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**Jesus Would Be Jim Crowed:  
Bishop Robert Lawson on Race and Religion in the Harlem Renaissance**

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When William Seymour started an interracial prayer meeting in 1906 at an acquaintance's small home on Bonnie Brae Street in Los Angeles, he never expected that the small prayer meeting would stoke the fires of early Pentecostalism. This small prayer meeting was eventually moved to an old barn-like building on Azusa Street. Both insider and outsider accounts of the Azusa Street Revival reflect the ways in which Seymour's group contested racism in the church and society. The Los Angeles Daily News described the racial composition of the meeting as

“colored people and a sprinkling of whites;”<sup>1</sup> one chronicler celebrated, “the color line was washed away in the blood;”<sup>2</sup> and one historian credited Seymour and the revival for “providing the vision of a truly color-blind congregation.”<sup>3</sup> Following the heyday of the Azusa Street Revival, African-American Pentecostal preacher, Robert C. Lawson founded Refuge Church of Christ in the heart of Harlem in 1919. In this mission he opened up a new avenue of race discourse in the world of U.S. Christianity and in black race ideology. The predominantly African-American denomination with whom he held his ministerial credentials at that time had just incorporated a smaller denomination of white Pentecostals. This interracial memory of the Azusa Street Revival stuck with those pioneer Pentecostal preachers who persevered to create a racially egalitarian church. In the years before Lawson’s conversion, his many experiences with racism as he traversed the U.S. exposed him to the social and institutional evils of racism. Thus, once in Harlem, Lawson led efforts to reclaim, recreate and recast racial harmony in Pentecostalism so that “apostolic [Pentecostal] people would rise to redeem man by example and precept.”<sup>4</sup> Lawson perceived racism to be not only potently poisonous in the church, but also across the globe.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> *Weird Babble of Tongues*, Los Angeles Daily Times, April 18, 1906.

<sup>2</sup> Frank Bartleman, *Azusa Street* (Plainfield, NJ: Logos International, 1980) (reprint of *How “Pentecost” Came to Los Angeles*, 1925), 54.

<sup>3</sup> Cecil M. Robeck, *Dictionary of Pentecostal and Charismatic Movements*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1988), 36.

<sup>4</sup> Robert Lawson, *The Anthropology of Jesus Christ Our Kinsman* (Piqua, OH: Ohio Ministries, 2000) eds. William Collier (reprint of 1925 edition), 34.

<sup>5</sup> Lawson, *Anthropology of Jesus*, 6.

Lawson fused together progressive black race ideology and a fundamentalist understanding of the Bible, hoping that the Holy Ghost might exorcise the Jim Crow zeitgeist.<sup>6</sup> In doing so, he embodied two seemingly mutually exclusive weltanschauungs of the day: the high culture of Harlem thinking, art, culture, and intellectualism;<sup>7</sup> and the so-called “disinherited vision” of Pentecostalism primitivism born out of the backwaters of America and grounded ostensibly in anti-intellectualism.<sup>8</sup> As a Pentecostal in Harlem, Lawson’s trenchant critique of his Pentecostal counterparts, the church-world, and secular society is best understood in his own theological terms and in the threefold context in which he wrote. In this article, I explore the context in which Lawson wrote *The Anthropology of Jesus Christ Our Kinsman* (1925) and established his ministry in Harlem during the “New Negro” era. This exploration allows us to see three-dimensional social milieu in which he operated; first, the Pentecostal movement and its struggle for racial equality; second, the larger church world of U.S. Christianity; and, third, the Harlem Renaissance.

This article first identifies Lawson’s place within clerical discourses of race in early Pentecostalism. The Pentecostal Assemblies of the World, an interracial Oneness Pentecostal body, rent asunder over race in 1924 owing to Jim Crow laws and overt racism from the Southern ministerial body itself. Secondly, it seeks to understand Lawson’s radical theology in the world of U.S. religious thought. At the time of Lawson’s publication, churches on the North

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<sup>6</sup> Robert Mapes Anderson, *Vision of the Disinherited: The Making of American Pentecostalism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1979), 5. Regarding this Anderson wrote, “Fundamentalism has been perpetuated as strongly by the Pentecostal churches as by any other.”

<sup>7</sup> Nathan Irvin Huggins, *Harlem Renaissance* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1971), 9.

<sup>8</sup> Anderson, *Vision of the Disinherited*, 5-8.

side of the Mason-Dixon Line largely failed to integrate. And while many of Lawson's contemporaries shared a conservative fundamentalist approach to the Bible, Lawson's idiosyncratic hermeneutics allowed him to interrogate the ideological captivity of U.S. Christians. Finally, this article contextualizes Lawson in the discourse on race of the Harlem Renaissance as a creative thinker and writer, and a radical theologian. Scholars have long noted the elision in our scholarship on examining the role of smaller or less known churches in Harlem. The balance of scholarship tips in favor of poets and playwrights instead of showing any substantial mass of preachers and priests. By understanding Lawson in his religious context within Harlem, we can see how he broadens the paradigm of black political and racial discourse. Lawson offered an alternative anti-racist lens that diverged from that of other well-known Harlem preachers: Daddy Grace and Father Divine, both of whom Lawson challenged. The following explores how we might place Lawson in that pantheon of race thinkers, prophets, and leaders.

Lawson, a southern-born black, knew all too well the pervasiveness of racism or what he called the "cancer eating of the soul."<sup>9</sup> After his tenure as pastor of a San Antonio church, he moved northward, living in several cities throughout the Midwest, and ultimately settling in Harlem in 1919 a few months before the race riots broke out. Once settled in, he founded Refuge Church of Christ. His founding of the church coincided with the early years of the Harlem Renaissance. It is at this time that Lawson reflected on the racism he experienced in southern churches.

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<sup>9</sup> Robert Lawson, *An Open Letter to a Southern White Minister on Prejudice* (n.p. n.d.), 4. Although this open letter does not indicate a publication date, James Clark dates it 1949, see James Clark, "The Relationship of Theology and Social Action in the Black Apostolic Tradition" (MDiv Thesis., Union Theological Seminary, 1990), 29.

Lawson published his earliest treatise on the issue of race in 1925, earning him a reputation among the black church community in New York. In doing so he joined others in the Pentecostal ranks as critics of racial disputes in the church, following closely in the footsteps of his mentor G. T. Haywood.<sup>10</sup> In *The Anthropology of Jesus Christ Our Kinsman* Lawson challenged readers to rethink the personhood and humanity of Jesus Christ in relation to black anthropology. His text quickly gained the attention of blacks and whites alike for its scathing critique of Christians' faulty historical perspective on "Negroes" (which he defined as any persons of a black Hamitic race) and Jesus. This, however, was not Lawson's only method of conveying his ideas. As it will be shown later, Lawson's implementation of social services for economically deprived blacks speaks volumes about his other methods of vindicating and uplifting the black race.

