Ella Mitchell: A Forerunner of Liberation Spirituality among African American Women

A DISSERTATION

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Ella Mitchell (1917-2008) reflects an emphasis on liberation that is inspired and empowered by the influence of God. Though a small body of literature exists by and about women of African American descent, few texts explore their lives and contributions to culture and none have noted the contributions of Mitchell’s life and work as a model of lived liberation spirituality. This dissertation explores the life experience and achievements of Mitchell, who was the first female dean of Spelman College’s Sisters Chapel, the first African American woman to become president and serve on the Board of Educational Ministries of the American Baptist Church, and the first female to preach at the historic Hampton Ministers’ Conference. Mitchell was the first to pull together the voices of African American women preachers for publication and did so through a series of five ground-breaking books entitled *Those Preachin’ Women* (1985, 1988, 1996, 2004, and 2008).

Segundo Galilea’s concept of liberation spirituality and its dimensions provides a framework for analysis of Mitchell’s life and contributions. Information was collected through published works by Mitchell, available recordings of interviews with Mitchell, unpublished manuscripts provided by Mitchell’s family, and information provided by family members and friends of Mitchell. The dissertation correlates Mitchell’s life to those of other
women in the Christian tradition who demonstrated a commitment to aspects of Mitchell’s experience. It overlays the simultaneous development in the Civil Rights Movement, African American culture, and African American Christianity that are relevant to Mitchell’s experience.

Through life experience and preaching, Mitchell demonstrates Galilea’s three key components of liberation spirituality: a personal identification with the suffering of Christ, unity of faith and action through service and love, and a call to conversion for others due to a shared responsibility. These are each evident throughout Mitchell’s life and manuscripts. Mitchell was born into a segregated state when women were not allowed to vote, chose to give freely to others and love them even as a child, and charged others to live with a sense of purpose and accountability. These characteristics are in clear alignment with the traits expressed by Galilea and provide a basis for viewing Mitchell’s life as a lived expression of liberation spirituality.
This dissertation by Kanika A.M. Magee fulfills the dissertation requirement for the doctoral degree in Spirituality approved by Raymond Studzinski, O.S.B., Ph.D., as Director, and by William Dinges, Ph.D.; Joseph White, Ph.D.; Teresa Fry-Brown, Ph.D. as Readers.

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Chapter One

Introduction

Ella Mitchell (1917-2008) stands as one of the influential twentieth century contemporary female preachers in the African American Christian tradition. Mitchell was a trailblazer, becoming the first female dean of Spelman College’s Sisters Chapel in Atlanta, Georgia; teaching homiletics at the Interdenominational Theological Center in Atlanta and Virginia Union University in Richmond, Virginia; becoming the first female to preach at the Hampton Ministers’ Conference; and gaining the title “Dean of Women Preachers” and being referred to as a “Mother of the Womanist Preaching Movement” as reported by the African American Lectionary.¹

While Mitchell never labeled herself as the mother of this movement, and others may vary in their assessment of her role, this distinction is affirmation of Mitchell’s consistent attention to race, gender, and class, three key concepts identified by womanist theologian Emilie Townes as central to womanist thought.² For Townes, reflecting the definition established by writer Alice Walker, womanist theology is communal, “a womanist cares about her people,” it is “grounded in love…of self, love of community…love of the Spirit,” it


² Emilie M. Townes, A Troubling in My Soul: Womanist Perspectives on Evil and Suffering (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1999), 1.
“is a social witness,” and it is reflective of a “womanish” young girl who must “be in charge, a gatherer of knowledge…[and] serious about her task.” Mitchell’s life reflects an emphasis on liberation that is inspired and empowered by the experience of God. Mitchell’s early experiences as one born in the segregated south and the granddaughter of a former slave helped shape her sense of purpose. This led her to seek to change perceived injustice, thereby challenging society and developing a spirituality of liberation long before it had been recognized as such, saying, “we are to be beyond our date, beyond our eon, beyond our age and generation…We are to live under the reign of God, as opposed to the reign of our generation, [and] the impact and influence of the people of our time.”

Part of Mitchell’s spiritual awakening occurred through the mentorship of civil rights leader and educator Mary McLeod Bethune, who represented a new paradigm for women. Bethune transformed Mitchell’s understanding of personal liberation much as the example of Jesus transformed did. Another aspect of her spiritual awakening occurred through the teaching Mitchell encountered while studying at Union Theological Seminary, which challenged social injustice and inequality. Mitchell notes,

The culture of Jesus’ time and place would not permit a band of twelve disciples to include women in their wanderings, but Jesus was unquestionably open to the powerless, both women and children. He dealt with a hemorrhaging woman regardless of her classification as unclean. He was so received by a Samaritan woman at a well that she became what could have been called the first evangelist…In fact,


4 Ella Mitchell, “Freedom—Romans 12:1-2” (sermon, location unknown, July 18, 1982), Private Collection, Atlanta, GA.
the very resurrection of Jesus was first announced by his coterie of female followers. The incredulity with which the disciples received the ladies’ report is all the more justification for the role of women as preachers of the counter-cultural gospel of the Kingdom of God.5

As Mitchell journeyed through life, she demonstrated a boldness and sense of purpose that grew out of her personal conversion. Mitchell awakened to see herself as a joint heir to God’s power and grace alongside all others, regardless of race, gender, or class and she did so in the face of discrimination and injustice. This understanding allowed Mitchell to love herself deeply enough to challenge situations that would demean or deprive her, saying “What committee would have selected a chubby girl converted in Charleston, South Carolina, in 1925?”6

The love of this conversion extended beyond self and embraced all of humanity, leading Mitchell to serve others throughout her life. Mitchell served even when others said she should not. This service grew into activism and stemmed from an unconditional love as modeled by Jesus. Mitchell indicates, “we need to think about Jesus’ calling under God—which is also ours—to deal with all kinds and conditions of broken-ness, wherever it is found, and no matter how it is expressed. Pain is pain. Suffering is suffering. And broken hearts are broken hearts.”7 These factors connect Mitchell directly to Segundo Galilea in the formation of liberation spirituality. The liberation of Mitchell is lived and shared. She, like


7 Ibid., 5.
Jesus, stands in solidarity with the poor and oppressed, identifying with them through her own experience as one who lacks material possessions and was oppressed. Like Jesus, Mitchell embraces those who are rejected by society and affirms their personhood. Mitchell works on their behalf to respond to their needs.

As Mitchell does this, she lives the liberation spirituality of which Galilea speaks and follows closely in the footsteps of Jesus. Mitchell experiences this for herself and, through her preaching, challenges others to live a spirituality of liberation as well saying people must “assess who we are and whose we are and what this whole matter of service is all about” to arrive in a place of love and surrender. Mitchell draws upon biblical examples, historical examples within the African American context, her life experience, and the model of Jesus’ life to both justify and glean how to live such a life. For Mitchell this life is one that is full of love—love from God and love for others. It is a life that is full of action—through service to those in need and activism to challenge the structures that create their need. Mitchell expresses her desire: “As a woman, I can’t help wishing for all women the fullest expression and acceptance of their humanity.” In life, Mitchell expresses this desire not solely to women, but to all people.

Mitchell internalizes the realities of her time and culture, noting herself that she grew up a few blocks away from a slave auction block and that at the time of her birth women were

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not permitted to vote. These realities jarred Mitchell and were part of an experience that identified her as oppressed and inspired her to be revolutionary. These experiences, combined with Mitchell’s exposure to Mary McLeod Bethune as a mentor, Joseph Nicholson during undergraduate studies at Talladega College, Reinhold Niebuhr during graduate studies at Union Theological Seminary and others challenged Mitchell and fostered her activism and service. Mitchell is clear that her activism and service are not motivated by a sense of need or injustice but by God. For Mitchell and Galilea this important distinction ensures that service to the community is not assimilation to the priorities of culture. Motivation and direction by God ensure that the oppressors’ values are not applied in attempts to aid the oppressed, for “when you put the kingdom of God first you are then protected against having your unselfish love exploited by some lesser goal or some predatory vultures of this world.”

Mitchell’s early experience provides the impetus for liberation and evidence of an early commitment to service. As a young adult the commitment to service and solidarity with the poor is strengthened, the conversion begins, and an activist is born. Throughout her adult life, Mitchell continues to demonstrate evidence of the conversion that calls her to receive God’s love and to love God’s creation. Mitchell models this conversion through love, service, and activism on behalf of the oppressed.

Further, Mitchell’s experience connects her to Christ as one who suffered and was rejected. Mitchell understands the stigma and isolation of societal discrimination. She also

understands the pain of suffering and loss. This personal experience of Christ represents the first of three areas that demonstrate Mitchell’s lived liberation spirituality as defined by Galilea. The second is faith in action, through which Mitchell takes the initiative to act on behalf of the oppressed. Mitchell does not turn away from their suffering but instead seeks to help them. This stems not from a sense of pity toward them but from a sense of identification with the oppressed. Mitchell asserts wholeheartedly that action—service—is required of all. A life cannot be complete without working to make a difference in the lives of others. This belief leads Mitchell to work and to compel others to work on behalf of those in need. In her view, everyone has a purpose and role in alleviating suffering.

The difference Mitchell makes in the lives of others not only occurs through service but also through a call to conversion. Others must be given the opportunity to experience God’s love in the same way Mitchell did. They must be told of God’s love and challenged to move as a result of it. The call to conversion is Galilea’s third major aspect of liberation spirituality. Through teaching, preaching, and mentoring, Mitchell urges others to change.

It is in the personal experience of Christ, faith in action, and call to conversion that Mitchell clearly demonstrates the qualities Galilea ascribes to liberation spirituality. In this, Mitchell serves as an exemplar of liberation spirituality, having lived it before it was defined and named by Galilea. For Mitchell this spirituality springs forth from a deep, abiding faith in God. This faith permitted Mitchell to draw upon the examples of Esther, Huldah, Prisca, and others to stand against all odds and follow God’s will.
This led Mitchell to many notable achievements. Though Mitchell would not be ordained in the Baptist Church for several decades after being licensed to preach, Mitchell felt compelled to promote opportunities for women in ministry, compiling five volumes of *Those Preaching Women*, a series of collections of sermons by female ministers. Mitchell was the first female dean of the Spelman College Sisters Chapel in Atlanta, Georgia. At this college, Mitchell shared a “spirituality of liberation” with African American women through counseling, teaching and preaching that drew upon biblical examples to demonstrate that cultural stigmas and hardships could be overcome. Mitchell taught homiletics at the Interdenominational Theological Center in Atlanta, Georgia for over a decade. Mitchell became the president of the Board of Education and Publications of the American Baptist Convention, a notable achievement for an African American woman. Of this journey, Mitchell expounds, “As I reminisce over these fifty years, I look back at person after person who may have been nowhere near as qualified as I felt I was, yet they received placement and honors denied me. By hook or by crook, they managed to capture the goodies I thought I deserved. But they have evaporated or disappeared from the vineyard. And my beloved, I wouldn’t take anything for the unpredictable way God has slowly (in my limited judgment) opened doors I could not see. God has planted me where I did not know opportunities even existed.”

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Mitchell references concepts that allude to Galilea’s aspects of liberation spirituality in her doctoral dissertation, which notes a series of motifs that are relevant and necessary in life. Among them is the motif of love, through which Mitchell indicates “let us love one another.” Then the “readiness and resourcefulness motif,” through which she explains a need for service to others despite personal hardship or lack. Mitchell also references “the grace and forgiveness motif,” which espouses unconditional acceptance of others. In each, Mitchell provides scriptural reference and slave narratives that demonstrate evidence of each as rooted in spiritual instruction and cultural patterns and finds parallels in the call to conversion, faith in action, and experience of Christ espoused by Galilea.12

What emerges from Mitchell is the assertion, despite the societal implication of inferiority, that her life, experiences, and stories are valuable. In the words of Renita Weems,13 women “are the church, a ragged band of miracle workers: ragged because [they] are often contentious, scared, lazy, undependable, and—in a word—flawed; miracle workers because [they’ve] had to take straw and build a cathedral of hope for every generation that


13 Renita Weems (1954-) is a Bible scholar and an ordained elder in the African Methodist Episcopal Church. Weems is a former member of the faculty of Vanderbilt University, Nashville, Tennessee; former visiting professor at Spelman College, Atlanta, Georgia; and is the Vice President for Academic Affairs at American Baptist College and co-pastor of Ray of Hope Community Church, also in Nashville. Weems is the author of several books and articles that draw attention to spiritual development, women in the Bible, and personal growth, and has received the Wilbur Award from the Religious Communications Council for the book, Listening for God: A Minister’s Journey through Silence and Self Doubt. Weems is the first African American woman to earn a Ph.D. in Old Testament Studies. Weems received this degree from Princeton Theological Seminary, Princeton, New Jersey, in 1989.
crossed [their] threshold.”14 Mitchell is that woman who built a legacy of liberation spirituality out of the straw of hardship, loss, and discrimination.

Galilea notes, “Present generations are unmoved by doctrines and words. They believe only in actions.”15 In this vein, Mitchell demonstrates actions that are worth believing in and trusting. Mitchell’s acts inspired generations of women in the African American tradition, taught generations of Christian education leaders, and continue to inspire those today who will glean from her words and her work.

This study highlights the work of Mitchell as an example of a lived liberation spirituality. This is achieved first by examining the definition of liberation spirituality as presented by Segundo Galilea with supportive materials from Jon Sobrino. By applying Galilea’s model to Mitchell’s life, actions, and words, the presence of a spirituality of liberation becomes clear. This spirituality is lived and shared through love, service, and activism by Mitchell in ways that gather others and inspire them to love and to serve similarly.


