnic Gnosticism possesses a faulty underlying assumption, namely that the oppressed can discern the motives of their oppressors. Before delivering the first blow, he reframes the doctrine of original sin which ethnic Gnosticism reinterprets as *privilege* or *whiteness*: “*Jeremiah 17:9* says, ‘The heart is deceitful above all things and desperately sick. Who can understand it?’”(2019, p. 3). In other words, the common substance of sin among all people—rather than one race—raises serious doubts about discerning the motives and intentions of others. He follows the text with an ironic explanation stripping this supposed insight into *whiteness* of any possible validity: “*I can’t understand my own heart and I’m going to tell you what’s in yours?*” (2019, p. 3; emphasis added). Through this ironic depiction, Baucham demystifies the false interpretation between oppressed and oppressor by reconstituting the orthodox picture of original sin, namely that *all* hearts are sick with sin. Second and finally, Baucham introduces Paul’s line of argumentation from *I Corinthians* which speaks of the greatest spiritual insight—love—inevitably raising further doubts about the moral insight possessed by a few regarding social justice. To do so, he frames the text in relation to the current racial strife and conflict within the community.

“What does this mean for you, when a white brother says something that is offensive, what do you do? ... What does a non-black person do, if they run into ethnic Gnosticism and feel like it's not fair? “Know the answer is here: ‘Love is patient and kind. Love does not envy or boast...Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. That’s what my book says!’” (2019, p. 10).

From this perspective, despite one's positionality or the inevitability of future racial conflict among Christians, showing love portrays possession of the greatest insight, namely Christ himself. On the other hand, refusing to show love reveals one's lack of insight and connection to Christ. Through Baucham's wielding of scripture as a sword, the moral superiority is reinstated through the Christian *gnosis* of love while reframing and ridiculing Chandler's espousal of ethnic Gnosticism.

Using the Negative to Clarify Boundaries: Colorblindness and Ethnic Gnosticism

The final rhetorical tactic that emerges in the text is how Baucham utilizes the *negative* to disassociate from both colorblindness and ethnic Gnosticism. First, Baucham rhetorically approaches a view that many interlocutors believed to be the biblical counterpart. "Now, as I say this let me hurry to acknowledge a couple of things that ethnicity is not a bad thing. ... and I need to hurry to say this, because some, some of my dearest friends and brothers. In fact...some of the signers of the document with us would want to argue for being colorblind. And I say, that dog won't hunt" (2019, p. 3). Baucham saw how many Christians found themselves eradicating ethnic differences as a reaction to those totalizing ethnic differences. This perspective, he argues, offends God just as much. To expose the offense of colorblindness, he wraps his imagery in irony even suddenly juxtaposing it to ethnic Gnosticism in order to show the correct path via the *negative*: "God didn't give me all this rich beautiful melanin so that you could act like I don't have it. Amen, somebody! And it is wrong for me to judge you for not having as much. God did this people" (2019, p. 3). Adding insult to injury for advocates of colorblindness, he continues the attack by parodying a person willing to reject the colorful variety of roses. In a humorous voice, he states, "As far as I'm concerned, God just made a rose. Why did he bother to make them all these different colors?" (2019, p. 3). Nevertheless, to reject the variety is to reject God himself. "If he did, praise him for it. Amen?" (2019, p. 3).

By showing how race is not simply natural but, in fact, God ordained, Baucham moves forward by noting how God teaches through ethnic and national identity. First, he argues it teaches dependence and humility: "No single group possesses all the good. Amen? I belong to a group that has strengths and I belong to a group that has weaknesses. ... Praise God for that!" (2019, p. 4). Such an idea reframes the superiority purported in ethnic Gnosticism for some, by placing all ethnicities as equal and thus eligible to learn and grow interdependently. Beyond this point, Baucham notes that ethnic and national identity teaches God's providence because, despite the atrocities of history, God, through his providence, can turn them into good. In fact, Baucham illustrates such providence in his own life:

“I’ve been living and serving in Africa for the last 3 and a half years and I’ve been reminded almost every day. It’s amazing that my ancestors were torn away from that continent and experienced the horrors of slavery and, now, I was born in the center of the universe. ... What is that? It’s providence people! Providence! Would anyone have chosen that path? Absolutely not!” (2019, p. 4).