Because of how he integrated his fundamentalist religious background with his liberal social concern, a study on Lawson forces us to tie together several fields of study. To rely solely on histories of Harlem or of Pentecostalism severely blurs and narrows our lens of Lawson as an expansive thinker. African-American religion in the historiography of the Harlem Renaissance has received little attention because of the emphasis historians have placed on the prominence of secular literary scholars of Harlem from the 1920s to the late 1940s. The amount of attention given to dramas, poetry, novels, music and the visual performances of Harlem has created the false idea that preachers occupied minor roles, or at worst non-existent, in addressing issues of

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<sup>10</sup> David Reed, quoted in Clark, *The Relationship of Theology*, 81,fn. 44.

race relations.<sup>11</sup> As no surprise, in the history of social movements the contributions of religious figures, specifically preachers, remain underemphasized, or worst, altogether overlooked.<sup>12</sup> John Michael Spencer observes as follows:

Scholars of African American religion have heard next to nothing about the Harlem Renaissance in the context of discourse on the black church... The immense attention they have given to the literary output during the historical epoch of the 1920s and beyond has left the impression that, whatever else was going on, religion was not central to the artistic and intellectual burgeoning of that time.<sup>13</sup>

Similarly, scholars have heard next to nothing about Pentecostalism in the context of racial discourse on the black church during the “New Negro era” or the Harlem Renaissance.<sup>14</sup>

Spencer’s observation regarding the paucity of histories on religion in the Harlem Renaissance conversely proves true concerning the plentitude of religious histories that elide the importance of the Harlem Renaissance. Authoritative histories on Pentecostalism such as Vinson Synan’s *The Holiness Pentecostal Movement*, Grant Wacker’s *Heaven Below: Early Pentecostals and American Culture 1906-1936*; Ian MacRobert’s *The Black Roots and White Racism of Pentecostalism in the USA*; and most recently, Randall Stephens *The Fire Spreads: American Pentecostalism in the South* dealt with the issue of race at institutional levels, looking at race in relation to the tensions, cooperation , defections and mergers that emerged from the movement.

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<sup>11</sup> John Michael Spencer, “The Black Church and the Harlem Renaissance,” *African American Review* vol. 30, no. 3 (1996): 453-460.

<sup>12</sup> This is ironic given James Baldwin’s Pentecostal motifs which owe to his Pentecostal upbringing.

<sup>13</sup> Spencer, “The Black Church”, 453.

<sup>14</sup> The terms “Harlem Renaissance” and “New Negro Era” are used interchangeably in Carmiele Y. Wilkerson and Zamir Shamoon, “Du Bois and the New Negro.” In *The Cambridge Companion to W. E. B. Du Bois*. Ed. Shamoon Zamir. (Cambridge University Press, 2008), 64.

Douglas Jacobsen has completed the most comprehensive study of Lawson's anti-racist theology in his exploration of *The Anthropology of Jesus Christ Our Kinsman*.<sup>15</sup> From Jacobsen's treatment it seems as if Lawson was the only early Pentecostal preacher to tackle the issues of racism head-on. Because most Pentecostals hardly involved themselves in (worldly) matters outside of the church, scholars have hardly given due diligence to progressive Pentecostals. Nevertheless, Lawson's life and writings cut to the heart of racial issues; his theological discourses had social and political dimensions.

The details on Lawson's early years remain foggy, but details about his pre-conversion years and conversion experience give us a clearer view of his understanding of race. Lawson was born in New Iberia, Louisiana in 1883 as part of the generation of children of the South whose parents and older relatives endured the bondage of slavery.<sup>16</sup> Even before Lawson could remember, his father who was a missionary laid hands upon him and proclaimed that his son would grow up to be a preacher. His personal recollections of his parents were almost none existent, as they both died when he was young.<sup>17</sup> He was then raised by his aunt, but he left early on to pursue a career singing in cabarets, a talent he would later utilize to compose hymns.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> One chapter he assembled was a reader of *The Anthropology of Jesus Christ Our Kinsman* and another is his own study of Lawson in the discussion of anti-racism in early Pentecostalism. Douglas Jacobsen, *Thinking in the Spirit: Theologies of the Early Pentecostal Movement* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2003), 260-285. The chapter titled "Theology and Race" focuses almost entirely on Lawson. This begs the question whether early Pentecostals tackled the race question in a manner comparable to Lawson.

<sup>16</sup> Sherry Sherrod DuPree, *Biographical Dictionary of African-American Holiness-Pentecostals: 1880-1990* (Washington, D.C: Middle Atlantic Regional Press, 1989), 162-3..

<sup>17</sup> Robert Lawson, *Personal Testimony*, ca. 1952. Audio cassette (Robert Lawson Collection, Center for the Study of Oneness Pentecostalism, Hazelwood, MO). Lawson heard this story from family. Date of tape ca. 1952 since he referred to being in New York for "33 long years preaching the gospel."

<sup>18</sup> Jacobsen, *Thinking in the Spirit*, 263-264.

From a young age he traveled throughout the North and South seeing the ramifications of racial prejudice and staying away from New Iberia because “a white posse was after [him].”<sup>19</sup> But at age thirty his singing career would eventually lead him to find his faith.<sup>20</sup>

As Lawson toured in Canada and the U.S. North “paint[ing] the town red” he was became extremely ill. In an Indianapolis hospital he became acquainted with his hospital roommate’s mother, a Church Mother from the local Pentecostal Assemblies of the World congregation. Because of his experiences with church folks in the South, he had grown averse to Christianity; nevertheless, out of respect to older black women, he allowed her to pray for him. After he tested positive for tuberculosis and was later “miraculously” released from the hospital, he searched out the address she had given him. She eventually introduced him to Garfield Thomas Haywood, the pastor of an interracial Pentecostal Assemblies of the World congregation.<sup>21</sup> Lawson stayed in Indianapolis as a protégé of Haywood, and in the pews of Christ Temple began to champion the cause of racial harmony. His earlier renunciation of faith owed to his experiences in the South. On one occasion, when a white Christian man tried to teach Lawson about salvation through Jesus, Lawson upbraided the man, assuming the white Christian was merely another racist bigot. Describing his reasons for animus towards the stranger, he stated:

Well, I didn’t want to hear anything from him because I was from the South, and hadn’t gotten the negatives of segregation out of me yet, and how they treated me down there.

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<sup>19</sup> James Clark “The Relationship of Theology and Social Action in the Black Apostolic Tradition” (MDiv Thesis., Union Theological Seminary, 1990), 27.