Chapter Two

Perspectives on Liberation Spirituality

A. Defining Christian Spirituality

Though defining Christian spirituality is not one of the tasks of this project, it is necessary to identify central components of Christian spirituality as a basis for this discussion. Sandra Schneiders cautions that “the discourse on spirituality has become so widespread in our culture that it risks becoming a catch-all term for whatever anyone takes seriously.”1 Within this context, it is no surprise that Bernard McGinn acknowledges that at least thirty-five definitions of Christian spirituality exist. Louis Bouyer indicates, “Christian spirituality (or any other spirituality) is distinguished from dogma by the fact that, instead of studying or describing the objects of belief as it were in the abstract, it studies the reactions which these objects arouse in the religious consciousness.”2 McGinn also quotes Hans Urs von Balthasar, indicating spirituality is a “basic practical or existential attitude which is the


expression of how one understands ethically committed existence,”³ and that Christian spirituality is “the subjective aspect of dogmatic theology.”⁴ McGinn also references Jordan Aumann, who indicates that “spirituality refers to any religious or ethical value that is concretized as an attitude or spirit from which one’s actions flow.”⁵

Walter Principe traces the term spirituality to the biblical writings of Paul, where spirit represented “the presence and action of the loving God manifest in the Christ event, which summons Christians to be ‘spiritual’ persons or to walk ‘in the spirit.’” In the Hebrew Bible, spirit refers to the “power and presence of the living God.”⁶ As the use of the term spirituality has evolved, it has transitioned from being applied abstractly in the fifth century to being linked to ecclesial leaders in the fifteenth century and interiority in the seventeenth century. McGinn calls it a “necessary pseudoconcept” that cannot be replaced.⁷

Spirituality reflects a blend of theology, social science, historical context and personal experience. McGinn refers to spirituality as “an experience rooted in a particular


community’s history.” It is an “element in human nature and experience”\textsuperscript{8} and, as such, reflects shared, common elements and unique, individual experience. According to Donahue, “spirituality is the living out of theology, so that spirituality means mediating theological truth into religious practice.”\textsuperscript{9}

Segundo Galilea notes, “We can identify Christian spirituality (not only for the Americas but for any place, culture, or social condition) as the process of following Christ, under the direction of the Spirit, and beneath the guidance of the Church. This process is paschal: it gradually leads to identification with Jesus Christ, which in the life of the Christian takes the form of death to sin and selfishness to live for God and for others.”\textsuperscript{10} From this, it can be concluded that liberation spirituality is central and in line with the example and model of Jesus’ life. Jesus’ earthly ministry of healing the sick, feeding the hungry, visiting with the unpopular, and teaching that focused on the poor and dispossessed, becomes the guide and justification for spirituality in general and for liberation spirituality, in particular.

Hence, Galilea indicates the following:

We have the fundamental normativity of Jesus, and the future of the Father is opened to us, but spanning the norm and the future is a pilgrimage, a journey, a process and a changing, in the Spirit. A number of consequences flow from this. First, spirituality cannot consist of a simple imitation of something already given, some a priori prescription. Spirituality is always and necessarily something to be redone. Secondly, to spirituality belongs, by its essence, novelty, newness—to be judged according to

\textsuperscript{8} Ibid., 33.

\textsuperscript{9} Donahue, “The Quest for Biblical Spirituality,” 77.

\textsuperscript{10} Galilea, \textit{The Way of Living Faith}, 4.
the spirit of Jesus. Thirdly, this novelty stands in relationship with the novelty of
history. It must be historical novelty before it can be biographical novelty in the
subject, because it is in history that the Spirit of God, manifested in the signs of the
times, continues to act. Spirituality is purely and simply a participation in God’s own
history, history as assumed by God in Christ and the Spirit.11

B. Understanding Liberation Spirituality

Liberation spirituality is a framework for understanding the meaning of liberation in both
a personal sense as it is internalized and a connectional sense as it defines external contact
with others.12 This spirituality embraces the model and teachings of the biblical Jesus as a
guide for how one should experience and behave in life. The internalization of this
spirituality is itself an experience of liberation which in turn facilitates a life that is
committed to the liberation of others.

Galilea13 is widely recognized as providing the framework for liberation spirituality. This
is a spirituality deeply rooted in relationship with and modeling of the man Jesus, who as he
engaged in public ministry, readily connected with the poor, downtrodden and dispossessed.
Mitchell notes that “God takes those who are least respected, often put down, those who are
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11 Ibid., 52.

12 Liberation spirituality is rooted in following the example of Jesus who, through his life, became one with
the poor and oppressed of society. It is characterized by a willingness to both become poor (or oppressed) and to
stand with the poor and oppressed to become their advocates. Central to liberation spirituality is an
internalization of the love of God which results in the sharing of God’s love with others, regardless of social
status.

13 Segundo Galilea (1928-2010) was a Catholic priest who has served communities throughout Latin
America and the former director of the Latin American Pastoral Institute. He lectured internationally and
worked on behalf of immigrant communities in the United States. In 1997 Galilea became the archbishop of
Santiago de Chile and later became the spiritual director of the Seminary of San Carlos in Cuba. His works have
formed the basis for liberation spirituality.
least honored, those considered least wise.”¹⁴ The life of Jesus becomes the impetus for personal conversion and the model for a life of discipleship. Similarly, Mitchell reflects this belief saying,

> Who in the world are these brokenhearted people, and when on earth did Jesus ever minister to these frightened, fractured, frustrated souls?...For Jesus there were many more causes of broken-ness than exile and oppression. There were national heartbreaks, of course, but there were also individual heartaches, and Jesus came to heal them all...Jesus, my sensitive Savior, says, “I will not leave you comfortless.”¹⁵

Of significance is the distinction between liberation theology and liberation spirituality. A theology of liberation, though closely connected to a spirituality of liberation, is distinct in its emphasis on the rationale and justification of liberation as a central interpretation of belief in God. As the works of Gustavo Gutiérrez¹⁶ demonstrate, liberation theology identifies the liberating elements of scripture as a justification and basis for a social justice orientation. The eschatological liberation through Christ is linked to the present need for liberation through Jesus. Liberation, for Gutiérrez, reflects a human condition and not only a social condition—it reflects the intrinsic and internal needs experienced by the oppressed not for financial gain, but for humanity.

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¹⁵ Ibid., 4-5.

¹⁶ Gustavo Gutiérrez (1928-) is a Dominican priest recognized as the founder of Liberation Theology, developed in response to the conditions prevalent in Latin America. He holds the John Cardinal O’Hara Professorship of Theology at the University of Notre Dame. Gutiérrez has served on the board of directors for the journal *Concilium*, been awarded the Legion of Honor by the French government, and has published numerous books and articles.
The spirituality of liberation incorporates these aspects of liberation theology and internalizes its message as a basis for providing a broad application. A liberation theology can be followed but a liberation spirituality can be embodied. For Galilea, liberation spirituality is communal and Christ-centered. Galilea says, “De una actitud de solidaridad con los pobres...o mas aun su estilo de vida hasta encarnarse entre los mas marginados, el cristiano agrega hoy la pobreza del compromiso. La de luchar por la liberacion de los pobres,” 17 (To an attitude of solidarity with the poor…or even the lifestyle to become incarnate among the most marginalized, the Christian adds today the poverty of commitment: that of fighting for the liberation of the poor [my translation]). It is not only the interiority he grew to associate with spirituality, but the connection with community that is compelled through relationship with Christ. For Gutiérrez, one must “be faithful, in both prayer and concrete commitments, to the will of the Lord in the midst of the poor.” His message indicates that God knocks at humanity’s doors in response to injustice, “not a violent entrance but a quiet knock”18 to invite a response. Galilea takes this a step further, acknowledging that “the crisis of faith is also the crisis of spirituality. For Jesus himself, faith was the decisive value of discipleship. Any reading of the Gospels reveals the repeated demands of the Lord for his followers’ faith.”19 Within this context, the life of Mitchell,

17 Segundo Galilea, A los pobres se les anuncia el Evangelio? (Bogota: Ediciones Paulinas, 1975), 45.
provides an example of lived liberation spirituality and Mitchell adds, “as Jesus tells the story of how it will be in the last end—He doesn’t ask how many times we went to Sunday service or even prayer meeting…it’s if you helped the least of these—if you reached out and touched someone who was hungry.”

Galilea, considered by scholars Jon Sobrino, Gustavo Gutiérrez, and others as the first to articulate liberation spirituality, continually emphasizes the significance of Jesus’ life as an example. This significance may on the surface appear obvious; however, it is central to the embodiment of a spirituality of liberation in that Jesus’ personality, actions, and life become the guiding model for this spirituality. Galilea specifically indicates that “any real following of Christ springs from a knowledge of his humanity, his personality traits, his way of acting, which by themselves make up the demands of our Christian life.” Hence, following the Christ means assigning significance to his earthly ministry and using these acts as the basis for a model of personal relationship with God and appropriate Christian behavior. Beyond this, it means interpreting authentic Christian life as one that connects with and embraces the poor so much that one is willing to be poor. For Galilea, Jesus’ model of liberation spirituality demonstrates a willingness to embrace poverty in the sense that he was rejected by society, shunned by leaders, experienced lack, and suffered as a criminal, among other

20 Ella Mitchell, “Love, the Only Proper Motive for Service” (sermon, Candler School of Theology Heritage Week, Atlanta, GA, February 23, 1995), Private Collection.

21 Galilea, Following Jesus, 30.
traits. Mitchell recognizes the internal struggle associated with this,

Jesus’ struggle was indeed real—and so, also, is our struggle. We oft-times are tempted to forget that we are the very children of God…We are tempted to choose our own way—over God’s way—to put our institutional and organizational goals and preferences ahead of the Kingdom of God, and to filch glory from the very idealism that we push to the fore…

[We are] tempted to allow the world to think that we are richer or wiser than we really are—tempted to buy friends with the very resources we said we couldn’t afford to give back to God…to make so much noise in our living that we drown out the hunger—the deep longing, the abiding hunger of our very souls. We are bewitched into believing that “one time,” it won’t make any difference—that no one will know—that the end justifies the means. But temptations of all the varieties are for us, even as they were for Jesus, vs. our primary identity as children of God. And our souls will remain restless until they find their rest in God.

Christ’s lived example forms the response to this struggle and is the central guide for those who embody a spirituality of liberation. This example includes a full understanding of one’s purpose and a consistent attention to the needs of the weak, sick, poor, and dispossessed of society. Jesus demonstrates this through both action and words. From these Galilea can assert that it is not simply evidence of an external concern but an internal process of identifying with those who are poor in society when poor is defined broadly as referring to those who are systematically exposed to dehumanizing experiences. Galilea explains, “We are called to discover his presence in the heart of our reality, from the Word of Jesus and not from some direct evidence. For the one who accepts God incarnate in history, for the one who accepts a crucified God who in his abandonment and death transforms slavery, misery,

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and injustice through liberation, everything is brought to light.”

For Galilea, God through Jesus fully embraced the pain, rejection and total experience identified with being poor and, in doing so, provides substantive insight into the meaning of liberation spirituality, a meaning familiar to Mitchell as one born into a racially segregated and gender-based reality.

Jon Sobrino applies the theory of Gutiérrez to push the interpretation of liberation spirituality further, asserting the codependent relationship between spirituality and liberation. One cannot exist without the other, for there is an “impossibility of a spirituality without liberation.” Conversely, Sobrino notes that there is an “impossibility of total liberation without spirituality, inasmuch as spirituality endows liberation with a new dimension.”

This contention suggests an integrated process that yields dual results. One is liberated through spirituality and becomes spiritual through liberation. This would necessarily occur in stages, so that one step forward in becoming liberated frees the person to move forward in spirituality and, similarly, this motion forward in spirituality provides the foundation and ability to move forward again in liberation. This continual process supports liberation spirituality as an ideal which is lived, strived for, and embodied. It can never be fully attained but the desire to attain it drives one deeper into it. It is reminiscent of the processes espoused


22 Galilea, Following Jesus, 22.

24 Jon Sobrino (1938-) is a Jesuit Catholic priest and theologian known for his contributions to liberation theology. Sobrino’s life was endangered as a result of his community’s outspokenness against the El Salvador Civil War and several in his community of Jesuits were murdered.

by the spiritual masters Julian of Norwich\textsuperscript{26} in her *Revelations of Divine Love*, Thérèse of Lisieux\textsuperscript{27} in *The Story of a Soul*, and others. It is a process of evolving into that which is seen as an ideal. Mitchell reflects this in the role she ascribes to pastors, noting that “God does not call pastors to lead congregations to perfection; only to love and serve them where they are, and lead them as far as possible in the time allotted.”\textsuperscript{28}

This perspective illuminates the importance of lived models of liberation spirituality, for in their ongoing journey toward a spirituality of liberation, stages emerge that are relevant and apparent to others seeking to live or simply understand it. Living a spirituality of liberation becomes a constant journey toward an ideal that is never fully attained but lived more fully at each new phase. This ideal is first experienced as an internal transformation and secondly as an outward expression that is self-liberating and liberates those in society.

C. Comprehensive Scope of Liberation Spirituality

Galilea’s premise, with which Sobrino agrees, is that there is no spirituality without

\textsuperscript{26} Julian of Norwich (c.1342-c.1416) is known for having a series of intense visions of Christ’s crucifixion while she was thought to be dying. During these visions, Julian indicates that she was privileged to feel Christ’s physical pain. Though Julian recovered from her illness, the experience caused her to express an extreme value in suffering as Christ suffered. Julian’s birth name and childhood experience are unknown, her name coming from the Church of St. Julian in Norwich, Norfolk, England, where she was from. *The Revelations of Divine Love*, which appear as *The Long Text* and an abbreviated original *Short Text* describe Julian’s experience in detail. Among Julian’s well-known views are that suffering was to be welcomed as a reward from God rather than punishment and that God is both a mother and father.

