

In *Take Me to the Water*, Starlette Thomas is steadfast and unmovable in her dissent from the prevailing perspectives on the sociopolitical construct of “race” as a lens through which we see others, and as a framework in which some are mistreated and disregarded. Inasmuch as race permeates much of Christian religious life, and colors the gospel that is preached, our notions of race must be dismantled and removed from the life and teachings of the church. Thomas seeks to reconstruct a gospel narrative that omits biases, hierarchies, and perspectives shaped by race. In so doing, she is committed—in her own words—to “work toward an inward orientation that not only changes our perspectives...but challenges the systems that support social othering.”
—**Jeffrey Haggray, Executive Director, American Baptist Home Mission Societies**

With sound scholarship and great passion, Starlette Thomas offers an indictment of the North American church's embrace of the false construct of race. More powerfully, she speaks with the voice of a prophet urging us to remember who we are, pushing us to return to those heady, beginning days of the early church when Christians were rising out of the water a new people, one people. While calling out European colonialists and their descendants, *Take Me to the Water* nevertheless invites all readers to wade in our baptismal waters and come to know our kinship with each other through it. Thomas offers history, study guides, and an action plan to help us take the plunge into a raceless community. Like the people of Nineveh, will we heed her call?
—**Bren Dubay, Executive Director, Koinonia Farm, Americus, Ga.**

Starlette Thomas provides the church with a gift, though be sure to open it slowly and don't expect sugar-coated junk. In an age of shallow theology and scorching bigotry, Thomas challenges us to enter the deeper waters. I'm a Baptist who believes in congregational freedom, so I won't suggest making this required reading at churches, but Christians who long for a better gospel than the one given us over the past 400 years should definitely read this book. —**Brian Kaylor, President and Editor-in-Chief, *Word & Way***

The bloody house of American racism is deconstructed board by board down to the studs and nails in this remarkable book by Starlette Thomas. Don't be afraid of that dissertation-like subtitle; it's a mouthful but her statement of purpose clearly interprets for us: “the raceless gospel expressed through baptismal identity can act as a catalyst for desegregating sacred space.” Eloquenty concise or as I would say, BOOM. As you read, you will be treated to a vibrant intellect as she engages history, theology, sociopolitical, and cultural ramifications of identity and a preacher who has, like a Gullah basket weaver, coiled and wrapped numerous strands into her book/basket. Use it to sift the debris of a culture in love with death. Use it to carry the fruits of liberation. The bibliography she provides is all by itself worth the price. You will be given a decoding device that unlocks baptismal identity as a fierce counter-sign to the present age of Christian nationalism and white supremacy. —**R. Michael Bledsoe, Retired Church History Professor, Howard University School of Divinity; Retired Pastor, Riverside Baptist Church, Washington, D.C.**

Take Me to The Water invites readers to reimagine how our new birth in God's family requires us to see through the lenses of Christ and embrace each other as members of the one family. Drawing from the experiences of the once-enslaved, Starlette Thomas walks us through the pages of the slave narrative, painting a picture of a segregated church with its roots etched in the sociopolitical construct of race. Using water baptism as a catalyst for a unifying church, this book helps us “to deconstruct race and decolonize identity.” *Take Me to the Water* should be required reading for anyone serious about breaking down the walls of segregation and giving birth to a unified church.—**Emmett L. Dunn, Executive Secretary-Treasurer/CEO, Lott Carey Baptist Foreign Mission Convention**

With philosophical precision and provocative prose, Starlette Thomas shows us there is something about the water of baptism that has the power to divest us of the lie of race and desegregate Christian communities in America. As a profound theological reflection, compelling personal confession, and catalyzing small group curriculum, *Take Me to the Water* has the potential to raise the church to new life, liberated from the bonds of a racialized faith through the clarion call of a raceless gospel. Read and be reborn!—**Ben Boswell, Senior Minister, Myers Park Baptist Church, Charlotte, N.C.**

In this sharp interrogation of American Christianity's insistence on perpetually attempting to harness the power of the gospel to fuel our own race-framed interests, Thomas applies sharp scholarship, her trademark wit, and a tenacious conviction that the God we say we serve has no use for the designations we impose. Read this book. Use it to spur discussion. Read it to remember that God's spirit flows with a power we will never control.—**Amy Butler, Founder, Invested Faith**