<sup>20</sup> Dupree, *Biographical Dictionary*, 162-3.

<sup>21</sup> Lawson, *Personal Testimony*, audio recording.

And I didn't believe there could be a God when they had such prejudice in their minds. So I let all my feelings about the evils of the South fall on this old man. I just counted him as one of them.<sup>22</sup>

Nevertheless, under the leadership of Haywood, Lawson's perception of racism in the church changed significantly as he gained a greater appreciation of interracial churches, a socially challenging ideal in the era of the Great Migration. Lawson's mentorship under the racially progressive Haywood may explain his radical position and his acute social concern in the New Negro era.<sup>23</sup> Because of his ability to learn and lead, it was not before too long that Haywood commissioned him to start his own churches in the South, the Midwest, and eventually in Harlem. In 1919 he founded the Refuge Church of Christ of the Apostolic Faith in on the heart of Harlem on 131<sup>st</sup> street.<sup>24</sup> During his time in there, Lawson defected from the PAW (Pentecostal Assemblies of the World) and founded his own Pentecostal denomination, the COOLJC (Church of Our Lord Jesus Christ).

### **Lawson's Critique of Pentecostalism**

Pentecostalism, according to most scholars of U.S. religions, challenged the social norms of the country, both south and north of the Mason-Dixon Line. Lawson's experience of living his early years in the South and the remainder of them in the North prompted him to advocate for the

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<sup>22</sup> Robert Lawson quote found in Clark, *The Relationship of Theology*, 28.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid.

<sup>24</sup> Dupree, *Biographical Dictionary*, 162-3. Anderson states that Lawson arrived in New York in 1917; other than Anderson, all sources I have consulted date his arrival to 1919. See Anderson, *Vision of the Disinherited*, 132.

reform and renewal of his contemporary ministers' thinking on racial issues. As a Harlem writer, Lawson addressed his immediate religious communities and a larger misinformed society. The (re)emergence of racism with the Pentecostal movement in the late 1910s and early 1920s and the worldwide prevalence of racism prompted Lawson to write *The Anthropology of Jesus Christ Our Kinsman*.<sup>25</sup> Lawson pined for the days of imagined racial harmony at the Azusa Street Revival and thus sought to restore racial harmony in his time.

The memory of racial harmony in the formative years of Pentecostalism acquired mythic status. Even today the topic of racial harmony is still a hotly debated. Arguments in support of a past racial harmony break under the weight of racism upheld by early founders and organizational actors. Scholars of Pentecostalism know well the racist views of the 'founder' of Pentecostalism, Charles Parham.<sup>26</sup> Even if we seek to understand Parham's racial theology as a product of his time, his views leave poor impressions. Antithetically to Lawson, Parham decried the intermingling of the races, admonishing that diseases resulting from mixed-parents would eventually wipe mixed bloods off the face of the earth. Miscegenation meant degeneration for Parham and perfection for Lawson; after all –according to Lawson– Jesus descended from a mixed-blood lineage.<sup>27</sup> Further, Parham's three-tiered typology of the human race elevated Jews as "Aryans," made Europeans exclusively "Gentiles," and relegated black peoples and all others to the base category of "heathens." In this move, he eliminated black believers from being a part

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<sup>25</sup> Jacobsen, *Thinking in the Spirit*, 263.

<sup>26</sup> James Goff, *Fields White unto Harvest: Charles Parham and the Missionary Origins of Pentecostalism* (Fayetteville, AR: University of Arkansas Press, 1988).

<sup>27</sup> Marlon Millner, "Love Lived: The Body as Pentecostal Theology in Robert Lawson's Anthropology of Jesus Christ Our Kinsman" (M.Div. Thesis, Harvard Divinity School, 2005), 56.

of the bride of Christ. Here is a case where a founder of Pentecostalism had views which Lawson sought to dismantle through black-nationalist discourses.<sup>28</sup> Unfortunately, Parham views proved to not be unique to him.

The prospects of racial harmony among his counterparts in other Oneness Pentecostal denominations seemed even bleaker. Soon after his arrival in Harlem, Lawson parted ways with Haywood over disagreements on the role of women in the church. In spite of his official defection he stayed abreast on the PAW's affairs.<sup>29</sup> The timing of the publication of *The Anthropology of Jesus Christ Our Kinsman* came one year after the PAW witnessed its first major schism. In 1924 the PAW split over friction owing to racial disputes between ministers in the South and North.<sup>30</sup> When Lawson wrote of "white brethren in the South...refusing to take credentials signed by a Negro," he alluded to the racial turmoil in the PAW. According to historian David Reed, white ministers in the South demanded the signature of white presbyters, and that the PAW eventually catered to the racial preference of credential earning ministers.<sup>31</sup> The official records of the PAW national convention record this injunction: "it is deemed

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<sup>28</sup> Ibid., 56-57.

<sup>29</sup> The details of Lawson's migration to the North are scanty. The few histories written on him interpret his move to Harlem as a result of his row with Haywood. The 1919 minutes of the PAW list Lawson based out of New York City on the General Board of Elders. Thus, for at least a short time, Lawson played a pivotal role in the founding of the interracial PAW. Elected to the General Board of Elders, Lawson participated in the merger of the General Assemblies of the Apostolic Assemblies (GAAA) a short-lived organization of white Oneness Pentecostal ministers and the PAW. See "Minute Book and Ministerial Record of the General Assembly of the Pentecostal Assemblies of the World 1919-1920 (Center for the Study of Oneness Pentecostalism, PAW Collection), 9.

<sup>30</sup> For more on this debate cf. David Reed, *In Jesus Name: the History and Beliefs of Oneness Pentecostals*, (Blanford Forum, UK: Deo Publishing, 2008); James L. Tyson, *The Early Pentecostal Revival: History of Twentieth-Century Pentecostals and The Pentecostals Assemblies of the World 1901-1930* (Hazelwood, MO: Word Aflame Press, 1992), 192-196, 245-246.

<sup>31</sup> David Reed, *In Jesus Name*, 212.

advisable that two white presbyters sign the credential of white brethren, especially in the southland and two colored presbyters sign the papers of the colored brethren.”<sup>32</sup> To Lawson, this kind of behavior was tantamount to spiritual leprosy reminiscent of the biblical account of Israel’s deliverance from Egypt in which Mariam – Moses’ sister – was plagued with leprosy for criticizing his marriage to an Ethiopian (black) woman.<sup>33</sup> Crying out against these maladies within his own movement, Lawson drew from the Apostle Paul’s castigation of the Galatians recidivism to carnal sins and wrote, “what a shame!... the church in America, and all have failed lamentably...they did run well at first, but when this issue came up between the black and white races, they were hindered because of not accepting their colored brethren upon absolute equality.”<sup>34</sup>

### **Critique of U.S. Christianity**

Things were no better in the larger world of Christianity. As Lawson put it, because the Baptists failed at racial integration “we have black and white Baptists;” and likewise since the Methodists failed “we have white and colored Methodists, etc.”<sup>35</sup> Again, invoking Paul’s

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<sup>32</sup> Resolution No. 4 The General Assembly Pentecostal Assemblies of the World, St. Louis, MO. October 4-6, 1923. As quoted in Morris Golder, *History of the Pentecostal Assemblies of the World* (Indianapolis, IN: Pentecostal Assemblies of the World, 1973), 77-78.