\textsuperscript{27} Thérèse of Lisieux (1873-1897) is often referred to as “The Little Flower of Jesus.” Thérèse became a Carmelite nun at the age of fifteen. Thérèse lived a short life, dying of tuberculosis at age twenty-four and was quickly beatified (1923) by the Catholic Church. Her spiritual autobiography, *The Story of a Soul*, was written as Thérèse was dying, at the behest of her sisters Pauline (known as Mother Agnes of Jesus) and Marie of the Sacred Heart.

\textsuperscript{28} Ella Mitchell, “Celebrative Preaching and the Congregation’s Culture” (unpublished manuscript, n.d.), Private Collection, 10.
Liberation spirituality is, hence, the universal experience of true Christian spirituality. It is rooted in the experience and expression of God’s love. “Christian spirituality must be integrally liberating and humanizing.” It reflects an ability to overcome the world’s expectations and limitations. It also reflects an ability to embrace God’s concept of humanity. Once this occurs internally, as those who have been rejected, dispossessed, and diminished by society begin to view themselves through a different lens, this personal liberation can be expressed to others. It becomes the embodiment of Jesus and his love. “Because he is love, he is justice and liberation for the poor, hope and refuge for sinners…He makes us his children. And he identifies himself with the most disgraceful of us (Matt. 25:40).”

Further, “God the Father calls all persons to follow Christ, led by the Spirit. Our response, which is Christian spirituality, begins by faith, which animated by love unleashes conversion.” For Galilea, “Esta conversion no es una actitud interna solamente, un cambio del corazon implica la transformacion de toda la persona y de toda la sociedad,” (This conversion is not only an inner attitude, a change of heart, it involves the transformation of the whole person and of society[my translation]).

The expression of this love is demonstrated through Jesus’ life. “Jesus’ humanity lived

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30 Ibid., 28.
31 Ibid., 79.
32 Galilea, A los pobres se les anuncia el Evangelio?, 42.
through the Spirit was and is the single radical source of Christian spirituality.”33 The historical Jesus provides this basis through acts and teachings. This began with Jesus’ choice to become as those who needed liberation and is modeled through Jesus’ life. It reflects “the ‘relational’ character of spirit vis-à-vis the sum total of reality. First, this is an underlying intuition of the practice of liberation, and so it will have to underlie its spirituality, as well. Secondly, we must take care to avoid the temptation…to ‘leave reality to itself’—to avoid the historical. To succumb to this temptation is to welcome into our lives an alienating parallelism in which the spiritual life and historical activity never meet.”34 Jesus connects these in his life and ministry in a way that frees humanity to do the same. The Jesus who became a miracle and sacrifice for all time and humanity was also the Jesus who became one with the wretched of humanity. This Jesus, through his example, connects with all people in a needed way, to affirm and liberate the dispossessed.

D. Jesus’ Lived Example in Spirituality

Central to Galilea’s concept is a literal following of the ways of Jesus. Galilea returns to medieval definitions of spirituality as following the example of Jesus in this part of his discussion. Early Christian spirituality did not engage mysticism or interiority as much as it focused on following the example of the higher power. For Galilea, “following Jesus Christ

is the most fundamental and original dimension of Christian spirituality.”\textsuperscript{35} Further, “Christianity as well as human liberation is founded upon, in its most radical aspect, following Christ (Jesus as truth and way) as well as participating in the life of Christ (Jesus as sanctifying and liberating life).”\textsuperscript{36} For Sobrino, spiritual life is “life lived in the spirit of Jesus.” Sobrino adds that “it all comes down to (1) committing ourselves to the building of the reign of God in the very midst of history, and thus drawing near to God, and (2) being women and men of pure heart, a heart that sees God, and thus building the reign of God. Or to put it another way, it is a matter of doing what Jesus did, and of doing it ever more as Jesus did it.”\textsuperscript{37}

Recognizing Jesus’ significance in the manifestation of liberation, Galilea asserts, “It is not surprising, then, that the salvation that Jesus brings to us appears very often in the Gospels as liberation from blindness and as sending light. Christ appears as the light that disperses the darkness (John 1:4-9; 8:12, 31ff.). He comes to give sight to the blind (Luke 4:18; 7:22; John 9:1ff.).”\textsuperscript{38} Mitchell expresses this sentiment by drawing upon Matthew 5:14-16 and saying, “First of all you are the light of the world…The light that you represent is not a decorative light but a functional light giving guidance. People exist in a world of darkness and they have to find their way on the basis of light—Illumination from models” provided by

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{35} Galilea, \textit{The Way of Living Faith}, 29.
  \item \textsuperscript{36} Ibid., 53.
  \item \textsuperscript{37} Sobrino, \textit{Spirituality of Liberation: Toward Political Holiness}, 2-7.
  \item \textsuperscript{38} Galilea, \textit{The Way of Living Faith}, 81.
\end{itemize}
God. Following in the tradition of “all of the great movements of spiritual renewal in the Church,” which Galilea asserts “have given a central place to the humanity of Jesus and to the imitation and following of this humanity,” liberation spirituality adopts the love and poverty of Jesus within the context of personal transformation as liberation and freedom. Galilea acknowledges that spiritual masters such as Francis of Assisi pointed to the imitation of Jesus as presented in the gospels, John of the Cross spoke of following Christ, Ignatius of Loyola believed that meditation on and contemplation of the great moments of Jesus’ life was essential to imitating Jesus, and Teresa of Ávila, referred constantly to Jesus’ humanity.

Again and again, Galilea articulates the centrality of Jesus’ lived example to a spirituality of liberation. For Galilea, “Jesus not only teaches us how to live as Christians, in communion with God the Father; he also teaches us how to live as human beings. Jesus is not only the sacrament of God; he is also the human ideal. He is the root of authentic humanism. Jesus teaches us to love, to work, to suffer, to surrender ourselves to some purpose, to have hope, and also to die, as true human beings. Christian spirituality is also human spirituality; it is the peak of humanism.” For Galilea, “It means knowing the Lord who we follow contemplatively, with our entire being, especially the heart, like a disciple and not a student,


like a follower and not a detective. Here again we see what is original about Christian spirituality: we do not know Jesus except by following him. The Lord’s face is revealed to us in the experience of following him. Therefore, Christology is contemplative, leading to the praxis of the imitation of Jesus.

Galilea’s articulation of the role of modeling one’s life after that of Jesus is clear and descriptive. Galilea says that “Christian spirituality is not only following Jesus (Christ as the Way) but at the same time it is living the life of Jesus (Christ as the Life), through the Spirit. Through the Spirit (the life[ as referenced above]) that Christ shed upon the world and particularly upon those who would be his disciples, we not only imitate Christ but we also transform ourselves into Christ and—like him—into children of God….being ‘born again.’”

Galilea further states:

Jesus’ humanity is our model because he realized radically that to which we are called: to live according to the Spirit. Jesus is also the model of the spiritual life, of Christian spirituality, because his life and actions were guided and nourished by the Holy Spirit. In Jesus, and in the disciples called to follow him, life according to the Spirit is opposed to ‘life according to the flesh,’ ‘according to the world’ (Gal. 5:19-21; John 6:33). To live according to the flesh, as opposed to the Spirit, is not so much to live according to sin and passions but rather, more profoundly, to live in a solely earthly and temporal perspective, closed in on oneself. It is to live by the criteria and ‘standards of this age’ (Rom. 12:2). To live according to the Spirit, however, is to live according to the criteria and perspectives of God, which have been incarnated for all time in the life and teachings of Jesus.

41 Ibid., 30-1.
42 Ibid., 35.
43 Ibid., 37.
Mitchell applies this principle of life according to the spirit universally, allowing it to infiltrate all aspects of being through liberation. Mitchell’s unique place is evident as she draws upon African spirituality to affirm the connection between physical and spiritual, a connection which fosters her understanding of purpose and her life of liberation spirituality. Mitchell notes,

The fact is that the early church combined the joy of a good physical meal with the joy of a spiritual feast. And on our occasion, Jesus was accused of celebrating with the “wineoes.”...In West Africa, the homeland, it seemed that all the celebrations were affirmations of the Goodness of God—celebrations of the abundant life, the kind that we believe the Babe of Bethlehem came to bring to a troubled world. African culture to this day does not separate the physical from the spiritual...when you’re in trouble you sing—when you’re happy you sing. Babies sing. Children sing. Young people sing—grown-ups and aging and elderly sing.44

Galilea looks not only to Jesus’ actions but to his words as evidence that his example is the guide for liberation spirituality. Looking specifically to Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount, Galilea calls it a “summary of gospel spirituality” and acknowledges the Beatitudes to be a synthesis of this sermon and its spiritual values. According to Galilea, “Jesus himself is an incarnation of the Beatitudes. Lived and proclaimed by him, they become the spiritual values of a Kingdom that is primarily Jesus himself. The Beatitudes are the ‘great prophecy of the Gospel,’ precisely because they propose an ideal that is completely unattainable on earth but that at the same time into which we might grow. It is the ideal of the ‘new person’ who is

clothed in the spirit of the Gospel, clothed in Christ.”

Acknowledging the differences between Luke’s and Matthew’s versions of the Beatitudes, Galilea states that “Luke’s version (6:20-26) teaches us who is blessed (or challenged) objectively in the Kingdom that is offered us. Luke tells us that the Kingdom has a preferential option for disciples of a certain social status (the poor, the hungry, the afflicted, and the persecuted). Matthew, however, has a more specific preoccupation with respect to Christian spirituality. He tells us how we become blessed (whatever our human and social status is), what basic attitudes we should cultivate to share in the Kingdom, and what attitudes identify us with the spirituality of Jesus. Matthew’s Beatitudes (5:1-12) synthesize the style of spirituality according to the Gospels.” Galilea also states, “We know that as we take seriously the demands of one of the Beatitudes, we also advance in the others because they incarnate the same message. The one who is truly poor according to the Gospel is also meek, merciful, committed to justice, and so on.”

Mitchell voices the significance of the Beatitudes, which shall be discussed in detail as it relates to her life, and Sobrino echoes and expands upon Galilea’s expression, indicating it is important to analyze not only Jesus’ practice, but the spirit of his practice. We have them both in his programmatic proclamation in the Sermon on the Mount. The Lucan version of the first Beatitude—“Blest are you poor; the reign of God is yours” (6:20)—makes it clear that the material principle of spirituality is real poverty. We must not, however, overlook Matthew’s version, with its poverty of spirit (“How blest are the poor in spirit; the reign of God is theirs: [5:3])—not in order to neglect the

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46 Ibid., 51.
primary importance of material poverty for identifying those addressed by the Beatitude. The meaning of the Matthean version is that we must be, to borrow Ignacio Ellacuria’s telling expression, “poor with spirit.” And again in the last Beatitude—“Blest are you when they insult you and persecute you…” (Matt. 5:11)—it is clear that the historical verification of the spiritual life is precisely the persecution that rages when justice is practiced.\(^47\)

E. Paradigmatic Suffering of Jesus in Spirituality

At the root of Jesus’ life is an affirmation of love for all people. His example demonstrates that this love is there regardless of social standing, personal background, or physical ailment. Such affirmation is further developed by an appeal to Jesus’ own suffering and rejection. Jesus becomes not only one concerned about the dispossessed, but at least at times Jesus becomes the dispossessed. This becomes an important aspect of the liberation experience of those who embody liberation spirituality, being able to connect with a feeling of oppression, poverty or rejection and overcoming that to claim true power. Edward Schillebeeckx notes the tradition of the “suffering righteous one” in Psalm 34:20 and later in Maccabees. Further, emphasis on the “last judgment” demonstrates that suffering was viewed as evidence of and a rite of righteousness in the early church and first century Judaism.\(^48\)

Jesus eventually becomes the ultimate example of sacrifice and giving, by surrendering his life for those who are sinners. Julian, like other medieval mystics, sees this suffering as


continual and ongoing, believing that Christ continues to suffer through time. “Serving, service performed out of love, thus becomes the final stamp set upon the life of Jesus; it is carried over from a historical event to the Lord who is to come.” Schillebeeckx contends that Jesus “died just as he lived, and he lived just as he died.” Suffering is central to the meaning and purpose of Jesus’ life and death. Within the context of liberation spirituality, it is this which connected Jesus with the poor through more than sympathy or outreach, but through shared experience.

In life, Jesus experienced rejection and ridicule, being driven out of Galilee and befriend other rejects in society. In death, the emotional pain of rejection was coupled with physical pain that ultimately secured his purpose and place as the ultimate martyr and example for Christianity. Connecting with the experience of Jesus cannot occur without a connection to Jesus’ suffering. “The ‘primordial pains’ of ‘God-forsakenness’ oppress these people. Thus ‘suffering’ becomes a paradigm, an archetype for everyone pious, faithful to the Law, to Yahweh.” It is in this that it becomes essential to liberation spirituality.

According to Galilea, spirituality stems from a psychological understanding of God’s love of self and all of humanity and the response to the love first expressed by God. This love is evident in the sacrifice of Jesus through life and death. It is a two-fold process, which involves a call from God and a response from humanity. God touches or speaks to humans as


50 Schillebeeckx, *Jesus: An Experiment in Christology*, 305-6.

51 Ibid., 288.
an invitation to relationship with God. This is an invitation to spirituality. The response is the development of this spirituality through relationship with God. “Christian spirituality is, before all else, an initiative by and a gift from God who loved us and seeks us, spirituality is then our recognition and our response, with all that entails, to this love of God that desires to humanize and sanctify us.”