This poetically written and theologically rigorous book takes the reader into the deep waters. It is well researched, challenging, and as one would expect from Thomas, in places controversial. For those committed to lifelong learning, this is the book to read. There are new gems in every paragraph.—**Wale Hudson-Roberts, Racial Justice Coordinator, Baptist Union**

In *Take Me to the Water*, Starlette Thomas challenges us in raw and powerful ways to take on the racial divide and racist past and present. Her scriptural, social, and theological observations are uniquely eloquent indeed. To put it even more strongly, this is a prophetic word of things we need to engage. Most importantly, this work is not only poignantly descriptive, but also in its working questions and suggested liturgy is practically prescriptive. Thomas' raceless gospel and its subsequent work in *Take Me to the Water* are places that we need to be, renewing both our baptismal commitments and vows to the glory of God and the renewal of ourselves and others whom we serve.—**Jeremy Bell, General Secretary, North American Baptist Fellowship**

Starlette Thomas leads us to and through the water. She tells us: "I don't simply have a problem with race but believe that race is the problem with our shared human being and belonging. I have no interest in working with the word, so don't add this book to your anti-racism reading list. I am anti-race." With these words she beckons us to join her on a journey toward understanding, liberation, and healing. For too long, too many Christians have used and continue to use their religious texts and platforms to teach ignorance and maintain unbelonging for some—whether Christian or not—and perpetual belonging for an increasingly short list of others. Thomas illustrates how productive fresh "raceless" understandings of the gospel uphold its message of wholeness for all humans and effectively undo the human-made divisions among us. For anyone who wants to truly practice what they preach, *Take Me to the Water* is a must read, with Dr. Thomas showing readers how to de-racialize Christianity.—**Sheena Mason, Assistant Professor, SUNY Oneonta; author of *The Raceless Antiracist: Why Ending Race Is the Future of Antiracism***

For those of us who have had the blessing of working with and hearing Rev. Thomas preach and teach, we have experienced a mode of love, a part of our own history, and the challenges that are before us.—**Lawrence Michael Cameron, Pastor, Bethany Union Church, Chicago**

“TAKE ME TO THE WATER”



*The Raceless Gospel as Baptismal Pedagogy
for a Desegregated Church*

STARLETTE THOMAS

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DEDICATION

To my ancestors who were forcibly converted by way of water during the European slave trade—from human beings to chattel property and whose names were washed away.

CONTENTS

Foreword

ix

Acknowledgments

xi

Introduction

1

Chapter 1
Troubled Water

11

Chapter 2
Wading in the Water

31

Chapter 3
Testing the Water

49

Chapter 4
Drawing from the Water

69

Chapter 5
Baptism as Reflection Pool

83

Appendix
“Take Me to the Water”: A Baptismal Liturgy

95

Notes

101

Selected Raceless Bibliography

111

FOREWORD

I was just seven years old when I was baptized. Many decades older now, I still remember that formative event more vividly than my service of ordination to Christian ministry in my mid-twenties or when I was commissioned an American Baptist home missionary years later.

Peering over the paper-thin balcony of time, I can see and hear the senior choir of the Tabernacle of Faith Baptist Church melodically encouraging me and other baptizands to step into the water. They sang, “Wade in the water. Wade in the water, children. God’s going to trouble the water.” I boldly entered the chilly baptismal pool on that warm first Sunday evening of August in 1958. First Sunday evenings at “the Tab” were exclusively reserved for baptisms and for participating in the Lord’s Supper.

Even at that age, I had already witnessed dozens of these first Sunday services before I myself was finally allowed to be baptized and then invited to join in the commemorative meal afterward. I knew what I was doing. I knew Jesus. I had seen Jesus incarnated in the face of Brother Cathcart, the voice of Sister Reece, the prayers of Rev. Campbell, the generosity of Mr. and Mrs. Stokes. I saw Jesus through the hands, hearts, and lives of so many others, both in and out of my local church.

With his left hand on my shoulder, and his right supporting me from floating away, Pastor F. Douglass Ferrell looked me in my eyes and asked, “Son, do you commit all that you know about yourself to all that you know about Jesus, and will you do so for the rest of your life?”