Lastly, Baucham demonstrates how ethnic and national identity illustrate the consequences of sin most evident in contemporary racial strife in America. Such a point reveals a balanced rebuttal against ethnic Gnosticism which also agrees with a central tenet of social justice advocates, namely the historic atrocities of slavery and institutional racism: “[W]hat we’re dealing with today is the fruit of horrible sins and atrocities. And you don’t have to be a social justice warrior to acknowledge that. Amen?” (2019, p. 5).

Through depictions of what orthodoxy is not, Baucham is able to fortify the community through a rhetoric of demarcation regarding the importance of race. To do so, he uses the apostle Paul’s own affection toward his fellow Israelites in the New Testament: “*I love my people!* That’s what Paul is saying here. ‘My kinsman, according to the flesh.’ ... He speaks in the most passionate terms imaginable about the group to which he, by God’s grace and by God’s providence belongs. *It matters*” (2019, p. 5; emphasis added).⁸ Nevertheless, even as Paul shows great affection for his fellow Israelites, ethnicity is not the ultimate lens through which all of reality is filtered. Instead, the orthodox lens filters one’s ontology through their connection to Christ: “Our connection to Christ is more important. There is a ditch on both sides of the road, folks. There’s a ditch on the side of the road that tries to act colorblind and act like ethnicity doesn’t matter. ... And there’s a ditch on the other side of the road that says, ‘It’s everything and that we start fair and not with Christ’” (2019, p. 5). Therefore, through the negative, Baucham clearly articulates inefficiencies of both politicized hermeneutics while, at the same time, developing explicit lines of demarcation through orthodoxy as a means to fortify and strengthen the faithful.

Conclusion

⁸ *Romans* 9: 1-8; This passage significantly speaks of Paul’s love for his fellow Israelites and God’s working in their history. His love is so great for what he calls “kinsman, according to the flesh” that he even desires to offer up his own salvation in Christ to them. Such love for one’s ethnic community is thus biblical and should have weight in future conversations on the topic. However, it is plausible that the significance of this topic as it relates to “ethnicity” is often overshadowed by the discussion of predestination found later in the same chapter.

Although unknown to many, Dr. Voddie Baucham is an important voice within conservative evangelicalism especially in relation to the current discussion surrounding social justice. Despite his importance, little to no research has focused on his rhetorical efforts nor the current rhetorics of demarcation being voiced within the evangelical community. This conflict, as was noted, is a continuation of the historical rhetorical spaces hailing all the way back to public figures like Carl Henry and, more importantly, James Cone. Baucham's expositional rhetoric regarding Ethnic Gnosticism at the Southeastern Founders' Conference, however, denotes a shift in discussions involving race, not just in society, but more specifically within evangelicalism, signaling greater fractures if disruptions continue to emerge. Therefore, continued research is needed in this area.

In facing this conflict, Baucham meaningfully shines a light on the flaws and inefficiencies of what he believes to be an alter ideology that could consume the church. Of course, many will disagree with Baucham's rhetorical strategies and translation of social justice as it verges on being polemical. Nevertheless, as Sullivan suggests (1999), part of the church's historic rhetorical strategies was, in fact, disassociation. More significantly, Baucham's notion of Ethnic Gnosticism as a quasi-religious movement that hitches itself onto traditional doctrines like original sin needs further research. Similarly, his critique of *colorblindness* from a biblical standpoint is rare among evangelicals and could add to future scholarship (Mehta, Schneider, and Ecklund, 2022). Whereas many rhetorical scholars have emphasized the importance of *whiteness*, this research alternately opens up new ground for mining the current social justice zeitgeist, especially as it relates to religious rhetoric (Harris & Steiner, 2018; Draper, 2018). Uniquely, Baucham's figurality in this rhetorical moment symbolically embodies that of the Apostle Paul as he opposed Peter to his face because he had succumbed to the social influence of the Judaizers (Gal. 2: 11-14). Yet, social justice proponents within the church may see themselves in a similar purificatory role. As to whether Baucham's rhetorical strategies will create further disassociation or a renewal of fellowship within conservative evangelicalism remains to be seen. Even through rhetorical conflict, Baucham longs for unity:

“So, let us speak to the great ills and evils and sins of our day. Let us proclaim and trust in the gospel of Christ above all else. And let us never, ever forget that all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God and that we're all in desperate need of his grace and that none of us is exempt. (2019, p. 10)

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