F. Emotion in Spiritual Experience

A necessary step in the formation of a Christian spirituality is an experience of Christ in some form. This is an emotive experience with an appropriately emotive response. The experience of God’s unconditional acceptance and love, of God’s presence and healing, evokes a heartfelt and emotional response. Though it may be couched in inexplicable, sometimes called supernatural, experiences, it is nonetheless experienced on a psychological level that involves a conscious and lifelong response to the experience of God. Galilea expresses that “the Christian path—conversion—is also the path of psychological maturity. The experience of faith, hope, and Christian charity, and the gradual activity of the Spirit also contribute to the maturity of the human faculties, without substituting for the autonomy of the psyche.”

Spirituality is a response to God which matures its subject and assists in one’s overall growth and development. This developmental process constantly draws one nearer to God,


53 Ibid.
making the person more grateful and more emotionally bound to God as the spirituality grows deeper. It is a recognition of God’s love, which evokes an emotional response from the recipient of this love. Mitchell turns to Paul’s letter to the Corinthians as an example of this love, “raising a hauntingly recurrent, but hardly popular theme: unconditional acceptance of all God’s children, family, friends, women: love with no strings attached.”

Galilea notes, “All spirituality springs from this fundamental fact of a God who loved us first. In our personal relationship, God the Father took the initiative: he loved us first. God sought us out. Our own conversion and Christian path, our own search for God in faith is due to the fact that God seeks us, wants to enter into communion with us, desires our growth, and wills that we be more than we are.”

The process of developing spiritually causes one to understand more of God, to relate more to God, and to desire to understand and relate more to God. In essence, “the path of spirituality is the process, concrete but never finished, by which we identify ourselves with God’s plan for creation.” This process acknowledges a natural sharing between God and humans that alters the resultant contact. It is relational at its core. Pedrito Maynard-Reid acknowledges this ebb and flow within the context of African American worship saying, “African-Americans who worship with their whole persons do not come to church only to


56 Ibid.
learn something but also to feel God’s Spirit, participate in communal sharing and involve themselves physically in the service.”\textsuperscript{57} This reciprocal responsibility and sense of God-given purpose are expressed by Mitchell in the statement, “God calls us to be prophets of the possible, in the possible roles which we are given. God does not ask us to walk through iron doors…There must, of course, be on our part the quiet determined struggle to gain the opening of more and more doors as time, life and the face of God provide.”\textsuperscript{58}

In Jesus the human element is added to the deity of God. This added dimension of experience and connection strengthens the emotional response. One can truly relate to the experience of Jesus and can weigh tangible life choices with the lived example and experience of Jesus. It is here that liberation spirituality comes to the fore. Jesus provides a model for experiencing liberation through the rejection of societal expectations, norms, and desires and for living liberation through identification with the dispossessed, outcasts, and rejects. These specific actions provide a basis for experiencing liberation spirituality as one liberated by Jesus’ acceptance and for living liberation spirituality by modeling Jesus’ acceptance.

In the person of Jesus Christ, the Christian God is shown to us in his definitive fullness and purity. “The grace of God has appeared, offering salvation to all…” (Titus 2:11). Jesus recapitulates all of the traces of the biblical God from Abraham to the prophets. Jesus makes God accessible and experiential to all persons; in Jesus, God takes on human qualities. The historical God becomes history; the God of the


\textsuperscript{58} Mitchell, “What Your Hands Find to Do,” np.
poor becomes poor; the God of justice becomes the victim of injustice; the God of the promise gives his life to fulfill it; and the God of hope gives us security forever (John 1:18).  

Mitchell expresses Jesus’ tangible connection with the experiences of the suffering as follows, “Jesus, after all, was an oppressed Jew—his people were considered at the very bottom of the Kingdom of this world… Jesus was not unaware that He was a member of an oppressed group; he had grown up under the iron heel of the Roman soldiers of occupation.” Of the journey to the cross, Mitchell adds, Jesus “says to them, ‘My soul is overwhelmed with sorrow, to the point of death…please stay here…stay awake and watch with me!’… He is overwhelmed with an unspeakable sorrow, and manifesting a kind of human vulnerability such as He has never let anybody see before… Jesus was fully human, and tested and tempted in all things, just like us.”

Galilea further states this premise as follows:

The originality and authenticity of Christian spirituality consists in this: that we follow a God who took upon himself our human condition, One who had a history like ours, who lived our experiences, who made choices, who devoted himself to a cause for which he suffered, who had successes, joys, and failures, for which he gave his life. That man, Jesus of Nazareth, like us in everything but sin, and in whom lived the fullness of God, is the only model for our discipleship.


60 Ella Mitchell, “A Lent Meditation” (sermon, Ebenezer Baptist Church, Atlanta, GA, April 1, 1987), Private Collection.

For this reason the starting point of our Christian spirituality is the encounter with the humanity of Jesus.\textsuperscript{62}

Born of this encounter is a gratitude and relationship that directs life. Knowing Jesus on this level transforms him into a tangible object of love and devotion. It awakens love in a way that can be easily understood, experienced, and returned. Receiving this love frees the person from the limits of insecurity and hate.

G. Personal Conversion Experience

As spirituality is internalized, it leads to a personal conversion or as Galilea notes, “In our surrender to Christ, his liberating life is given to us.”\textsuperscript{63} One is transformed, seeing oneself not through the narrow lens of humanity, but understanding a greater purpose and power that stems directly from God. Mitchell, in a sermon to a women’s group says, “we must free our potential and become what God intends for us—we must enjoy the promises of God—we must feel free to witness in whatever way—free from fear because we are all systems go with God and working on all cylinders.”\textsuperscript{64} This person no longer sees him or herself as one who is oppressed, but as one liberated by the presence of God. This person overcomes the life experiences, prejudices, and circumstances that have caused feelings and labels of oppression and instead recognizes the beauty and potential inherent in a life with God. For Galilea,

\textsuperscript{62} Galilea, \textit{The Way of Living Faith}, 29.

\textsuperscript{63} Ibid., 53-4.

“Every human person must be converted, must embrace and actualize the liberating grace within himself or herself. Original liberation is the path for following Jesus that is called spirituality.”

This, too, is a part of the lived example of Jesus. As Jesus overcame the labels associated with his background and actions, so the converted redefines him or herself through a personal experience of conversion. This conversion brings the subject into a deeper relationship with God and provides a basis for redefining one’s self-concept through this relationship.

“Christian conversion is the starting point for spirituality. It is the process of choosing Jesus and his Gospel. It is Christian because we are converted first to Christ and through him to justice, love, neighbors, the poor, and the Kingdom of God. Christian conversion is conversion to a God who is inseparable from the love of neighbor.”

This conversion is central according to Galilea. For Galilea, Christian conversion is the firm decision accompanied by appropriate means of placing us on the path of following Jesus. Conversion is always a break, a change, a change of mentality: we begin to be guided by the criteria of faith and the Gospel and not by the criteria of the world and the flesh, closed in on ourselves. Conversion is a change of practice and attitudes: we begin to act in imitation of Christ and not out of selfishness, idolatry, and passion. More profoundly, Christian conversion is a rebirth, according to the life of the Spirit, that clothes us anew in Christ.

Galilea also notes, “La conversion segun el Evangelio implica la justicia (santidad en sentido biblico), y esta justicia alcanza tambien las estructuras injustas de la sociedad

65 Galilea, The Way of Living Faith, 70.
66 Ibid., 90.
67 Ibid., 79.
latinoamericana, donde tambien ha cristalizado el pecado,” 68 (The conversion according to
the Gospel means justice (holiness in the biblical sense), and that justice reaches unjust
structures of society in Latin America, where sin has also crystallized [my translation]).

Once an internal conversion is completed, the conversion manifests through external
actions. Galilea indicates that “To be Christian, conversion must also be social. This means
that within conversion’s global scope, it must break with the sin and selfishness found in
each age and place. Thus a Christian cannot shy away from the moral teaching and
orientation of the Church.” 69 Further, “conversion to the Christian God and conversion to
one’s neighbor are one and the same thing (Luke 3:10).” 70 Through the power of conversion,
the individual improves his or her self-concept and all of society. It is the liberation of self
that empowers and equips the person to contribute to the liberation of others and also
compels them to do so. “Although in and of itself, a culture is not converted, men and women
within a culture are converted and they, in turn, transform their culture for the better, as long
as they are conscious of the cultural implications of Christian conversion.” 71

Galilea provides a reminder that “personal and private sins and injustices do exist,”
however, for Galilea “these are liberated by the grace of Christ, which leads to personal
conversion.” Galilea cautions that

68 Galilea, A los pobres se les anuncia el Evangelio?, 43.
69 Galilea, The Way of Living Faith, 90.
70 Ibid., 27.
71 Ibid., 91.
Original sin is not the center of the Christian experience. The central focus of Christian faith—which in turn influences the entire experience of history—is Jesus Christ and the redemption and liberation that he brought us. It is an elementary affirmation of faith that with his resurrection, Jesus liberated us from sin, once and for all. This liberation lives on in the risen Christ, who with his liberating grace “gives light to every man coming into the world” (John 1:1ff.). Christ’s spirit acts today in the roots of history, the human heart, and society, producing a dynamic of grace contrary to the dynamic of sin. We call this original liberation.72

Conversion does not occur in limited areas but in all things. This includes a person’s self-concept, personal actions toward others, and individual understanding of right and wrong, as well as moral and immoral. The converted accepts new responsibility for his or her role in the injustices of society and personal power to make a positive difference. He or she will “suprimir las causas y las condiciones de la pobreza y de la opresión, tomando el partido de los pobres en la lucha social. Eficacia en elegir, por amor y deseо de servicio, los medios más técnicamente conducentes para la transformación de la sociedad injusta,”73 (remove the causes and conditions of poverty and oppression, taking the side of the poor in the social struggle. Effectiveness in choosing, by love and desire for service, means conducive to the transformation of the unjust society [my translation]). Though this person recognizes systematic elements of need, the person does not fail to accept personal responsibility for making the difference that is possible through one life. “If Christian conversion is also a conversion of moral customs, these insufficient cultural norms need to be liberated and

72 Ibid., 67-9.
73 Galilea, A los pobres se les anuncia el Evangelio?, 45.
reconverted to the norms of the Gospel in all of their wholeness.”

Liberation, then, becomes a process that is both personal and communal. The individual is continuously converted and the community is likewise in a state of conversion or, as Galilea expresses, “learning” to be converted. Of personal conversion, Galilea notes there is an “ever-present demand that Christians be continually converted to the God of Jesus Christ.” In further explanation of the ongoing process of conversion Galilea says, “Peter was a Christian—but not completely…So monks are not Christians who ‘specialize’; they are those who, through their charismatic vocation, are learning to be Christians;” it is a process.

Galilea emphasizes and reemphasizes this important context of liberation. It is not lived as an individualized concept but can only be experienced within the context of community.

Another example of the enculturation of Christian ethics has to do with fraternity. Christian conversion must lead to making each neighbor a brother or sister—without regard to nationality, race, social class, or political ideology. But cultures create—each one in its own way—national, racial, class, sexual, and ideological prejudices that make Christian fraternity a caricature or something limited and sectarian. Racism or classism divides society because of a cultural mentality and not only due to a conscious option made out of ill will on the part of people (although this does indeed exist). In the same way, nationalism is a cultural fact and not a personal choice. Some people are able to overcome differences of class or race but continue the sin of ideological discrimination through political ideas, political parties, plans for society, and so on.

All of these divisions cannot be explained simply by a structural analysis of the economy that deals with classes of rich and poor. Ideological prejudices, racism,

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75 Ibid., 28.

76 Ibid., 34.
and machismo are found in all social classes. Even among oppressed people one can find racism and the exploitation of women.

To be converted to fraternity implies leaving aside the cultural roots of antifraternal prejudices in order to live a boundless love.77

H. Community Orientation in Spirituality

Though it begins as a personal, individual experience, liberation spirituality is lived as a communal experience. The acknowledgment of the gift of God is first juxtaposed with the limits of human experience. For those who connect with Jesus’ experience of suffering, this deprivation of comfort is often reflected by lack of physical possessions and communal acceptance. Thus, the initial call to love God in response to God’s unconditional love is seen in contrast to the conditions of society’s love and to accept all that God limitlessly gives is in contrast to the limits of possession offered by society. This is so much the case that the limits in possession may result in lack of basic necessity. This communal connection is in turn expanded to include not only personal experience of God’s love and human lack but to include an expression of God’s love to those who also experience human lack. Galilea states it in this way, “Christian spirituality requires the backing of the community; it is communitarian. It is communitarian because the diverse ecclesial communities—commensurate with the differing degrees of their participation—are the place and event for the experience of Church.”78 Mitchell acknowledges that the Black “Church has been easily

77 Ibid., 94-5.

78 Ibid., 42.
assumed to be a haven and support network for the poor, oppressed, and struggling. In every age since we first arrived, we have hovered together in mutual assistance and encouragement."  