<sup>33</sup> Lawson, *Anthropology of Jesus Christ*, 33. The narrative of Israel’s deliverance from Egypt played an important role in African-American social and political liberation. Lawson’s use of the story of Moses’ marriage to the Ethiopian woman proved germane to his arguments against internecine disputes because of the racial implications of the story and the symbolism of the Exodus in black churches during the Great Migration. Earlier in the book, Lawson have his reasons for understanding Ethiopians as an ancient black civilization; he quoted Jeremiah 13.23 “Can an Ethiopian change his skin...” and provided the etymology of Ethiopian, “burned face.”

<sup>34</sup> Ibid.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid., 32.

theology, Lawson believed that the color line was something Paul would have never imagined when he wrote “[n]othing shall separate us from the love of God,” for indeed “the color proposition is the one thing that is separating many from the love of God.”<sup>36</sup>

Lawson further critiqued the insidious ways through which religious whites projected racist notions of their racial superiority. Beyond physical barriers of racial segregation, racists of the time expressed their ideas through Christian art. The world of Christian art in the early twentieth century portrayed biblical figures as white and their servants as black. This grieved Lawson an art aficionado so he relentlessly blasted artists for their eisegetical portrayals of Holy Writ. His critique encompassed a wide range of Christian art found in galleries, Sunday school cards, and public exhibitions. One such case of Negro biblical subordination in the arts was of a white King Solomon surrounded by “black slaves fanning him with huge fans.”<sup>37</sup> In a similar case, the Methodist Episcopal Centenary exhibition held in Columbus, Ohio, displayed a rendition of a white Queen of Sheba with a “Negro preacher thinly clad with brass rings on his arm and a spear in his hand representing her guard-slave.” Questioning these works of art, Lawson asked, “[h]ow did this white woman get over in Abyssinia and become queen of all those black folks? And how could Solomon be pure white when his mother... was a full-blooded Negro woman.”<sup>38</sup> Likewise he criticized portrayals of Jesus’ disciples as white men. Further he postulated that the reason poets and artists have neglected to include the man who bore Jesus’

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<sup>36</sup> Ibid., 33.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid., 23.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid. Lawson also referred to Solomon’s black phenotype (cf. Song of Solomon 1:6).

cross is because he was black (from Cyrene), and, had he been white, he would have not only be featured in more art, but he would even be a patron saint attracting the prayers of many.<sup>39</sup>

### Critique of Society

By the time Lawson's book was published, the arguments of biological inferiority of non-whites were on the rise coupled with notions of their cultural pathology. Thus, a discussion on race in early twentieth century America is incomplete without mention of the influence of the eugenics movement on race policy and ideology and its consequent impact on Lawson's writings. As early as in the preface of his book, Lawson challenged racist policies of the day historically tied into the eugenics movement, or what Francis Galton infamously called, "racial improvement."<sup>40</sup>

A mere one year before the publication of Lawson's book white supremacist Walter A. Plecker propounded his racist policies in order to create a black and white segregated society, erasing all other racial categories. In *The Anthropology of Jesus Christ Our Kinsman*, Lawson responded to Plecker's most notorious statement among black church members, "Let us turn a deaf ear to those who would interpret Christian brotherhood to mean racial equality."<sup>41</sup> Plecker wrote this from a theological conviction rooted in a southern conservative Presbyterianism that condoned racial segregation. Through his policies he sought to polarize black and whites. What

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<sup>39</sup> Ibid, 23-24.

<sup>40</sup> Warren Fiske, "The Black and White World of Walter Ashby Plecker," *The Virginian-Pilot*, August 18, 2004, 4. <<http://www.nps.gov/jame/historyculture/loader.cfm?csModule=security/getfile&PageID=280086>>

<sup>41</sup> Lawson, *Anthropology of Jesus*, 6.

follows are not only examples of the ideas put forth by religious men in Lawson's time, but also a glimpse of the racist ideology Lawson sought to overcome.

At the turn of the century Plecker, a graduate of the University of Maryland's School of Medicine, took up several jobs in obstetrics and developed his disgust towards miscegenation and mulatto babies of white and black parents which he described as "a standing disgrace."<sup>42</sup> He did, however, encourage the mixing of blacks and Native Americans in order to put to rest any argument of Native Americans' blackness.<sup>43</sup> Unfortunately, race categorizations in the U.S. had come under serious scrutiny at the same time that Plecker assumed the position of Registrar of Vital Statistics of Virginia and perpetuated his multileveled racism.

As appalling as Plecker's views may seem, they were not uncommon among scientists and a growing number of white racists, including religious leaders. By this time in the U.S., the eugenics movement had already infiltrated the thoughts and practices of historians, medical doctors, professors, and politicians. Universities across the Western world had made room for this movement, seeking to eliminate the number of "undesirables by selective sterilization." While this rhetoric of eugenics is usually associated with Hitler's "solution to the Jewish problem," it also marked a dark chapter in U.S. history predating Nazi Germany. The most learned of American society bought into the social engineering of the eugenics movement. Faculty at the University of Virginia and his accomplice John Powell moved eugenics forward, and in 1924-25 successfully fought to pass the "An Act to Preserve Racial Integrity" and the Sterilization Act. The former called for newborns to be racially identified at birth, it prohibited

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<sup>42</sup> Fiske, *The Black and White World*, 2.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, 5.

intermarriage of Caucasians with anybody bearing traceable mixture of race –the only exception was for persons with less than 1/16 Native American blood – and it forbade lying on registration forms.<sup>44</sup> In effect, this law would create a binary racial society: whites and others.<sup>45</sup> Lying about one's race was punishable by felony and up to one year in prison.<sup>46</sup> The Racial Integrity Act, operated on the “one-drop-rule,” that is, any person with the slightest amount of black ancestry was disqualified from being white.<sup>47</sup> To Plecker's chagrin, the Act allowed whites to have, at most, one-sixteenth Native American blood. The Sterilization Act mandated the involuntary sterilization of the feebleminded including the “insane, idiotic, imbecile, or epileptic...so that they would not produce similarly disabled offspring.”<sup>48</sup> Of all the thirty-one states that passed the Racial Integrity Act, none was as stringent and uncompromising in its implementation as Plecker's home state of Virginia.<sup>49</sup> Plecker worked even more vigorously, albeit behind the scenes, to see the passing of this act. He also provided John Powell with the data to draft other deplorable bills. Lawson aimed his anti-racist theology such bureaucratic genocide and religious understanding of race. For Lawson, black/white miscegenation would actually improve rather than deteriorate the blood line.<sup>50</sup>