Responding, “Yes, I do and yes I will,” I was then immersed and initiated into a life-long journey and fellowship with others who had also promised to walk wet in the world, just as Jesus did when he emerged from the Jordan, a baptizand of John and the Holy Spirit.

As I write, I can still see and feel the cold water dripping from my white baptismal gown as I strode out of the pool into a new life and into the Beloved Community that greeted me. On that evening, I became one of the “As many of you as were baptized with Christ” that Paul proclaimed had entered into a counter-cultural narrative, believing and behaving as transformed non-conformists and citizens of a new world in his letter to the Galatians (3:27-28).

According to Paul, the efficacy of baptismal waters is more potent than human blood in human veins. Baptismal water does more than dilute and diminish sin. Baptismal waters empower us to grow to distain the privileged distinctions humans make with regards to Jew or Greek, slave or free, and male or female. When baptismal waters flow through the core of our being, barriers of exclusion are broken and bridges of embrace begin to replace them. This water makes us one in Christ Jesus.

In the pages that follow, Dr. Starlette Thomas applies this pedagogy to matters of “race” and its poisonous progeny in the North American church.

So very much of the church's theology, Christology, and ecclesiology have been impacted by this dehumanizing and ultimately *Imago Dei*-defacing social construct we all too often assume to be real. Thomas contends that baptismal water is capable of de-racializing a Christianity polluted by an anthropology that promulgates that only some people are real people, or that they are the only people who really count.

Starlette Thomas performs a valuable function herein by subjecting the Christian tradition to a critical analysis of the origins of race and its many death-dealing afterlives that have haunted the church and American society for centuries. With this text, she further demonstrates her craft as a ghostbuster. Pastorally and often poetically she deconstructs Western civilization's ineffable apparition called "race" that harasses human beings in the White House, our courthouses, and in houses of worship. In doing so, Thomas energizes people of faith to reclaim the prophetic mission of the church and so transform itself in its own life to become a witnessing community articulating the vision of the new humanity that the gospel proclaims.

Segregated churches are by default isolated and estranged churches. They quarantine themselves. There is no flow. There is no current. These churches may be described as having algae in their baptismal pool or font. *Take Me to the Water* is a pedagogical primer that helps us clean up our acts to make it safe for all of us to get back into the water again—or, perhaps for the first time.

Sisters and Brothers, with this book in hand, you have already demonstrated your desire to enter fresh waters. The material and exercises in this book will help take you there. As I reflect again on my own baptism all those decades ago, I remember the song the congregation sang as I emerged from the water, changed clothes, and prepared myself to join the waiting congregation sharing in communion together. It was this:

*On Jordan's stormy banks I stand,
And cast a wishful eye
To Canaan's fair and happy land,
Where my possessions lie.*

*I am bound for the promised land,
I am bound for the promised land;
O who will come and go with me?
I am bound for the promised land.*

Will you come and go with us? That "Kin-dom" awaits us. Let's step into the water.

Rev. Dr. Aidsand F. Wright-Riggins*

*Aidsand Wright-Riggins is executive director emeritus of the American Baptist Home Mission Societies, an affiliate faculty member of the Berkeley School of Theology, a board member of the Morehouse School of Religion, and the mayor of Collegeville, Penn.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS



From blog to book, the pages that follow represent more than a decade of writing this vision until I was clear of what I was seeing—not a post-racial society but a raceless “kin-dom” that is coming. These words came by day and by night, by invitation and in preparation for sermons, Bible studies, podcasts, lectures, workshops, and a post-graduate degree. These words came by way of a mixture of African American spirituality and Christianity, fashioned on a mourner’s bench upon which I professed my faith and rose to proclaim an innate sense of “somebodiness.” Like the ring shout, these words encircled and then came to me: “As many of you as were baptized with Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. 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. 3:27-28). These words then took hold of me.

I am certain that “somebody prayed for me.” The ancestors, to include my grandparents, Eva Mae and John Curtis Thomas, prayed to be free of the ongoing experience of colonization, racialization, and white supremacy. They put their hands together and handed to me a southern asceticism coupled with a charismatic freedom of religious expression, which led to a mystical experience that was transcendent, ecstatic, and unitive. I, too, had prayed for relief from racialized oppression, and then these words delivered me—the raceless gospel.