Beyond the community orientation of liberating aspects of spirituality, Galilea notes the community orientation of spirituality as a whole. The individual is introduced to spirituality through the community in which life is lived. Within the Black Church tradition this community is one which improves the state of all of its related individuals. Alone, oppressed, and powerless, the community generates togetherness, freedom, power and ultimately strives for liberation. The participants enter into an environment with others who understand their concerns and trials and with God who also understands these trials, through Jesus, and hears their laments. Mitchell affirms Jesus’ understanding in the statement, “Jesus’ attitude of

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79 Here Mitchell references the arrival of enslaved Blacks to America. Her reference is to the informal “church,” which Albert Raboteau (African-American Religion) calls the “invisible institution,” that grew in slave communities as a means of personal fulfillment and social protest. Through the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel, founded in 1701, the Church of England was instrumental in promoting Christianity among slaves and sent missionaries to the United States in 1702. Though slaves heard the same words as free Christians, they interpreted a very different message from the Christian gospel. Slaves accepted Christianity with the promise of a merciful God who saved the Israelites from the Egyptian slavery and would therefore save the Africans from the American slavery. In writings like those of Gustavas Vassa, born Olaudah Equiano (c.1745-1797), a prominent African whose autobiography helped influence the British government to abolish slavery through the Slave Trade Act of 1807, God is seen as a merciful God who helps people to endure suffering. As slaves embraced this message, they found hypocrisy in the practice of free Christians. This belief formed the foundation for the formation of the Black Church. The sentiments of former slave Josephine Howard explain the dilemma many slaves felt as they attempted to reconcile the teachings of Christianity with the acts of their Christian enslavers, “Dey allus done tell us it am wrong to lie and steal, but why did de white foks steal my mammy and her mammy?...somewhere over in Africy…and day locks dem in a black hole…Dat de sinfulelles’ stealin’ dey is.” Albert Raboteau, African-American Religion (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 60.

quiescence was understood better by our slave ancestors than by anybody else because they knew what it was to endure heartless abuse and keep one’s dignity, while not saying a mumbling word.”

Galilea notes, “Y así en cada valor cristiano, que descubre en la nueva sociedad, el creyente debe aprender a desarrollar nuevas actitudes, una nueva espiritualidad, una nueva mistica del Evangelio que le permitan vivir y crecer en su fe en un contexto social asombrosamente Nuevo,” (And so in every Christian value, one discovers in the new society, believing he must learn to develop new attitudes, a new spirituality, a new mysticism of the Gospel that can live and grow in their faith in a new amazingly social context [my translation]).

The oppressed of whom Mitchell speaks agree that a physical sense of liberation awaits them and create a community that can respond to one another’s needs. They assert their own authority within this group environment, creating an alternate reality that is liberating. Galilea asserts that this is “una conversion constante, pero esta conversion no sera solo algo personal, sino tambien un llamado y una promesa a la sociedad injusta en que vive,” (a constant conversion, but this conversion is not only personal, but also a call and promise to an unjust society in which they live [my translation]). It is an environment that is often not sanctioned by the power structure or the oppressor. Congregating is an act that affirms liberation as it is often an act of rebellion and an assertion of independence, further instilling

82 Galilea, A los pobres se les anuncia el Evangelio?, 40.
83 Ibid., 39.
a sense of powerfulness in response to the powerlessness demonstrated through society. For Maynard-Reid in the 1800s, “In these secret places, slaves took great risks to express their faith in traditional African ways.”84 Daniel Goleman, who has helped popularize discussion on emotional intelligence, is quoted by Maynard-Reid, indicating that “the single most important factor in maximizing the excellence of a group’s product was the degree to which the members were able to create a state of internal harmony.”85

The “internal harmony” to which Goleman refers is generated by the shared emotional response designed to evoke the desired response from God by people who identify with the “poor” in the life of Jesus. The people have already agreed that God is all-powerful and that praise is due to God. “The community channels the basic sources of spirituality to believers: the presence of the spirit of Christ among them (‘Where two or three are gathered in my name, I will be there among them’ [Matt. 18:19]), the word and sacramentality of the Church, and the experience of fraternal love. The community is a spiritual experience because it is the experience of fraternity, love, and solidarity.”86 It is this same community that shares the experience of oppression and the quest for liberation.

Galilea takes the concept of fraternity a step further noting “Esta reconciliacion fraternal de adversarios y grupos sera la prueba de que la resurreccion liberadora fue eficaz, al crear


85 “This cultural worldview of necessity is carried over into worship. Worship therefore is a community happening in which kinship and mutual interdependence are affirmed” (Maynard-Reid. Diverse Worship: African-American, Caribbean & Hispanic Perspectives, 61).

86 Galilea, The Way of Living Faith, 42.
una comunion fraternal,” (This fraternal reconciliation of adversaries and groups will be proof that the resurrection was effectively liberating, to create a fraternal communion [my translation]). Fraternity is not limited to those who are within the community; it is shared with those beyond the community. This includes sharing it with the oppressor. Just as Jesus reached beyond his Jewish community to embrace humanity and then still welcomed those he scolded within the Jewish community, those who are converted are called to share God’s love freely and unconditionally. This is an ultimate step in entering into fraternity with all people. This makes it truly inclusive regardless of person—for it not only includes those who have been wronged and are therefore justified by a sense of righteousness, it includes those who do wrong and could rightly be condemned. For Mitchell, “The very mention of the love of enemies seems such a far-fetched ideal among most Christians. But the apostle Paul, himself, the author of this epistle [1 Corinthians], shows serious signs of sticking in this department…‘You have heard love your friends, hate your enemies. But now I tell you: love your enemies and pray for those who mistreat you…’ As far out as this may sound, the Gospel accounts are loaded with examples of unconditional love in the ministry of Jesus.” This is the harmony to which the community strives.

Within the slave culture, songs which have become known as “spirituals” often voiced this struggle and developed an internal language for the communication of hope and the

87 Galilea, A los pobres se les anuncia el Evangelio?, 41.

88 Mitchell, “The Tie that Binds—No Strings Attached.”
belief in God’s justice. Spirituals became an opportunity for slaves “to release their repressed emotions and anxieties and simultaneously experience the exhilaration of being creative under circumstances of unbelievable stress.” Voicing personal trials, like “I’ve Been ‘Buked and I’ve Been Scorned,” “Sometimes I Feel like a Motherless Child,” and “Nobody Knows the Trouble I’ve Seen,” spirituals were not only designed to remember the pain and acknowledge God’s power, but to emotionally charge the environment and provide an emotional release. In this release was often an inherent forgiveness of the oppressor for the emphasis was not on revolution but simply on justice. Mitchell notes one such spiritual saying, “It was a song of social PROTEST when we sang, ‘I Gotta Shoe,..All God’s Chillun Got a Shoe, When I get to Heaven…” They were signifying at the master for not providing adequate shoes HERE and for not letting them shout down HERE. And guess whom they had in mind when they sang, ‘Everybody talking ‘bout heaven ain’t a’goin there.’”

The freedom of these spirituals and subsequent music is reflected in the worship of the Black Church. Townes notes that “northern Blacks did not mistake their limited freedom as equivalent to an absence of racism…Few Whites believed that Blacks had any other place in society than one of subservience.” Regardless of physical enslavement or freedom, C. Eric Lincoln and Lawrence Mamiya indicate that a shared experience of oppression existed to


bond African Americans across class and social status. They indicate that “What was really created was a black sacred cosmos that cut across denominational lines—largely Baptist and Methodist at first, but also Roman Catholic, Pentecostal, and others in later years. Wherever black people were gathered in significant enough numbers, the distinct quality of a shared Afro-Christian religious worldview and faith was felt.” They further share that this “qualitatively different cultural form of expressing Christianity is found in most black churches, regardless of denomination, to this day.”

Though Lincoln and Mamiya mostly exclude denominations with white control like the Presbyterian and Congregationalist churches, their focus includes traditions that supported reserved, intellectual worship and those that fostered ecstatic, emotion-filled experiences. Within the Black Church, those services which encourage emotional expression allocate time and space for this expression within the order of worship. While a printed bulletin may not denote the specific emotion that is sought or anticipated at each part of the service, the service is designed to allow spontaneous outbursts and expressions. The hymn of praise may continue beyond four stanzas and may transition naturally into another series of songs. An outburst of dancing, shouting, or other joyful expression is encouraged by the continuation of music in lieu of continuing with the next segment of service. This pause represents an acquiescence, an unspoken condoning of expressiveness and emotionality which voices the

acceptance of Jesus’ converting power. This occurs in community and is jointly experienced though each person must accept conversion individually.

Central to these services is the solidarity that results from the shared experience of the community. Galilea reflects the same condition noting, “Because of Christ, there is in the human condition a solidarity of grace and fraternity, and not only of sin. Original sin ceases to be the protagonist of history. All human persons are in solidarity with one another not only in evil and sin but more deeply in the liberating grace and spirit of Christ.”

I. An Expression of Fraternal Love

Following Jesus’ example at its most basic level means loving the community without condition. Jesus’ actions to liberate those around him stemmed from his unconditional love for them. Jesus’ love is perhaps the most remarkable component of his earthly ministry. For Sobrino, “The commandment of love, proclaimed and supremely illustrated by Jesus himself, and its demand to be ‘for’ others, dare not be understood merely as a wise axiom (‘do unto others as you would have them do unto you’), or in terms of ‘human success’ (as the path to self-achievement). The commandment of love must be interpreted as correspondence to what is most profound in the reality around us, by way of assisting it in becoming more.”

Sobrino echoes the sentiments of Gutiérrez, Paolo Freire, and other liberation theologians, noting that “in systematic terms, Jesus devoted himself to the humanizing of

human beings.”94 Jesus’ life recognized and affirmed the human value of all people, regardless of stereotypes, discrimination, mistakes or sins. Jesus “was the child of a poor home, son of a carpenter…Carpentry was an honorable profession, but it would not elevate one to the level of aristocracy of that day. [He was] from a humble or poor home; a carpenter. Then there was the whole question of the ‘Nazareth Syndrome.’—the stigmatism of growing up in Nazareth.—that insignificant little town.”95 It is this recognition that compels liberation spirituality toward conversion and transformation of disenfranchised people and unjust systems. Sobrino affirms this noting that “The spiritual life must be efficacious for the transformation of the secular reality around us, helping us steer that reality in the direction of the reign of God.”96

Sobrino further establishes that “With reference to liberation, then: liberation offers the human spirit a material, a channel, which supplies the matter upon which it is to act. At the same time, however, the human spirit must ‘inform’ liberation. It must give liberation a determinate direction, provide it with a particular content, and furnish it with certain values to further it—values that will be present in the liberation project.”97 Galilea echoes “but perhaps more to [the believer’s] surprise he discovers that his God is also a God of justice, a God concerned about the suffering and oppression of his people, a liberating God. ‘I have

96 Sobrino, Spirituality of Liberation: Toward Political Holiness, 2.
97 Ibid., 27.
witnessed the affliction of my people in Egypt and have heard their cry of complaint against their slave drivers, so I know well what they are suffering. Therefore I have come down to rescue them from the hands of the Egyptians…’ (Exod. 3:7-8). The Christian God is the liberator of the oppressed. He is the God of hope for the poor.”

Galilea is clear in the centrality of love for one another as an essential component of spirituality. He indicates, “The privileged ‘place’ in which spirituality is incarnated and becomes practice is in love toward our brothers and sisters and in preferential love for the poor and suffering” and “finding God hidden in the faces of our brothers and sisters is the ultimate experience of the incarnation of Christian spirituality.” On the topic of love Mitchell admonishes, “Don’t waste your time hurting others! Accentuate the positive—find some good in each of God’s children. Do you want them ruined or redeemed…And don’t be impatient—Love is Patient.” Further, Mitchell states, “Love praises God for your blessing. Love believes the best things about you, wants you to succeed—If you fall down, love rushes to pick you up…Jesus does just what Paul talks about: Priests do wrong—prays to forgive them. Believes best things—[saying] they don’t really know what they’re doing.”

Further expounding upon this, Galilea expresses the following:

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99 Ibid., 45-6.


101 Ibid., 4-5.
In this conversion, the prophets reveal to us another surprising aspect of the face of the God of the Bible, to be converted to him is to be converted to one’s neighbor. It is to practice charity, justice, and mercy. ‘Releasing those bound unjustly, untying the thongs of the yoke; setting free the oppressed and breaking every yoke; sharing your bread with the hungry, sheltering the oppressed and the homeless; clothing the naked when you see them, and not turning your back on your own…Then you shall call, and the Lord will answer…’ (Isa. 58:6-9).”

Love for others is the way to gain God’s attention and acceptance. It is an unlimited love that is not constrained by the limits of society. Raimundo Pannikar’s thoughts about the external manifestation of internal development coincide with those of Galilea, as Pannikar focuses specifically on the responsibility of those in monasticism and comments, “The monk has to break through the thick walls of this heart, the walls of callousness and selfishness in himself and around him; he has to break through mere temporality and inauthenticity in order to be on his way.” In this vein, Galilea agrees that

Love for our brothers and sisters—our neighbors—is a final indispensible source of Christian spirituality. All of the previously mentioned sources of the Spirit and Christian life would be deformed if they did not lead us to the practice of fraternal love. The decisive proof of our following of Jesus and that we are living according to the Spirit is that we love our neighbor (1 John 2:7-11; 4:7-16).

Moreover, love for our neighbor is a source of spiritual experience not only because it is the best verification that we are living according to Jesus’ spirit but,

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103 Raimundo Pannikar (1918-2010) was a Spanish Roman Catholic priest who specialized in interfaith dialogue. He was a visiting professor at Harvard Divinity School and professor of religious studies at the University of California at Santa Barbara. Pannikar published numerous works on Christian, Buddhist, and Hindu spirituality.

above all, because the neighbor is the privileged “place” for our encounter with and experience of God. Loving our neighbor, we love God, and our surrender and service to that neighbor out of a greater love are the basis for an authentic spiritual experience.