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<sup>44</sup> Racial Integrity Act of 1924, SB 219, <[http://www2.vcdh.virginia.edu/encounter/projects/monacans/Contemporary\\_Monacans/racial.html](http://www2.vcdh.virginia.edu/encounter/projects/monacans/Contemporary_Monacans/racial.html)>

<sup>45</sup> David Smith, *The Eugenics Assault on America*, (Fairfax, VA: George Mason University Press, 1992), 59.

<sup>46</sup> Racial Integrity Act of 1924, SB 219.

<sup>47</sup> Smith, *The Eugenics Assault*, 62.

<sup>48</sup> *Expressing the General Assembly's regret for Virginia's experience with eugenics*. House Joint Resolution 607, <<http://leg1.state.va.us/cgi-bin/legp504.exe?011+ful+HJ607ER>>

<sup>49</sup> Fiske, *The Black and White World*, 5.

<sup>50</sup> Lawson, *Anthropology of Jesus*, 27-28.

Beyond the “philosophical and pseudo-scientifically teaching of the day, especially... miscegenation,”<sup>51</sup> Lawson recognized how racist whites were replacing these arguments of biological racial inferiority with arguments of cultural inferiority based on the inferiority of black family, history, and civilizations, taught to students in textbooks.<sup>52</sup> Perhaps, for this reason he filled his public library with books on Africa and the American Negro.<sup>53</sup>

Lawson took on prominent historians of his time, to pinpoint their faulty renditions of history taught to students. First, he called out the prominent novelist/historian of his time, Herbert George Wells and his narrative of history in *Outline of History*. According to Lawson, Wells showed himself to be a “notable example” of a writer exercising “newspaper logic, white American logic.” By this, Lawson referred to tactics which “keep fresh in the minds of the white race the delusion that we are a race of thieves, murderers and rapists; and it is a deliberate plan to vilify an humble God-fearing race,” so that “when the white child reads history or the newspaper, he thinks of the Negro ... [as] he has never been anything, he is nothing now, and he will never be anything because he is of an inferior race.”<sup>54</sup> Lawson then took to task historians, curricula developers, and columnists of prominent newspapers such as the New York Times. He blamed recent articles for distorting the legacy of the black civilizations and uncritically quoting racist academics. In his struggle against people of science and letters, discriminatory laws, and biased media, Lawson counted Franz Boas of Columbia University as one of the “few honest

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<sup>51</sup> Ibid.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid., 9.

<sup>53</sup> Clark, *The Relationship of Theology*, 34.

<sup>54</sup> Lawson, *Anthropology of Jesus Christ*, 9.

historians.”<sup>55</sup> Overall, there were few who could be trusted to responsibly represent black lives.

These examples should elucidate how racism plagued Lawson in each of the three social contexts he inhabited: the Pentecostal movement, the larger world of U.S. Christianity, and American society. Lawson’s approach to critique the systems and to rectify their problems stemmed from his social position in Harlem and the prevalent ideas of black radical ideology. Lawson inherited racial egalitarian ideals of the church from his mentor Garfield T. Haywood, and in Harlem his understanding of blacks in society was shaped by black race ideology of the day, namely race vindication and racial uplift. Therefore, to understand Lawson’s writings and his practical approaches to ministry, placing him in the vibrant world of 1919 Harlem is essential.

### **Context of Harlem**

The close of WWI brought about an opportunity for African Americans to forge a new identity, drawing on W.E.B. Du Bois ideas of the “New Negro.” The intellectual output of the Harlem Renaissance, according to David Levering Lewis, can be broken down into three distinct phases within the interwar period. Lewis’ precise demarcations are: the “Bohemian Renaissance” (1917-1923) in which whites mostly contributed to the proliferation of writings on African American society, histories, policies, and culture; the “Talented Tenth” (1924-1926) in which both black and white authors wrote under the direction of progressive black organizations; and finally, the “Negro Renaissance” (1926-1935), a period marked by a new generation of black

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<sup>55</sup> Ibid., 9-12.

writers who contested political programs by creating a new cultural agenda.<sup>56</sup> Lawson intellectual development falls into the first phase of the New Negro movement; his book, *The Anthropology of Jesus Christ our Kinsman*, fits into the “Talented Tenth” era, especially given his push for instruction in the arts and the political nature of his book; and finally Lawson further defined his ministry and more fully developed its implementation for racial uplift in Harlem during the “Negro Renaissance.” The socio-political content of his book shows how political and intellectual thought of the “New Negro” movement shaped his theological views. Lawson, however, did not confine his theological understanding of society and politics to his publications. Using his pulpit and the radio waves as centers of knowledge production, Lawson distinguished himself from other preachers by teaching the social and political implication of the Bible.<sup>57</sup>

In the early years of the Harlem Renaissance, black-run periodicals announced the “Negro’s coming of age,” as evidenced by their emphasis on highlighting black achievements rather than publicizing problems. This emphasis on achievement created a better starting point for blacks to forge the identity of the “New Negro.” And because African Americans in Harlem saw themselves as the locus of intellectual activity, they also saw themselves as the most likely to actually live out the concepts of racial uplift. By their example other black folks would follow; but in some ways this backfired. Many commoners shunned the *high* culture of Harlem created by artists, novelists, poems, plays and symphonies, referring to Harlem intellectuals and artists as “dicty niggers,” yet they also realized the ways in which these intellectuals were setting African

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<sup>56</sup> Wilkerson and Shamoan. *Du Bois and the New Negro*, 64.

<sup>57</sup> DuPree, *Biographical Dictionary*, 162-163.