But it took a lot of resisting, defying, and not shying away from what race really is and will always be: a social system of belief that divinizes, celebrates, and pedestalizes bodies socially-colored white and that would always demonize, scrutinize, and marginalize me. Consequently, I am indebted to Gabriel Prosser, Denmark Vesey, Nat Turner, and to all those unnamed freedom fighters who participated in rebellions, uprisings, and the undermining of American slavery. Thank you to the ancestors who refused to go along to get along with its progeny. Thank you for putting your body on the line so that I could read and write, think and speak, move and live freely.

I am also grateful to the many wordsmiths, word workers, and word conductors along the way who have guided my feet and transported me to a time that is meant to be, namely:

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 Nell Irvin Painter
 M. Shawn Copeland
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I have come this far by the faith it took them to write about race in their own words and on their own terms.

Thank you to everyone who gathered in churches, colleges, community groups, denominations, and universities that have invited me to speak. I am especially grateful to the Servant Leadership School, now the School for Liberation in Washington, D.C., that gave me my first opportunity to share

the raceless gospel as a one-day retreat. The Baptist World Alliance afforded me the space to present my first paper to the Commission on Racial and Gender Justice titled “Doing Justice to Our Bodies: How the Social Construct of Race Wrongs Us” in Zurich, Switzerland. The members of the Historic Bethany Union Church of Chicago and Pastor Larry Cameron trusted that the message was worthy of declaration during its 150th anniversary. Thank you to Steven Skultety, Adam Gussow, and Nathan Oakes. The students and community members who gathered at the University of Mississippi were receptive, and a few were even ready to believe in the possibility of this raceless “kin-dom.” Thank you for an incredible discussion and the tear-filled fellowship that followed where we believed that it was possible to live race-free if for one night only.

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Thank you to Dr. Sheena Mason, who shares in this raceless journey and the conviction that there is another way to belong to ourselves and in community. Thank you to Rev. Dr. Aidsand Wright-Riggins who graciously contributed the foreword and is both a source of inspiration and encouragement. Thank you to my beautiful son, John Curtis, who is living proof that miracles do happen. And finally, to the water and to the depths it has taken me in my journey to becoming and belonging in this body, thank you.

INTRODUCTION



*I tol' Jesus it would be all right
If He changed mah name
Jesus tol' me I would have to live humble
If He changed mah name
Jesus tol' me that the world would be 'gainst me
If He changed mah name
But I tol' Jesus it would be all right
If He changed mah name*

I consider myself a race abolitionist, a dignity advocate, a community-building protagonist, a baptism evangelist. Through the work and witness of the raceless gospel, I am taking the North American church to the waters of baptism and submerging a Christian faith, identity, and practice that supports human hierarchies as well as the white supremacist ideology and theology that undergird them. With both hands on their cross and following in the footsteps of Jesus, I believe that Christians should have no interest in power-grabbing identities and ways of being.

I don't simply have a problem with race but believe that race is the problem with our shared human being and belonging. I have no interest in working with the word, so don't add this book to your anti-racism reading list. I am anti-race. Because there is no racial justice. Race was not created to be just. There is no racial equality. Race was not created with the belief that human beings are created equal. There is no racial unity. Race was created to divide us based on physical attributes such as shape of skull, size of nose, texture of hair, and pigment of skin. There is no racial reconciliation. Race was not created to bring us all together after helping us reconcile our differences.

When I say race, I'm talking about power and how we were swindled out of authority over our bodies—not identity or nationality. Because race has no country, no culture but colonialism. As a Christian, I don't believe that I am powerless against it. Instead, I believe in the water of baptism and its witness, its ability to draw out all our impurities and to drown out all the competing voices so that we can be our true selves.

The raceless gospel also encourages us to see race as it is—a sociopolitical construct, built from the tip of our tongues up, a human invention and

what Brian Bantum describes as “a tragic incarnation.” In the end, it is an invitation so beautifully explained by mystic and theologian Howard Thurman, who said, “I have always wanted to be *me* without making it difficult for you to be *you*.”¹ This is my covenant, my promise to you as my next of kin.