Because God is revealed as Father of all people and Jesus, identified with each one of our brothers and sisters (Matt. 25:40), my neighbor is for me a sacrament of God; in my neighbor’s face I encounter something of the face of Jesus. And because God is revealed preferentially as the God of the poor, and Jesus wanted to identify preferentially with them, the face of Jesus is especially encountered in the face of the poor.

Fraternal love and service to the poor as sources of Christian spirituality are of such importance that an adequate presentation would surpass the limits of this chapter. We will return to this subject in order to treat contemplation and commitment…fraternity…and the meaning of the poor…For now, it is enough to point out that love of neighbor is a special effect and source of Christian spirituality.\footnote{Galilea, The Way of Living Faith, 76-7.}

Galilea, in \textit{A los pobres se les anuncia el Evangelio?} further clarifies that this fraternity is not only for the poor, but for the enemy. It embraces the oppressed as well as the oppressor. When the oppressor is part of the fraternity, there is \textit{“prueba de que la resurrecccion liberadora fue eficaz,”}\footnote{Galilea, \textit{A los pobres se les anuncia el Evangelio?}, 40.} (proof that the resurrection was effectively liberating [my translation]).

Galilea demonstrates strongly that the separation of classes creates division among people that is not in line with the model of Christ. Galilea expounds further on this topic stating, “The fact that there are privileged and deprived social classes or groups—that the rich have the right to more and the poor, to less—goes against the Christian idea of justice.
But it happens that these situations have come to be a normal part of many cultures. By cultural custom, the rich do not feel themselves privileged and the poor do not feel victimized, because neither group achieves a true cultural conversion that makes them see the unjust elements of their own mentality.” Mitchell recognizes this reality in the statement, “There are women who believe that there are differences in the very basic equality of human beings! It’s like that miniscule minority of Blacks over a century ago who opposed the abolition of slavery. Like that appalling handful who thought they were better off as slaves these more numerous sisters seem to prefer their pretty prisons.” This internal liberation, for Galilea, is more central to liberation than the removal of unjust elements. The person must recognize the injustice and human value. When this occurs, liberation has occurred and conversion has happened. Without it, even the removal of injustice will not make the oppressed free. Once the conversion has occurred, questions will not simply arise concerning how to conduct outreach to the poor, questions will ask why there are “haves” and “have nots” and will move beyond how society has supported this system to a personal question of how I have supported this system for personal benefit.

A conversion to pure justice in individual relations is not enough. Justice is also sociocultural, and the dynamic of conversion must reach this area. Christians must not only question their personal life but also the culture in which they live, that leads them not to perceive collective injustices, such as differences in salaries and earnings, differences in neighborhoods (some receive all services while others do not), and contrasts between luxuries and necessities. Christian conversion is not enough if it

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does not perceive these injustices.”

To correct these injustices “Christian fraternity creates a privileged relationship of brotherhood with each individual or human group that is oppressed or in need, the poor and the ‘little ones’ of the Gospel (Matt. 25:40). The Christian and the Christian community must recognize a brother or sister in every person and act accordingly. Yet the poor and the ‘little ones’ are brothers and sisters in a very special way. That is to say that the presence of Jesus in the poor and the love for them have a primary place in Christian spirituality.” This is supported in that “the sacrifice that pleases God is to break the unjust chains, untie the yokes, free the oppressed, share bread with the hungry, house the homeless poor, clothe the naked…” That is, charity to the needy brother or sister, to the poor, has a religious value for God.”

Galilea’s emphasis on love cannot be understated. For Galilea “learning to love is the great, always unfinished task of Christian spirituality.” Of Jesus, Galilea notes, “His death in rejection and abandonment was the final rubric of his identification with the poor. By his life, Jesus preceded his disciples in the preferential option for the poor.” Mitchell recognizes Jesus’ identification with the poor in the example of the Last Supper, noting that

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109 Ibid., 119.
110 Ibid., 126.
111 Ibid., 120.
112 Ibid., 128.
“The supper has ended. Suddenly Jesus gets up and takes off his tunic and wraps a long towel around his waist. Then he pours some water into a basin and begins to wash the disciples grimy feet, and to dry them with the towel about his waist. He is acting as a slave would have acted on a more open and sociable occasion,” and he does it willingly.113

“If commitment to the poor places us on the path of salvation, its gospel motivations place us on the path of holiness.”114 For Galilea, solidarity with the oppressed is central to the purpose of the church and central to the call to follow Jesus. This does not only apply to believers and the suffering of believers should not be considered more significant than any other suffering. Of this Galilea asserts that “the Christian community does not suffer more or less than other communities, but by giving that suffering a sense of mission it is able to represent other communities before the Father and to redeem the suffering of the many, becoming a liberator.”115 Galilea says,

Furthermore, beginning above all with the teaching of St. Luke, the meaning of the poor for Jesus is not only significant for salvation or Christian spirituality. It is also significant for the evangelization or the mission of the Church. Jesus taught us that the authenticity and credibility of the Gospel depend on whether the community that evangelizes does or does not favor the poor in its preaching and in its works of human liberation. In other words, whatever the pastoral activity, whatever makes it authentic and credible to others is the option to first evangelize and liberate the poor. These are two inseparable dimensions in Jesus’ teaching and activity.116


115 Ibid., 118-9.

116 Ibid., 130.
For Galilea, recognition of this does not only benefit the poor and the community as a whole, it benefits the person who embraces the concern for the poor through personal conversion and liberation. The liberating process begins internally, extends to others and, in doing so, continues the internal process of liberation, conversion and growth.

The Christian experience of commitment to one’s neighbor, particularly the poor, begins to form part of the very experience of God, and becomes sanctifying—it evangelizes us.

The poor evangelize us because service of them widens our experience of God, makes us more contemplative, and also makes our contemplation and prayer more concrete and incarnate through uniting the experience of Jesus with the experience of the poor. Involvement among the poor, even with its limits and shortcomings (one never is able to live like them or become one of them), opens a concrete way to practice detachment and voluntary poverty. The option for the poor demands a sharing in some way of their place, their instability, their lacks, and their simplicity of life.\(^\text{117}\)

Sobrino adds to this, stating that “Indeed, they claim, the practice of liberation has become the principal (if not the only) mediation of their personal experience of God. From the vantage of their immersion in that practice, they reread the scriptures. They reread them from cover to cover. There they find liberation to be the chief concern, and the manifestation both of God’s will for the oppressed and of the duty of believers. Achieving liberation of the oppressed is now seen to be incumbent upon believers. Liberation is now seen to be the

\(^{117}\text{Ibid., 139.}\)
central reality, the merger of the historical and the personal, the blending of present exigency and scriptural norm."\(^{118}\)

In consideration of Ella Mitchell and others who, like her, did not choose poverty, racial discrimination, gender bias, and other forms of oppression but embraced these realities as part of what empowers instead of limits their lives, Galilea’s words become even more poignant. It is not a manufactured state of following Jesus but a wholehearted embracing of Jesus’ meaning for their lives and the purpose which stems from this. Theologian Leonardo Boff further contends, “The poor are not simply the beneficiaries of liberation. By the mere fact that they exist, for believers they are the historical locus of God, the ‘place’ where God is found in history. In other words, liberation practice and [theological] theory are sustained by a spiritual experience of encounter with the Lord in the poor.”\(^{119}\)

Liberation is not possible without spirituality and spirituality as it develops naturally imbibes liberation. For Sobrino,

> In order to open liberation to its fullness—indeed, even to secure its socio-economic nucleus, or to give efficacy to the political struggle itself—spirit is indispensable…Liberation practice without spirit is generically good, but concretely threatened with degeneration, diminution, and sin. Positively stated: spirituality has need of the practice of liberation in order to have the proper channel and appropriate material for its evangelical and relevant self-realization in current history. Practice has need of spirit in order to maintain itself precisely as a liberation of the poor, while becoming, ever more creatively and powerfully, a liberation that is truly comprehensive.\(^{120}\)


\(^{120}\) Sobrino, *Spirituality of Liberation: Toward Political Holiness*, 29.
A spirituality of liberation is necessarily an internal experience that wholly redefines one’s being and an external experience that redefines the relation of the oppressed to society and to the oppressor. This spirituality embraces all of humanity, beginning with the self, enlarging the view of one’s own worth and power to make a difference. Subsequently, it embraces all others in humanity, enlarging their view of their stature to ensure it is level with that of self and all others. As this occurs, liberation spirituality, when lived, seeks to elevate the oppressed in their own minds, in the minds of the oppressor, and in the lived reality. One who experiences this conversion and lives its fruits, imbibes a liberation spirituality. This is the spirituality of Ella Mitchell, who was freed by God and daily sought to liberate others, as shall be discussed in the next chapter.
Chapter Three

Knowing Ella Mitchell: A Lived Liberation Spirituality

The primary source materials for a review of Ella Mitchell’s life within the context of liberation spirituality are Mitchell’s writings, sermons, and interviews. Though many of these materials are widely available, vast majorities are in unpublished manuscript form and have been analyzed for content that reflects central themes. Additional materials have been gathered from historical societies, academic institutions, and personal contacts with those connected to Mitchell. These form the primary materials for this analysis of Mitchell’s life and serve as examples of her liberation spirituality.

This section begins with a biographical narrative approach, by way of a literary analysis of Mitchell’s statements about her life and experience as one who identified with the dispossessed. Mitchell’s personal and spiritual growth is analyzed within the context of liberation spirituality, using central components of the discipline as identified by Segundo Galilea, its leading practitioner, and Jon Sobrino.

Mitchell’s experience will be explored by using three points of liberation spirituality provided from the work of Galilea, 1.) personal experience of Christ, 2.) faith in action, and 3.) call to conversion. The historic-social context of the African American civil rights struggle, which was simultaneous with and significant to Mitchell’s experience will frame the dissertation’s analysis. Additionally, some comparative analysis will occur between Mitchell and other nineteenth and twentieth century African American Christian women.
whose writing and action also reflect components of liberation spirituality, thereby offering further insight in the analysis of Mitchell.

A. Introduction

Mitchell is celebrated for over ninety years of life, the vast majority of which was lived in service to God and to others. At age eighty she acknowledges being called the “Mother of the Movement” as a “privilege and a blessing.” Mitchell has been described as possessing “nobility [that] transcends both aristocratic arrogance and class conceit. Rather it is derived from humble commitment to serving others, reminding us all of our better human potential.”

Ella Muriel Pearson Mitchell’s childhood is as important to her impact as her adult accomplishments. As a child, she learned that her father’s mother, Grandmother Pearson, was the daughter of a slave from the Frazier Plantation in Colleton County, South Carolina. When asked about her knowledge of significant family history, this is the woman whom she references. Her grandmother’s father was the master of the slave who gave birth to her. This and other memories of slavery were an embarrassment to Mitchell’s family and, as a rule, were not discussed. “You didn’t talk about those slave years,” Mitchell says. Of this,

1 Mitchell has been heralded by sources including the African-American Lectionary as the mother of the womanist preaching movement, which bore significant influence for African American women preachers in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. The African-American Lectionary.


Mitchell says “I regret that I did not know the importance of insisting that my three grandmas, two of them ex-slaves, give me the early family history before they departed.”⁵ These experiences fueled Mitchell’s personal journey toward liberation spirituality.

Because of the secrecy, Mitchell conducted considerable research to learn about her family, visiting ledgers in the historical society in Charleston, South Carolina, even though she no longer lived in this community. Through this process she discovered that her name was recorded as Eleanor though she was named for her godmother Ella McFall and the mother of actress Ruby Dee, Muriel, who requested that her mother’s next child carry her name.

Mitchell exhibited a concern for social welfare at an early age. She connected with the poor in ways that Galilea likens to Jesus and those who embody Jesus’ spirituality of liberation and in ways that would resonate with the social teaching of Reinhold Niebuhr years later as a student at Union Theological Seminary in New York. Mitchell expresses an awareness of the reality that she grew up five blocks from the former slave market in her community and expresses an inquisitiveness that guided her to an understanding of what this strange moniker fully meant. Even then, Mitchell asked the difficult questions that challenged people to care for others as God demands—questions she continued to ask

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⁵ Ella Mitchell, “My Roots” (unpublished manuscript, 2004), Private Collection, 1.
throughout her life.⁶ These questions drove Mitchell to serve others and to seek to fight injustice for many decades.

Though Mitchell was integrally involved in churches of several denominations, her growth in the Presbyterian Church which her father pastored likely deeply impacted her development. As one of the relatively small number of African Americans who was part of the white controlled Presbyterian Church rather than Methodist or Baptist churches, Mitchell would have been exposed to the struggles that were a natural byproduct of the church’s leadership and structure.

B. Background

Born on October 18, 1917, in Charleston, South Carolina, to Dr. Joseph R. Pearson (1875-1969) and Mrs. Jessie Lugenia Johnson Wright Pearson (1886-1976), Ella Pearson (Mitchell) had three sisters and a host of aunts. The presence of so many women in Mitchell’s family meant that she was often sheltered from traditional women’s roles because there were many people in the household to fulfill the role of cooking, in particular.

Mitchell’s father was educated at a mission school sponsored by the Presbyterian Church and his advanced education was supported by a Presbyterian minister.

Grandmother Pearson, Mitchell’s paternal grandmother Hannah Frazier Pearson had fourteen children and is recalled by Mitchell as a “very strong woman.” Though she is recorded as illiterate in the 1870 U.S. Census, Mitchell indicates that she “well remember(s)

⁶ Poussaint, interview, 4.
grandma Pearson reading” to her.7 Grandmother Pearson was married and lived at the Frazier Plantation in Colleton County, South Carolina. The stigma associated with her conception caused these details to be somewhat of a family mystery. Grandmother Pearson is said to have shared the identity of her father with only one of her older children though there was ongoing speculation about this possibility due to rumors and physical traits.