Americans on a new trajectory.<sup>58</sup> At the time of global conflict engendered by WWI, the U.S. and western nations bought into the idea that literature, art, music, i.e. *high culture*, indicated the degree of true civilization.<sup>59</sup> Lawson's humble beginnings and practical teachings spared his reputation among commoners. His sermons, while theological and politically-charged, were also practical and resonated with his racially and class mixed congregation.<sup>60</sup> While decorated with prestigious awards in his life, including an honorary LL.D. degree and an earned Doctor of Divinity degree,<sup>61</sup> the Star of Ethiopia bestowed upon him by Haile Selassie,<sup>62</sup> the Carver Award recipient "for his contribution to the Arts, Sciences, Americanism and Human Welfare,"<sup>63</sup> he knew how to minister to the impoverished and low working class. Because of the dire socio-economic condition of "thugs, vicious and debauched men and women" in the "heart of the Harlem Ghetto,"<sup>64</sup> Lawson implemented a practical type of Christianity never inaccessible to his saints. Lawson attested to the effectiveness of his approach in a newspaper article covering the grocery store he opened for the poor, "I need hardly say that I have seen the work prosper, the community cleaned up, and moral life of the people raised in a high level."<sup>65</sup> The article further

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<sup>58</sup> Huggins, *Harlem Renaissance*, 5-6.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*, 9.

<sup>60</sup> Lawson, *Anthropology of Jesus*, 6.

<sup>61</sup> Clark, *The Relationship of Theology*, Appendix A, 8-9.

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*, 31

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*, 31 The description is found in a photo of Lawson holding his award.

<sup>64</sup> "From Pulpit to Grocery Store," *New York Amsterdam News*, March 25, 1929. Article clipping found in Clark, *The Relationship of Theology*, Appendix A, 20.

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*

revealed Lawson's rationale for practical Christianity, often criticized by fundamentalist preachers as having liberal Mainline Social Gospel tendencies.

In practical Christian technique the approach to one in need of help and God knows we are all in need of some form of real help should not be with the question where shall one spend eternity, but where shall one spend the night.<sup>66</sup>

“Dynamic Christianity,” Lawson's term for putting Christian-based socioeconomic remedies into practice, largely defined his legacy in Harlem.<sup>67</sup> The impetus for the Harlem Renaissance was to conjure up creative and divergent ways of thinking and performing the “New Negro.” For black preachers this meant daring to rethink and challenge societal understandings and *doings* of theology. In the case of Lawson, his theology included *doing* service for the community. Between 1926-1938 he founded several shops and service locations for those in need: the Refuge Grocery Store opened in Harlem offering products at low price; three funeral homes;<sup>68</sup> a day nursery to allow adults to pursue work and where their children would have “home training, good food, careful watching, and good health;<sup>69</sup> a library to encourage readings on the Bible, Africa, and the American Negro;<sup>70</sup> and the R.C. Lawson Institute, a highly competitive school in Southern Pines, South Carolina, that served as both a home and high

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<sup>66</sup> Ibid.

<sup>67</sup> Clark, *The Relationship of Theology*, 34.

<sup>68</sup> Clark Appendix A, 8.

<sup>69</sup> Church Souvenir Journal, reprinted in Clark, Appendix A, 35.

<sup>70</sup> Ibid.

school for children from crowded city homes regardless of denomination.<sup>71</sup> Lawson made these services available because of “a commitment that went quite a distance to make life more bearable for the people in his congregation and those in the community of Harlem.”<sup>72</sup> These kinds of projects and approach to ministry seem incompatible with the worldview of early Pentecostals who “regarded both church and state as incurably corrupt, abstained from political activity aimed at altering them, and placed their hopes for change in an imminent Second Coming [of Jesus Christ].”<sup>73</sup> The social services established by Lawson seemed to resemble all too closely the core doctrines of the Social Gospel, the church-based attempts to usher in the Kingdom of God by fixing society. Early Pentecostals spurned this doctrine because of its “*thisworldly*” focus and lack of “*otherworldly*” vision.<sup>74</sup> Notwithstanding, Lawson collaborated in city-wide ecumenical efforts with other black pastors, many of whom no doubt had Social Gospel leanings.<sup>75</sup>

### **Lawson and Race Vindication**

Lawson began his intellectual journey in the midst of major and unprecedented shifts among African American progressives. During Lawson’s early years as a pastor, W.E.B. Du Bois propounded the idea of racial uplift as a response to what many whites deemed the “Negro

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<sup>71</sup> Ibid., 29-30. The school offered was staffed by qualified professionals and offered courses; Clark, *The Relationship of Theology*, 30.

<sup>72</sup> Ibid., 20.

<sup>73</sup> Anderson, *Vision of the Disinherited*, 5.

<sup>74</sup> Ibid., 236

<sup>75</sup> Clark, *The Relationship of Theology*, 28.

Problem.” In keeping with ways to ameliorate the “Negro Problem,” Lawson dedicated *The Anthropology of Jesus Christ Our Kinsman* “to the glory of God and to help solve the race problem.”<sup>76</sup> Lawson’s book is replete with black racial ideology of the early twentieth century that addressed the “Negro problem” and sought possible solutions through race vindication and racial uplift.

Belief and practice of race vindication originated prior to the twentieth century. Black nationalists of the nineteenth century argued in the logic of race vindication.<sup>77</sup> Writers and speakers of the Harlem Renaissance saw “race vindication” as an avenue to “deconstruct the discursive structure erected in science, medicine, the law, and historical discourse to uphold the mental and cultural inferiority of African peoples.”<sup>78</sup> Black scholars recognized the importance of a discourse of “race vindication.” Carter G. Woodson, for example, saw this discourse as one of the few ways “that the Negro [could] escape the awful fate of becoming a negligible factor in the thought of the world.”<sup>79</sup> Educated blacks, including preachers, in the early twentieth century put their intellect to work by publishing and broadcasting their ideas of race vindication. As a theologian, Lawson’s greatest contribution to this narrative of race vindication came from his readings of the Bible, as he conveyed these ideas in sermons, publications, and radio broadcasts.

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<sup>76</sup> Lawson, *Anthropology of Jesus*, 4; Frederick Jackson used these terms interchangeable. See Kevin Gaines, *Uplifting the Race: Black Leadership, Politics, and Culture in the Twentieth Century* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1996), 67.

<sup>77</sup> *Ibid.*, 2.

<sup>78</sup> V. P. Franklin and Bettye Collier-Thomas “Biography, Race Vindication, and African-American Intellect,” in *The Journal of Negro History* 81, no. 1 (1996): 1.

<sup>79</sup> *Ibid.*

Theologians and historians before Lawson attempted to use biblical and archaeological evidence to vindicate the black race,<sup>80</sup> but few, if any, contextualized and ascribed such soteriological profundity to the question of race as Lawson had. The soteriological problem presented by Lawson had Christological dimensions.

And according to that standard [one-sixteenth Negro blood], if our Lord would return to the earth again in the flesh, and would go down South incognito, he would be jim-crowed [sic] and segregated; for he himself had more than one-sixteenth of negro blood in him.<sup>81</sup>

A deeper theological reading of that statement in keeping with Lawson's theme of Jesus as "our kinsmen redeemer,"<sup>82</sup> shows that Southern white Christians would not accept the blood atonement Jesus made for them. Such blood would have been impure and wholly rejected in society and soteriology. Jesus would not have been able to interact with whites in the South because black blood coursed through his body. At such point whites assumed a position more hypocritical than the Pharisees of Jesus days.