This work will make a mess of things, starting with our boxes, categories, and containers for human identity, being, and belonging. It will require us to wade in the water and wade into the shared drama and trauma of American society. Don't worry: I'm here to walk alongside you, but it won't be easy.

Paul writes to the Romans, “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.”² As baptized believers, this is not simply a new lease on life. We decrease and he increases in us.³ We become an extension of Christ's body.

We don't merely identify *with* Christ, but we identify *as* Christ. C.S. Lewis believed that “every Christian is to be a little Christ.” Submerged in womb water, we are born again, new creatures in Christ Jesus, new human beings. Titus calls baptism “the water of rebirth.”⁴ Jesus says that baptism of water and Spirit grants us entry. It takes water.

In John 3, Jesus tells Nicodemus about the birth “from above,” but Nicodemus is only clear on the birds and the bees. He knows where babies come from. Jesus reiterates his point, and Eugene Peterson wrote it this way in *The Message*:

Jesus said, “You're not listening. Let me say it again. Unless a person submits to this original creation—that ‘wind-hovering-over-the-water’ creation, the invisible moving the visible, a baptism into new life—it's not possible to enter God's kingdom.”⁵

So then, we have got to come clean on a few things. Because Jesus says all it takes is water and the Spirit hovering, that new life in Christ doesn't mean a change in our weekly schedule but the ending of one life and the beginning of another. We are baptized and reborn as begotten children of God. We come up—headfirst, inhale first breath, and take first steps with Jesus.

Jesus' disciples are called to be “fishers of people”⁶ but the church, now expressed through buildings though it began as a body, has become a fishbowl. Christians are just swimming around in the same old stagnant water because “we've always done it like this.” Too afraid to filter it or to

empty it, the North American church could use a fresh start—or better yet, a rebirth.

Many church leaders aren't making disciples. Instead, they are creating consumers of a religious product that is available in contemporary and traditional services, that comes with hymns or praise songs, that is offered at 8 a.m., 9 a.m., 10 a.m., or 11 a.m. There is also an evening service if that doesn't work for you. But Jesus doesn't work for us or around our schedules. We must have his church confused with a business, a 501 (c) 3 organization. We must have Jesus mixed up with a CEO or worse still, a salesman—though Jesus didn't leave his followers a business model.

Furthermore, it is also a religious product that they guilt persons into. “Look what Jesus did for you, a sinner. Get saved! Come to Jesus today!” Because “if you die tonight, do you know where you'd spend eternity?” People often come to Jesus out of fear and shame—not love and gratitude.

Some church leaders are selling a religious experience. We go to church to sit in a seat. But being a disciple of Jesus means we sit at his feet. Jesus said, “Learn of me”—not worship me.⁷ Jesus never asked for the red-carpet treatment, for roped-off and VIP seating.

In fact, Jesus kept it moving. He told his disciples, “If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me.”⁸ Start here: Clean up, get washed in this body of water, and then follow me. We have much to reflect on, and I think that baptism is a pool that offers this opportunity.

The state of the North American church is troubling with its belief in white supremacy, race, and its progeny; its practice of a half-baked patriarchy, half-priced misogyny, and half-hearted morality. With so much hypocrisy, it is no longer viewed as an expert or an authority. It has lost a generation or two's respect. Turned inward and focused on the needs of its members solely, those days are long gone, and the expectation of esteem is no longer a given.

The global pandemic caused by COVID-19 unsettled what many Christians believed about ourselves, our world, and the institutions that once gave our lives meaning. There is a moral reckoning occurring. Christians are looking at the words of Jesus and asking the church, “Have you practiced them lately?” These Christians are re-examining their beliefs and quietly leaving the church. They are at home faithfully deconstructing with the hope of piecing back together a healthier and more authentic ecclesiology. It's going to take time, and I think it takes us to the water.



John the Baptist is waving people over to the water. Camel hair is never going to be in style—even if you add a belt to it. But he was a prophet—not a fashion icon. The change that was coming would not be a topical or seasonal treatment.

To be sure, there were lots of people talking about God, using God in their sentences. But this was different. Really talking about God is hard, and it's rare—as confirmed in the Hebrew Scriptures when God called Samuel: “The word of the Lord was rare in those days.”⁹ Prophetic words that speak unapologetic truth to unhinged power, that challenge traditional hatreds and systemic oppression, that fight prejudice with unconditional love are rare.