Mitchell recalls an oft repeated phrase within her family that served to remind each other that details like Grandmother Pearson’s father were never to be discussed, “little pitchers have big ears, don’t talk about it now.” Mitchell contrasts this historical stigma with current interest, noting “you didn’t talk about those slave years. There was so much embarrassment. They felt embarrassed. Now we feel it’s history and we need to know something about it.”8

What Mitchell recalls of some aspects of her maternal family is vague. Once again, the stigma of tradition limited Mitchell’s knowledge of her ancestry. Mitchell notes that her mother’s side of the family was “hush-hush,” and that there was shame in that “many of them did not know who their fathers were. You can always trace a mother but you can’t find a father sometimes, and that was true.”9

It is from this side of the family that Mitchell received two sets of grandparents. Her grandmother’s close friend was unable to have children and asked for Mitchell’s mother Jessie, while Mitchell’s grandmother was pregnant with what was to be her eleventh child.

8 Poussaint, interview, 3.
9 Ibid., 4.
Through this agreement, Mitchell’s mother was primarily raised by close friends of the family, affording Mitchell two sets of maternal grandparents. Both of Mitchell’s maternal grandfathers died before her birth, so she was primarily raised by a number of women. Among them were Mama Elizabeth Johnson (adoptive grandmother) and Mama Elizabeth Wright (maternal grandmother). From these two women, Mitchell “learned many of the hymns by rote, from their singing in church and on ‘wash days.’” Of them Mitchell notes, “Those old ladies could quote scripture seemingly for days. They had a verse to fit every problem or occasion. It was during those years that the specific concepts of a vocation in Church ministry were shaped.”

These concepts were heavily shaped by Mitchell’s experience in the Presbyterian Church. In the aftermath of the near slave revolt organized by Denmark Vesey in Charleston, South Carolina in 1822, the Black Church in South Carolina took shape in a way that ensured white oversight. Vesey was accused of connecting theology with social activism in a way that seemed “fanatical” to whites and generated fear. This court ruling supported the expansion of Reformed churches including the Presbyterian Church, which was popular among African Americans in Charleston and throughout South Carolina. Though subject to the oversight of whites, African Americans carved a religious tradition that was unique and separate from their white counterparts. This tradition led to a robust and diverse church landscape in

South Carolina and fed Mitchell’s faith and educational development. Mitchell rotated regularly between area churches of varying denominations throughout her childhood and was likely impacted by the racial realities of the Presbyterian Church in which her father was a pastor.

It was in her formative years that Mitchell demonstrated early inclinations toward searching and exploration rooted in both faith and liberation. As she recounts growing up approximately five blocks from a former slave market, this presence constantly reminded her of the injustices and inequities of the world. The presence of this reminder was an ongoing source of concern for Mitchell, both because of the past it symbolized and because of the lack of communal response to it in the present. Mitchell says, “Right there, in my growing years. I shudder to think, sometimes, why they were so seriously…removed from it. It was as if it is a blight on their characters, you know, and they weren’t the ones who were responsible at all. It was another generation ahead of them…I still don’t understand it, really.” Mitchell would continue to ask questions and challenge those around her to break free from the limits and stigmas of society throughout her life.

C. The Preaching Life

Mitchell was primarily raised in Olivet Presbyterian Church, where her father was the pastor, and provided musical support in churches of varying denominations. Though the Presbyterian denomination was a more popular choice among African Americans in a city like Charleston than in rural parts of the state, it was not the denominational choice for the

12 Poussaint, interview, 4.
vast majority of African American Christians. They often chose to connect with denominations that afforded them more independence and control, like the Methodist and Baptist traditions. In the post-Civil War era, the Presbyterian community in South Carolina was one of the strongest communities of African American Presbyterians in the U.S., a community that strongly emphasized education and self-discipline. This emphasis on education and self-discipline is evident throughout Mitchell’s life.

In Charleston, the Presbyterian community reflected a level of relative affluence as the church had proportionally more free African Americans and domestic workers than the general population in the 1840s, 1850s, and 1860s. This church, like the larger body of churches that filled the spiritual needs of African Americans during this period, developed a subculture that responded to the discrimination and conditions unique to their experience. In her dissertation, Mitchell explains that this relative improvement still exists within a system of overall deprivation. Mitchell notes, “Persons born under oppression must learn early to expect the worst and respond resourcefully. They are not in the literal state of siege which prevailed during slavery, but life is constantly threatened, and resources seem never to be adequate.”

Mitchell’s father, Joseph Pearson, connected with the Presbyterian Church through the support of a Presbyterian minister who helped ensure he was able to attend college. Ministers

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14 Ibid., 123-7.

of African American Presbyterian congregations, like Mitchell’s father, were strong advocates of formal education as a means of reculturation and advancement.\textsuperscript{16}

Her father pastored two churches in this area and Mitchell aided him in visiting the sick whenever she could. Of the sick, Mitchell explains, “I took them on as part of my responsibility too…and [I would] make dresses, and slips, especially, for some of the little girls.” Mitchell would ride on the handlebars of her father’s bicycle to accompany him on these visits. Her mother eventually made her a pillow on which to sit and a hat to shield her face as she went with her dad. Of this, Mitchell says, “I was happier going on the rounds with Papa than I ever was playing games or doing my homework. As I reflect now, I realize that it was then that ministry began to build its hold that would not let me go. The attraction was not to any well defined facet of ministry. I liked all of it, especially the people.”\textsuperscript{17}

At Olivet Church, a thirteen year old Mitchell assisted by playing the organ. From a young age, Mitchell would speak at the church and at youth programs. She recounts, “In the summers, the Presbyterian Church would host conferences at Haines College in Augusta, Georgia and Bethune-Cookman College in Daytona Beach. I used to give the vesper messages at some of these conferences.”\textsuperscript{18}

With this background, the church was always a part of Mitchell’s life. Mitchell’s involvement in the church went beyond her father’s pastorship. Mitchell explains, “I was


\textsuperscript{17} Mitchell, “My Roots,” 8.

\textsuperscript{18} Poussaint, interview, 12.
always in one church or another, so I didn’t just start getting interested in religious work…I
would play the piano for the Methodist church, I would sing in the Catholic church…I played
for an Episcopal church Sunday school and played for our church.” She eventually played
for four different church Sunday Schools before becoming the church service musician at her
father’s church. This for Mitchell was more than simple performance, she was “pouring out a
youthful and growing love for God and God’s work” and doing it regardless of
denomination.

Also in her childhood, Mitchell was called upon by her grandmother to “locate and read
many of the Bible passages she [Grandmother Wright] had learned by rote earlier in life.”
Mitchell explains that this led her to memorize Bible passages and she recalls these
childhood moments when she reads scriptures and preaches as an adult. They formed an
early grounding for Mitchell in the word of God.

Despite extensive involvement in the church, Mitchell did not initially consider the
possibility of entering into ministry. Mitchell says, “There can be no denying that in my heart
I felt I was being summoned to ministry…but in the late 1930s there were huge barriers
against women in the pulpit. I knew of no religious body where women were preaching.

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19 Ibid., 11.

20 Ella Mitchell and Henry Mitchell, Together for Good: Lessons from Fifty-Five Years of Marriage
(Valley Forge: Judson, 2006), 18.

21 Ibid., 18.
Even my parents were divided on the subject.”22 Mitchell was interested in drama and in pursuing a college degree, as well as singing. All of this reflects the early models of women to whom she was exposed and the influence of her high school teachers, most of whom were graduates of Talladega College (Alabama) and two of whom were graduates of Fisk University (Tennessee), which had established a reputation for its music program.23 Though Mitchell could see models of women who had achieved in each of these areas, there was no model of a female preacher in her life.

Mitchell was fifteen years old when she delivered her first sermon. A great source of distress for her was that her mother did not support the idea of women preachers though Mitchell’s father was very supportive. This, she later notes, is a significant reason for the delay in seeking ordination until she was in her sixties. This delay reflects the process of liberation that Mitchell continued throughout her life. Of this topic, Mitchell says, “Papa was encouraging and wanted me to preach, but Mama spoke very little about it. I could tell she was not too happy. Mama did not love the idea of women preaching. All of the women she knew in religion were missionaries. She felt that I should have been a missionary and not a preacher. She was hesitant even when I spoke about going to seminary, but she would always

22 Ibid., 20.

come to hear me whenever I would speak. Papa was affirming. He was supportive mentally, spiritually and financially.”

After speaking at summer church conferences, Mitchell’s role in the church grew. After college, she became a Sunday School missionary, appointed in 1940 by the Board of National Missions of the Presbyterian Church to assist in establishing Sunday Schools across parts of South Carolina and conducting parish work. This assignment began in Sumter, SC, later expanding to Mayesville. It was this experience that initially connected Mitchell with renowned educator Mary McLeod Bethune. Of Bethune, Mitchell says, “We used to sit on the porch and she gave me a lot of counsel and good advice.” For Mitchell, Bethune was a “forthright person, she just comes right out and asks you the things or tells you the things that she wants you to know. I…sought her out as a mentor.”

Bethune demonstrates a commitment to liberating the oppressed that is evident throughout Mitchell’s life and thought. Bethune’s emphasis reflects a commitment to fight through existing systems to secure improvements. Bethune stresses the need for education, to


25 Mary McLeod Bethune (1875-1955) was an educator and civil rights leader who founded a school that grew to become Bethune-Cookman University in Daytona Beach, Florida. The daughter of former slaves, Bethune became an advisor to United States President Franklin D. Roosevelt. Bethune was instrumental in forming what became known as the Black Cabinet, a coalition of African American leaders who served as an advisory board to the President. She was referred to by Eleanor Roosevelt as her closest friend in their age category. Bethune was the regional and state leader for several social justice organizations and in 1935 founded the National Council of Negro Women, an organization which connected almost thirty organizations in social justice activity for women. In 1938 Bethune became the first African American female to head a federal agency, as the Director of the Division of Negro Affairs for the National Youth Administration.

26 Mitchell, interview.

27 Poussaint, interview, 6.
influence public opinion, and to “win [the] understanding and support” of other racial groups to achieve “creative progress” instead of “riots and conflicts, or…hoodlumism.” For Bethune, it was key to “place the burden of responsibility upon him who denies it.” She indicates, “If we simply accept and acquiesce in the face of discrimination, we accept the responsibility ourselves and allow those responsible to salve their conscience by believing that they have our acceptance and concurrence. We should, therefore, protest openly everything in the newspapers, on the radio, in the movies, that smacks of discrimination or slander. We must take the seat that our ticket calls for and place upon the proprietor the responsibility of denying it to us.” 28 This is a resolve that Mitchell carried forward as she held her seat on a bus, staged a protest in a department store, and followed the call of God into ordained ministry.

Bethune, in her efforts to secure funding for the school she developed, demonstrated that her concern for education was greater than an affiliation with a denomination. Trained and initially funded by the Presbyterian Church, she turned to the Catholic, Episcopal and Methodist churches for funding before establishing a relationship with the Methodists.29

In a Chicago Defender article about the Brown vs. Board of Education decision Bethune is quoted saying, “I am proud of the quiet, modest way in which my people received the


news of this decision. And why not? We have God and justice on our side." Mitchell
reflects this sense of quiet, resolute rebellion which is summed up in an ethic of liberation.

The liberation ethic of Bethune is as evident as her commitment to ecumenical and
interfaith cooperation and respect. This, too, is reflected in Mitchell’s ability to move
between denominational traditions. This is apparent through a 1950 address at the University
of Miami in which Bethune is quoted as saying, “Our churches, our synagogues, yes—and
our mosques—all of our places of worship and meditation; all of the myriads of words of
religious leaders that find their way over the air waves—all must point the way, with courage
and clarity and humility.” She further noted that all who were religious “should be fired with
a divine discontent” due to the injustices of the world. As a mentor, Bethune laid the
foundation for Mitchell’s liberation spirituality, a foundation which was shored by the
influence of Nicholson in her undergraduate career and Niebuhr as a graduate student.

These experiences also led Mitchell to begin considering enrolling in seminary as she
“sensed that [she] needed more than [she] had to give…and realized [she] had to go to
seminary.” Mitchell’s drive for further education is in alignment with the educational
emphasis of the Presbyterian Church.

Bethune awakened the activist in Mitchell and began in Mitchell a concrete journey
toward liberation of self and others. Mitchell says of Bethune, she “got me off, off that quiet,

31 Ibid., 162.
irresponsible kind of attitude I had.” Mitchell was attracted to Bethune as a mentor because of “the fact that she was always in front of the gun, somewhere in Washington, and I read about her…before she went to teaching or anything like that. But she was always in somebody’s face, in Congress, and I just thought, oh, she’s a great guy, I just want to be around her! And so I sought out whatever time I could.”33 Bethune’s model allowed Mitchell to witness and glean from a woman who challenged the oppression of women and others; a woman who was outspoken and bold. For Mitchell, Bethune represented a woman who had not allowed society’s rules to define her “place” or to limit her purpose in life. This inspired Mitchell to broaden her dreams and embrace liberation through God.