By offering a corrective history of anthropology Lawson sought to tackle the source of misunderstandings about "brethren of the colored race." The root of this misunderstanding lay in "the fact of their [whites] civilization, that is, their education ... [for] ignorant education is the worst education."<sup>83</sup>

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<sup>80</sup>A nineteenth-century example of race vindication is Martin Robison Delany's *The Principia of Ethnology: the Origin of Races and Color; with an Archaeological Compendium of Ethiopian and Egyptian Civilization from Years of Careful Examination and Inquiry* (Philadelphia, PA: Harper, 1880).

<sup>81</sup> Lawson, *Anthropology of Jesus*, 32.

<sup>82</sup> *Ibid.*, 8, 41-48.

<sup>83</sup> Lawson, *Anthropology*, 8.

## Lawson on Racial Uplift

With this ideology of race vindication in mind, Lawson's writings and ministry might assume a greater significance in our understanding of the black political discourse. Beyond race vindication, Lawson's social projects and writings were imbued with ideas of racial uplift. Ideas of racial uplift began to circulate around the 1880s with the proliferation of black newspapers, activist writers, and a new generation black educated middle-class, many of whose parents had been slaves. Kevin Gaines' description of racial uplift as ideals "offered as a form of cultural politics, in the hope that unsympathetic whites would relent and recognize the humanity of middle-class African Americans"<sup>84</sup> succinctly summarizes what Lawson attempted to accomplish in his book. But Lawson would have broadened this to include all blacks throughout history, not just middle class African-Americans.

Lawson, like exponents of racial uplift, believed that the individual achievement of blacks benefitted the entire race. Starting with his mentorship under Garfield T. Haywood, Lawson gained a profound appreciation for talented blacks in positions of leadership. Haywood not only assumed the helm of important roles in the interracial PAW, but he was also "the most intellectually wide ranging of all early Pentecostal theologians"<sup>85</sup> covering topics such as eschatology, race relations within the church, oneness theology, paleontology and world history – possibly what influenced Lawson to take up this topic. Haywood took it upon himself to teach

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<sup>84</sup> Kevin Gaines, *Uplifting the Race: Black Leadership, Politics, and Culture in the Twentieth Century* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1996), 3.

<sup>85</sup> Douglas Jacobsen, *A Reader in Pentecostal Theology: Voices from the First Generation* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2006), 173.

his protégés theology and all matters related. Delving into theological studies immediately after his conversion, Lawson spent approximately five years as a Bible student under Haywood in Indianapolis.<sup>86</sup> Early black Pentecostal leaders had “a sense of esteem, a sense of pride [as they] thought they were equally qualified to head and to lead organizations.”<sup>87</sup> Of all early Pentecostal leaders, like Haywood, Lawson became among the most published and talented in composing music sung by black and white Pentecostal congregations.

It was Lawson’s conviction that “only by the happy combination of the zealous and able student, the wise and scholarly teacher and a well-organized institution, can we hope to educate men and women that are and will be needed in the future.”<sup>88</sup> Through his weekly Sunday night radio broadcast Lawson informed a large audience both within and outside Harlem of the city’s educational crisis. Some of the audience only became aware of this problem through Lawson’s ministry in which he criticized the city for allowing schools to be understaffed, in need of textbooks and supplies, and filled with poorly-trained teachers.<sup>89</sup> Only with a competitive education would blacks assume leadership positions both in church and society. To make this notion of racial uplift come to fruition for others, Lawson first opened the Church of Christ Bible Institute in 1926 – a year after he published *The Anthropology of Jesus Christ Our Kinsman* – and the R.C. Lawson Institute (formerly called the Industrial Union Institute and Training) in Southern Pines, North Carolina in 1931. Lawson’s interest was in “bettering the educational

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<sup>86</sup> Clark, Appendix A, 8.

<sup>87</sup> Clark Appendix B, 2.

<sup>88</sup> Robert Lawson, *The Contender for the Faith*, March 1937, 5. This page of periodical reprinted in Clark, *The Relationship of Theology*, appendix A page 16.

<sup>89</sup> Ibid.

experience of inner city youth.”<sup>90</sup> The school offered three tracks of study: grammar school education; a four year high school; and a two year industrial course for those desiring trade jobs and better positions.<sup>91</sup> The high school was anchored in the notion of racial uplift and the need for a well-rounded education in the arts. The curriculum included courses in History, French<sup>92</sup> and Latin.<sup>93</sup> Students came from various denomination and from impoverished communities throughout the country including, New York, Boston, Baltimore, Trenton and several cities in the South.<sup>94</sup> In one case, Lawson offered scholarships to two Ethiopian students. One of the students, the Ethiopian students Befequadu Tadesse, went on the University of Oregon and became a member of the State Department of Ethiopia.<sup>95</sup> Many graduates continued on to competitive U.S. colleges.<sup>96</sup> Lawson portrayed his idea of student success in his monthly publication *The Contender for the Faith*. In offering a scenario of a young (presumably black) man thinking of his future and how much different life would be if he had lived in great eras of history, Lawson prompted readers to think how that a young person with a proper education could assume a prominent role in society, for “[i]t is his opportunity to be a pioneer in the political field if he

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<sup>90</sup> Ibid., 33.

<sup>91</sup> Robert Lawson, *The Contender for the Faith*, 5.

<sup>92</sup> Ibid.

<sup>93</sup> Clark, *The Relationship of Theology*, 31.

<sup>94</sup> Ibid., 33.

<sup>95</sup> Ibid., Appendix A, 32.

<sup>96</sup> Clark, *The Relationship of Theology*, 33.

stud[ies] and learns[s] and strive[s] for success.”<sup>97</sup> At the climax of the article, Lawson reflected on the great contribution of Negroes:

Our race has given her men and women also as pioneers in the respective fields, they had to strive harder and reach the goal only through great hardships. Today what greater scientist ever lived than that distinguished negro, Dr. George Washington Carver of Tuskegee Institute, Alabama. Born a slave without even a name...