People who put the words of Jesus into practice daily and who call us to live the life we sing about on Sunday morning are rare. Palatable words are cheap and easy to come by. It costs us nothing to say them, and these words don't add to the hearer at all. But talking about God changes us.

This is Thomas G. Long's conviction in *Testimony: Talking Ourselves Into Being Christian*. He writes that “saying things aloud is a part of how we come to believe. We talk our way toward belief, talk our way from tentative belief through doubt to firmer belief, talk our way toward believing more fully, more clearly, and more deeply.”¹⁰ Therefore, we must be careful with our words as we can just as easily talk ourselves out of something. Long says, “To speak about God is to live in that world and to speak out of it.”¹¹ This talk is not cheap; this gospel speech is not proven by talking a good game.

The early Christians called it “the Way,” as Jesus had a way of doing things that made him stand apart from all the would-be messiahs and prophets of his day. But a watered-down gospel shapes nothing. Our work and witness should “prepare the way of the Lord” without getting in the way of the Lord, without allowing persons to assume that you are the Lord. It should not encourage the belief that if you don't preach, then they can't hear the gospel; that if you aren't praying, then God won't answer them; that if you don't visit them, then they won't be healed.

The same was true for John the Baptist, who backed away and said in essence: “You've got the wrong person. I'm not the Messiah you are looking for. I may sound like him, but I am not him. I'm good but not that good.”

John the Baptist is only the introduction, the preface. Wait until they hear the Word made flesh, Jesus. John is simply bringing greetings. He is a messenger. Jesus is the Messiah.

Sure, John is baptizing them, calling them to account and preaching prophetically. But he's just trying to get them ready. Jesus is coming soon,

and they must clean up their act. All John has is water, but Jesus is coming with the Holy Spirit and fire. They haven't seen anything yet.

And John is clear on who he is. "I am not to be compared to him, and he is not to be compared to me. We are not even in the same category." John said he is not good enough to take care of Jesus' shoes, let alone stand in them. So, he told the crowd to make room: "Prepare the way of the Lord; make his paths straight."

John is just here to make an announcement. Salvation is on the way. Deliverance is near. John is baptizing the people, but Jesus is coming to clean house. But first he wants to be baptized by John, and John does it after some convincing.

Jesus is not above the message, but he must go down in the water too. He must fall in line. Yes, Jesus is Lord and Savior, Master and Messiah, Friend and Faithful One. But Jesus is also a human being, who stands at the end of John's line to be baptized. The greatest of all is now no better than any of us. Yet he has been set apart as God's beloved.

John is a part of this miraculous and mysterious encounter, but he is not running around boasting about his special baptisms. He isn't passing out business cards or setting up shop down by the river. He does not attempt to capitalize on the work of God. He does not split the baptism service into John's baptisms and Jesus' baptisms. Nor does he form a different service and name it "Greater St. John's Baptism."

John knows that baptism is at least a two-step process but likely more. There is a step he does not control. He can do nothing except that to which he has been called. He cannot pretend to be someone he's not. John knows that there is something in the water that transforms us and leaves a watermark. He reminds us that: if we behave as if we have completed the work of baptism by offering a towel and handing out a certificate; if we do not make room for Jesus who is just down the road but, on his way, to baptize with the Holy Spirit; if we attempt to quench the ongoing work of the Holy Spirit, then we are bearing witness to a watered-down gospel.



"You can go down a dry devil and come up a wet devil" is a joke about the efficacy of full immersion baptism. Though instituted by Christ himself and positioned as the means through which to enter the "kin-dom" of God,¹² the quip implies that a *baptizand* or candidate for baptism is somehow able to defy or reject the new life in Christ that the ritual is meant to symbolize.

Said in jest, it suggests that there are evils that persist despite baptismal “regeneration.”¹³

Baptism is a re-enactment of the death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus.¹⁴ While it is not a means of salvation, in Christian scripture it is often coupled with repentance. Peter said to a crowd in the Acts of the Apostles, “Repent and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ so that your sins may be forgiven; and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.”¹⁵ Peter’s directive is referred to as “believer’s baptism,” usually reserved for persons who have reached the age of accountability for their personal confession of faith in Jesus as Savior and Lord.

Baptism is believed to be a means of spiritual re-entry into the world wherein believers are given a new humanity, a new way of being and belonging through Christian community. “Christianity means community through Jesus Christ and in Jesus Christ. No Christian community is more or less than this,” Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote in *Life Together*.¹⁶ Also, persons were often given a Christian name during baptism to mark this transition. They were now children of God.

Some Christians refer to themselves as “born-again believers,” which implies that their former way of life is dead to them. The Apostle Paul claimed that Jesus’ disciples now lived for him: “From now on then, therefore, we regard no one from a human point of view; even though we once knew Christ from a human point of view, we know him no longer in that way. So, if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation.”¹⁷ Baptism, a rite of passage, changed the way in which Christian believers related to each other. It seemingly had the power to transform the way they saw each other, no longer from “a human point of view” but in a way that was perhaps otherworldly.

Why then is the church in North America still segregated on Sunday mornings? Howard Thurman’s question in *Jesus and the Disinherited* addressed this discrepancy:

Why is it that Christianity seems impotent to deal radically, and therefore effectively, with the issues of discrimination and injustice on the basis of race, religion and national origin? Is this impotency due to a betrayal of the genius of the religion or is it due to a basic weakness in the religion itself?¹⁸

While it is presently justified as a necessary evil due to cultural differences and differences of opinion regarding worship style, the existence of the Black Church and the White Church is a literal sign of segregation—hanging over the North American church in judgment.

The segregated church is a byproduct of the sociopolitical construct of race traceable to Enlightenment thinkers' theories on human being and belonging, which ordered bodies according to their physical appearance. The concept actually "signifies and symbolizes social conflicts and interests by referring to different types of bodies."¹⁹ This is in addition to the implications of American slavery, which attempted to dehumanize African people and re-create them as property. Not surprisingly, the baptism of African people who were enslaved was initially prohibited as European colonizers thought that it would manumit them.²⁰

William Willimon asks, "What are we to do with a church that speaks to people on the basis of their gender or race, all the while baptizing them on the basis of Galatians 3:28?"²¹ Not wanting to throw the church out with its baptism water, I come to this work through what Howard Thurman describes as a "creative encounter" and a process called "deconstructing," wherein I am breaking down race for analysis and theological scrutiny. "As a person, each of us lives a private life; there is a world within where for us the great issues of our lives are determined," Thurman writes in *The Creative Encounter*.²² Race, white supremacy, and their progeny are the great issues of mine.

Take Me to the Water is a few sheets from my "working paper"²³ as I aim to strain Jesus' gospel of racialization and call the North American church to repentance for sins committed in support of a racialized worldview and the segregation of human beings. I am calling the church to live into its baptismal identity through the proclamation of the raceless gospel, because we're all God's children preparing for a coming "kin-dom." Anything less is a watered-down gospel not worth repeating or listening to on a Sunday morning.

This book is also my personal response to experiences that are not unique to racialized communities made to believe that light and dark, good and evil signify one's physical body. Like all the generations before me, I have experienced predation, harassment, and discrimination based on the sociopolitical construct of race. I remember a time when the invisible boundary got in front of and way ahead of me. The raceless gospel is my answer to this mistreatment, but it is also "my moral odyssey."²⁴ I had to go and prepare a place for me, free of white supremacy. It is "how I got over" while putting race in its place. It is how I heard Jesus calling me and when I was sure that he had changed my name.

Though I sometimes hear the voices of internalized racism, I hear more clearly now the voices of my ancestors declaring, "I am somebody!" Treat these slips of paper as notes on my deliverance, how I escaped "the race

trap” and now raceless, free from all competing identities. I question race because I am a baptized believer, and it is my calling to discredit any word that attempts to create a hierarchy of being. The raceless gospel undermines the notion that if one’s skin is “light enough,” then she can be spared the double curse of being born “black and ugly” since Christians don’t believe that Jesus died to save our skin.