The kinds of students Lawson aspired to reach are pictured in a pamphlet advertising the school. While the school attracted many inner city youth, it also reached out for poor blacks in the rural south. One photograph shows a poor black family outside of their squalid shack.<sup>98</sup> His school was “A School for Children of Parents *Who Care*,” where they “train[ed] the heart, head, and hand.”<sup>99</sup>

Racial uplift not only meant better education but also better jobs. Over his weekly Sunday night radio broadcast Lawson decried the racial ratio of the New York City’s police force; of the city’s 18,200 police officers only 132 were blacks, approximately .007 percent. Lawson demanded more Negro police for the city and Harlem in particular.<sup>100</sup>

A plethora of other primary sources further attest to Lawson’s passion to uplift the socio-economic condition of blacks. The few examples provided here suggest that Lawson’s vision for better education, better jobs, and more prominent positions for blacks, was consistent with racial

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<sup>97</sup> Lawson, *The Contender for the Faith*, Appendix A, 5.

<sup>98</sup> Industrial Union Institute and Training School advertisement reprinted in Clark, *The Relationship of Theology*, Appendix A, 15.

<sup>99</sup> Ibid.

<sup>100</sup> Clark, *The Relationship of Theology*, 36.

uplift ideology of the early twentieth century. A closer look at his theological convictions on race grounded in his fundamentalist hermeneutics of the Bible and founded in his progressive racial views sheds more light on how he was able to maintain and balance the dialectic of liberal intellectualism and biblical fundamentalism.

### **Uplift through Theology**

In Lawson's writings, particularly *The Anthropology of Jesus Christ Our Kinsman*, he sought not only to vindicate the black race but to uplift it using theological/anthropological arguments. According to Kevin Gaines, "uplift, among its other connotations, also represented the struggle for a positive black identity in a deeply racist society, turning the pejorative designation of race into a source of dignity and self-affirmation through an ideology of class differentiation, self-help, and interdependence."<sup>101</sup> Lawson's arguments, in some ways, reflect this logic. Turning on its head the white racist notion of blacks as the lowest race, he wrote, "if any race have whereof to boast as touching things of the flesh, relative to our Lord Jesus Christ, the colored race has more."<sup>102</sup> In Lawson's world of theology, the possibility of racial uplift via "theological uplift" seemed quite conceivable.

Certain that Jethro, the priest of Midian and father-in-law of Moses, was a Negro and that Moses was a brown-skinned man, and assuming an uncritical reading of Old Testament biblical history, Lawson argued: "our white brethren are indebted to us for their Supreme Court." His

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<sup>101</sup> Gaines, *Uplifting the Race*, 3.

<sup>102</sup> Lawson, *Anthropology*, 29.

basis lay in two key points. First, that Jethro instructed Moses how to establish a hierarchical judicial system based on appointed judges who deliberated legal cases.<sup>103</sup> And second, that the laws of western civilization are more or less based upon the (moral) Law of Moses.<sup>104</sup>

Beyond this theological uplift, the secular arguments Lawson employed resonated with a larger audience. He quoted Volney, who wrote, “to the race of Negroes, the object of our extreme contempt, we owe our arts, science, and even the very use of speech.”<sup>105</sup> And in light of Abyssinia’s claim to a civilization eleven-thousand years old, he also asserted that “Negroes, then, can rightfully now claim Abyssinia, a remnant of Ethiopia, not only the oldest surviving Christian nation, but the oldest kingdom on earth.”<sup>106</sup>

Distinctive physical features of blacks, historically portrayed as exaggerated, became evidence and source of pride for Lawson. He took Herodotus’ description of Egyptians as having “black skins and woolly hair,” to appropriate for blacks the rich ancient findings of Egyptians rulers who shared these physical traits. One comparison in particular elucidates this desire to connect the powerful ancient Egyptians kingdom with blacks of the 1920s: “[w]hen I saw the statue of Amenemphet [sic] III, I was immediately struck by the facial resemblances of Jack Johnson [the first black world heavyweight boxing champion].” He further noted the “striking resemblances” between blacks in Africa to King Sahura of the V Dynasty. By turning pejoratives into praise, Lawson was able to affirm the blackness of ancient civilized kingdoms which ruled

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<sup>103</sup> Ibid., 23. Also see Exodus 18:18-22.

<sup>104</sup> Ibid., 23.

<sup>105</sup> Ibid., 20.

<sup>106</sup> Ibid., 19-23.

over “Caucasian varieties [of] savages.” Most trenchantly, he asserted, “by the light of the modern research, it does appear as if white-skinned humanity got its civilization from the black-skinned variety – and even its origin.”<sup>107</sup>

### **Conclusion**

Because of the originality of the claims made in his book, Lawson made preemptive arguments in anticipation of critiques from other religious leaders.

Why are you so concerned to prove that Jesus Christ has Negro blood in him? It is vitally necessary and helpful, especially when the wave of prejudice is causing so many to sin through the egotism of race-pride. This ungodly pride is causing many to think themselves better than other people; therefore separating themselves in the body of Christ through shame of their brethren’s colored races.<sup>108</sup>

The crux of the matter of race in the church was the hypocrisy under which the church operated and its failure to influence society for the good. Given Lawson’s interpretation of Jesus’ racial composition, Jesus would not be able to be classify himself as white in Virginia. And had he walked into a church, Jesus would necessarily oblige to the rules of segregation deepening the meaning Martin Luther King’s 1957 observation of 11 o’clock as the most segregated hour, for Jesus would be Jim-Crowed. Hate, false ideas about blacks, and racial prejudice all boiled down in into one sentence for Lawson, “[a]nd whatever race one chooses to hate, remember, our Lord is of that race.”<sup>109</sup>

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<sup>107</sup> Ibid.

<sup>108</sup> Ibid., 33.

<sup>109</sup> Ibid., 47.

In conclusion, we see how see how this rendition of Lawson challenges our assumptions regarding fundamentalist and progressive thinkers. In the person of Lawson we discover the epitome of a Pentecostal who held in productive tension the pragmatic and primitive impulses at play in early Pentecostalism.<sup>110</sup> Amidst the intellectuals of Harlem during the heyday of Christian (re)configurations of race relations and in the time internecine feuds within the Pentecostal movement, the discourses of Lawson reveal how one could take seemingly ‘liberal’ principles and implement them in a conservative context, and vice-versa. The Great Migration of African Americans created opportunities for a project such as his to work.<sup>111</sup> By implementing the ideas posited of black intellectuals (racial uplift and vindication), Lawson showed to not only be concerned with the church, but also with the greater black populace. His services were not only for black believers, but for any in need. His social concern, however, sprang up from an unexpected well of theological thought.

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<sup>110</sup> For a thorough description of the functionality of the primitive and pragmatic impulses see, Grant Wacker, *Heaven Below: Pentecostals and American Culture 1906-1936* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2003), 10-12.

<sup>111</sup> Wallace Best demonstrates how those of the Great Migration transformed church culture in the urban cities of the North, cf. Wallace Best, *Passionately Human, No Less Divine: Religion and Culture in Black Chicago, 1915-1952* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007).