While working to relocate identity outside of whiteness and its comparative identities, the raceless gospel is representative of a personal investment in self-determined worth and meaning outside of the dominating culture. Likewise, I am waving a white flag over socially-colored black bodies as the epic battle over evil, first as heathen and now suspect who fits the description of a criminal, continues to be wrongly waged against them. Africans and later African Americans have historically represented cosmic darkness tucked under their epidermis. Unfortunately, the church in North America has had a hand in all of this and is a part of its testimony.

Race is a conversion narrative that re-creates persons in these socially-colored images that come with pluses and minuses such as white privilege and oppression, socially-colored because, as pointed out by Henry Louis Gates Jr., “Who has seen a black or red person, a white, yellow or brown? These terms are arbitrary constructs, not reports of reality.”²⁵ The works of David Roediger (*The Wages of Whiteness: Race and the Making of the American Working Class*, *Working Toward Whiteness: How America’s Immigrants Became White*, and *Colored White: Transcending the Racial Past*), Ian Haney Lopez (*White by Law: The Legal Construction of Race*), and Nell Irvin Painter (*The History of White People*) document the history of this social arrangement of power and the forming of a new community called white, which denigrates African people, maligning their country of origin and changing their last names to those of their oppressors. Before the arrival of these immigrants, enslaved Africans were forced to deny their cultural linkage to the continent of Africa and forbidden to speak their languages and retain their ancestral names. They had been forcibly “baptized” during the Middle Passage and been reborn as racialized human beings. Their country of origin, ancestral heritage, and cultural identity were forcibly exchanged for the color black.

Thus, the raceless gospel is not to be confused with a colorblind lens or a post-racial vision of America. Instead, this baptismal pedagogy empowers us to see race as a hegemonic category and liberates us from these oppressive inventions so that we can live liberally in Jesus as a member of his body in anticipation of a “kin-dom” that is coming.²⁶ It also returns us to our countries of origin, our native lands, and roots us in the God whom notable

theologian Paul Tillich calls the “Ground of Being.” It is an opportunity to come home and to be right at home in your body.

Also, unlike the transcendent baptismal identity, racialized identities are temporal, “modern,” with meanings that fluctuate as those who are socially-colored white change over time.²⁷ The proclamation of the raceless gospel, its acceptance and practical application after baptism, interrogates and nullifies the sociopolitical construct of race and its progeny. The raceless gospel for a “kin-dom” coming affirms the effects of baptismal identity and challenges structural inequality and systemic racism supported by racialized identities. Baptismal identity in Christ as defined in Galatians 3:27-28 and Colossians 3:9-11 submerges all other identities. Consequently, *Take Me to the Water* offers the raceless gospel expressed through baptismal identity as a catalyst for desegregating sacred space.

This book will draw from the work and witness of Howard Thurman, who guides my tongue as he offers both the required social analysis of segregation and the spiritual response of an integrated and fully authentic life—which is the work of the Christian faith in my view. I posit in this volume that the racializing of the Christian faith, evidenced by the various depictions of Jesus that hang in homes and sanctuaries—the idea that God is a white man—as well as the segregated church in North America, was never the intention of the gospel. Instead, it is proof of the coercion and co-option of the American empire and the church’s outright rejection of the new community that Jesus created through his body and by the power of the Holy Spirit.

Positing the desegregation of sacred space as a practice of discipleship, I call attention to the segregated church, explain the meaning and significance of baptism and also the personal and social implications of a baptismal identity. Chapter 1 provides a historical overview of how the segregated North American church came to be and also definitions of race and its progeny as understood by anthropologists, historians, lawyers, and theologians. Chapter 2 examines the history of baptism, baptismal identity, the baptismal formula’s implications for a just society, and the church’s forgotten creed. Chapter 3 details the work and efficacy of baptism to challenge structural divisions within the North American church. In Chapter 4, I record my gleanings and what we can all draw from the water. The final chapter offers a summary that doubles as a benediction, a parting blessing as we re-enter the world with new eyes to see. Thus, it by no means the end of our learning.

Take Me to the Water does just that. You must decide to get in and fully immerse yourself in the work and witness of baptism, convicted that the old,

racialized self is not a part of the new life with Christ. While reading this book, the water will start to trouble you and you may question what you've gotten yourself into. But that's only the beginning of the transformative work of the raceless gospel. I'll be waiting for you when you get out.