A pivotal moment occurred when Mitchell recalled the words and mentorship of Bethune and was inspired to take action and remain seated on a segregated bus. Prior to her experience with Bethune, Mitchell says, “I was not going to make ‘any waves.’…where I would know that it was going to be a problem for myself or anybody else.” Though Mitchell describes herself as a “mischievous” child, she explains, “I kind a kept quiet, especially when it came to segregation. Knowing you don’t have these privileges and rights, and you just are restricted, and so you make the best of it. And I did. I think I did.”34

Bethune’s presence awakened in Mitchell new possibilities of what she could become and what she could stand against. It was at least some part of the conversion experience about which Galilea speaks. “For the first time, I saw there could be more to a woman’s call

33 Poussaint, interview, 6.

34 Ibid., 10-1.
than Sunday schools, church music, and meetings of the women’s society.” This empowering presence caused Mitchell to “dare to do all kinds of things like sitting on the bus where I wanted to sit on the bus in South Carolina, and having the driver tell me, ‘You can’t sit there,’ and I said the motto of our state is ‘While I live I breathe.’” When Mitchell finally stood up from her seat, she recounts, she would not move. She simply stood there in her place. Mitchell was saved from arrest in this incident because of the respect and influence her father held throughout the community. She never rode the bus again in South Carolina, walking wherever she needed to go.36

In her adult life, Mitchell continued to engage in protest repeatedly. Her stint with the bus was only the beginning. Mitchell describes an instance in Birmingham, when they “wouldn’t let us sit in the same section of the church with—auditorium—with Eleanor Roosevelt….I was among the leaders” of the protest. On another occasion, Mitchell describes an impromptu protest in a store where she sat down in an area for whites and refused to move. Perhaps the most dramatic instance was an occasion in which she was refused use of a rest room and threatened to urinate on the floor in the store. Of this Mitchell says, “I never raised my voice. I never acted as if I were angry.”37 Mitchell’s way of protest was often mild and unassuming yet powerful and poignant. Her husband Henry Mitchell indicates, “Ella, in all

36 Poussaint, interview, 7.
37 Ibid., 22.
her sweetness, could be rough and tumble on civil rights.”38 Indeed, they demonstrated kindred spirits in areas of protest. Ultimately, Henry’s encouragement and support became crucial to her acceptance of call and pursuit of ministry.

D. Family and the Segregated South

Mitchell’s childhood and young adulthood were marked by the dehumanizing realities of segregation. Mitchell recalls with disdain that her father, a pastor, community leader, and educated man, was not allowed to vote. The family could not afford the poll tax that was required of them. When Mitchell began to vote at age twenty-one, her father still had not overcome the disappointments and challenges of their history to muster the wherewithal to vote for himself. He began to vote in his eighties though Mitchell’s mother, a former school teacher educated at the Avery Institute, a leading school for African Americans, never voted.

Mitchell’s father, born in 1875, had thirteen siblings and was the first in their family to attend college, graduating from Biddle College, now Johnson C. Smith University, Charlotte, North Carolina. It was 1903 when he finished seminary. In addition to pastoring, he also became a teacher. Of her father Mitchell says, “My father was, in the times that I knew him, was a minister of a church…Papa was a preacher and I always felt that that is a very significant thing to say. But he taught school also.”39 Mitchell was proud of her father’s legacy. He was a transformational figure in her life.


39 Poussaint, interview, 4.
Mitchell’s mother also taught, at Wallingford Presbyterian Day School, and worked in their community. Mitchell calls her mother a “very community-minded person” working in the boys club. Mitchell grew up with the wisdom of three sets of grandparents because her mother had both a set of natural and surrogate parents. As noted above, a couple that could not have children helped raise Mitchell’s mother, creating this unique blended family.

Mitchell’s childhood reflected an uncommon picture of integration in early twentieth century South Carolina. Mitchell calls it a “strange harmony between races”\textsuperscript{40} but it was a harmony that placed her into direct contact with oppression and mistreatment. Because the church her father pastored was predominately white (until his appointment), the family moved into a predominately white neighborhood, building a parsonage behind the church at 93 Beaufain Street, Charleston, South Carolina, a few years after his appointment and before Mitchell’s birth. The nearest African American families were several blocks away and were generally servants of the family’s neighbors. So Mitchell’s childhood friends reflected ethnic and racial diversity until she was twelve or thirteen, when they were barred from communicating with her. “I can remember when the Schirmers (a nearby Jewish family) came over to tell us that, tell [my parents] that, and ‘We’re not going to have anything more to do with you now,’ and everything was screened off so that we didn’t see into their porches anymore.” Of another neighborhood family Mitchell recounts, “And the Jantz residence, they had a high fence, and they laced that fence with white cloth so that you couldn’t see inside

\textsuperscript{40} Mitchell and Mitchell, \textit{Together for Good: Lessons from Fifty-Five Years of Marriage}, 7.
the fence. Yeah. And whenever they were having any affair, any kind, they would lace that fence in.”

As Mitchell processed this troubling reality of segregation and oppression through the sudden loss of childhood companions, her parents explained that “this was the way it was” in their culture and her father reminded her “all the time: You just got to be better than they are. You just got to be stronger than they are and you’ve got to achieve.” Mitchell’s childhood was uncommon in her time and culture.

As a part of Mitchell’s education, her parents sent her to a private school, the Avery Institute, which was established by the American Missionary Association as a leading school in South Carolina to provide African American school teachers for the region. Later in life, when the local newspaper published a notice about Mitchell’s graduation from Union Theological Seminary, the matriarch of the Breaux family on their corner began to inquire, “who was this Pearson girl that lived at 93 Beaufain Street.”

As an adult, Mitchell continued to live in a segregated culture. In 1943, when Mitchell made her way to California for church work by taking a road trip with two friends, one African American and the other white, they were constantly reminded of the oppressive nature of 1940s American culture toward African Americans. Repeatedly upon arrival at rest locations, they were challenged by the strain created by their interracial group. On the first

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41 Poussaint, interview, 9.
42 Ibid.
night, the trio slept in sleeping bags in a field in the Shenandoah Valley. In Little Rock, Arkansas, an African American family was terrified by the thought of a white house guest and, as such, paid for her to stay at the YWCA. In Tulsa, Oklahoma, they arrived at the home of one of their relatives. Mitchell and the other African American were not permitted on the front steps of the home and were not allowed inside. Their white friend’s uncle would not let them in and made arrangements for them to stay with his African American maid. During the course of this trip, the trio was often split up and sometimes slept in their car as they traveled to California from the Deep South. Mitchell recognized the dangers of taking this trip but boldly confronted the challenge expressing, “I didn’t dare face the fact that there was in me an adventurous and rebellious woman trying to be free.” Mitchell conducted this trip to serve as a counselor for the Lisle Fellowship in California, after which she fulfilled a similar role in Colorado. When this summer excursion was completed, Mitchell assumed her position with the Presbyterian congregation, the Church of the Master.

E. Seminary and Self

Mitchell entered Talladega College in 1935 with a four-year full tuition scholarship and through the influence of many of her high school teachers, who were Talladega alumni. She had prepared by sewing her college clothes along with five of her friends based on designs from the Sunday *New York Times* newspaper saying, “Twenty-twenty hindsight tells me now

that we were poor and responding to need, but at the time we waxed creative and actually enjoyed our sewing together.\(^{45}\)

As a student at Talladega College, in Talladega, Alabama, Mitchell realized that she wanted to pursue religion as a major. The fact that Talladega did not offer religion as an area of study did not quell or discourage her. As a result of Mitchell’s repeated requests and prodding, and in line with trends reflected by universities across the nation that were adding courses, lectureships, majors, and departments in religion, Talladega launched a degree program in religion during Mitchell’s final year of study. Across the country universities were increasingly establishing religion departments and majors for students, a trend that had been led by Presbyterian and Congregationalist denominations. By 1930, a majority of denominational and private colleges had established departments of religion and, among those that did not, they typically had appointed faculty in this discipline.\(^{46}\) Mitchell transferred her major to religion, studying as the sole student under Joseph W. Nicholson, coauthor of the 1933 publication *The Negro’s Church* with Benjamin E. Mays. Nicholson’s and Mays’ research and publication helped to articulate the meaning of the church in African American 1930s culture and his views surely influenced Mitchell’s understanding of the religious experience of African Americans and what DuBois calls the Black Church.


Mitchell became the program’s first graduate in 1939 with a bachelor’s degree. Mitchell describes an excitement and freedom that resulted from her new major area of study. This was likely as much a result of her feeling that she had responded to the call that God had spoken to her as to the depth of instruction she received from Nicholson. Both combined to generate a meaning that fueled a belief that the faith community, and Mitchell as a believer, could have a profound impact on society and culture.

As a result of this excitement, Mitchell led worship at Talladega’s chapel services, sewed the pulpit coverings and Bible markers for the liturgical year and “thoroughly enjoyed daily chapel services” as her excitement grew. Mitchell credits a three day bout with blindness during her freshman year at Talladega for her taking her sense of calling seriously and ultimately influencing the college to establish a major in religion. Mitchell had been earning extra funds by sewing for students and faculty and notes that one weekend she could no longer see. She and her roommate had to wait until morning for assistance as there was no evening phone service. Mitchell was eventually taken to a physician in Washington, DC by her father for an operation before returning to school.

As a junior at Talladega, Mitchell became the president of the Young Women’s Christian Association. She travelled and sang with a quartet but indicates that her primary interest was in singing with the university’s gospel choir. It was in her junior year as a student that Mitchell began what she considered to be one of her most meaningful experiences in

ministry—she began conducting a Bible study in an impoverished area known as the Furnace Quarters. This community consisted of twenty families living in shacks and was known for dangerous conditions. Though Mitchell invited classmates to journey with her to assist the families in this community, they always declined and Mitchell went to this area alone, against the advice of friends and in the midst of opposition from local police. Mitchell’s weekly journey to this community to teach the Bible and provide needed supplies for them and their children is reminiscent of the lonely, sometimes dangerous ministry modeled by Jesus.

In the two years between undergraduate graduation and seminary enrollment, Mitchell served as a missionary for the Presbytery in Sumter County, South Carolina. In this capacity, Mitchell worked to establish Sunday schools at churches throughout the county. Mitchell indicates, “It was like being Minister of Christian Education for six small rural congregations.”

After completing the undergraduate degree in religion in 1939 and this outreach through the Presbyterian Church in 1940 and 1941, Mitchell decided to attend seminary because, she indicates, “I wanted to be a religious educator but did not know enough about the Bible.” Further, her “commitment was firm,” as she says she “would serve in some capacity in the


49 Ibid., 23.

50 Mitchell, interview.
church, in spite of the barriers to women. Again I was launching into the unknown,"51 largely inspired by Bethune’s model and influence. After a near stint with Yale Divinity School, Mitchell was accepted by and attended Union Theological Seminary, New York, New York during a time of rapid change for the university.52

To achieve this goal, Mitchell sold the 1932 Dodge automobile she had acquired to do the parish and Sunday School work in South Carolina and used this money to travel to what she called the big city, New York. Though admitted to the Yale Divinity School, Mitchell was not allowed to attend because the university determined there were already enough African American students in their program. When concerns were expressed about their ability to find placements for her, her acceptance was rescinded. Mitchell does not discuss how Yale was originally selected, though its connection to the Congregationalist tradition may have influenced her decision. Mitchell was referred to Union Theological Seminary by Yale once it was clear that this option was not viable.

Transitioning from rural roots to New York was daunting, but it was yet another challenge Mitchell was willing to face. Mitchell also had a handful of aunts and uncles who had migrated to New York and her godmother Ms. Wallace also lived there with her family. These provided support to Mitchell while she lived in New York.

51 Mitchell and Mitchell, Together for Good: Lessons from Fifty-Five Years of Marriage, 22.

52 Faced with the changing tide of American life, particularly in the face of World War II, Union responded to the need to provide “training for active Christian service,” according to Chicago pastor and Alumni Council representative Charles W. Gilkey. William Sloane Coffin took the reins to address this need at a critical moment in Union’s history and was the seminary’s president when Mitchell arrived in 1941. Union is credited with fostering the revival of Protestant theology through the scholarship of its faculty in the 1930s and 1940s.
At Union, Mitchell was thrust into a growing debate and transition in the field of religious education—an experience which surely secured her place as a respected instructor of religious education in later years. The growth in religious education began as grade schools transitioned away from religious education, private schools in Congregationalist and Episcopalian traditions adopted this mantle and Sunday Schools began to grow. This transition fueled the development of religious education in the 1910s and 1920s as seminaries launched lectureships and departments in religious education.

Union was uniquely positioned to respond to the growing emphasis on Christian Education through its close relationship with Columbia Teacher’s College and focused on creating a body of data about how religion and morality are learned by children. Through this, Union established a reputation for preparing theologians who understood and had experience in religious education, a significant distinction as the two areas were typically viewed as separate. By the 1940s, Union remained at the forefront of religious education scholarship, as faculty H. Shelton Smith and Harrison Elliott debated the roles of God’s participation and the social sciences in religious education, respectively.53

Among the faculty appointments during Coffin’s tenure was that of Reinhold Niebuhr as Associate Professor of Christian Ethics in 1928, and later as the Dodge professor of Applied Christianity. The “new theology” taught by the systematic theologians Paul Tillich (also appointed during Coffin’s presidency) and Reinhold Niebuhr conflicted with the religious

education movement and further reflects the diversity of thought to which Mitchell was exposed at Union.

With the backdrop of a worsening national depression, Niebuhr’s views challenged reform efforts, criticized theological liberalism, and emerged as a “neo-orthodox theological movement in America.”54 His 1932 book, Moral Man and Immoral Society, offers insight into lectures and articles, which were popular across the U.S. and fueled a growing respect for Union. In these thoughts, Mitchell likely felt that, in many ways, she had discovered a kindred spirit and like-minded intellectual. She indicates that she spoke with Niebuhr beyond class requirements, suggesting that she was not repelled by his thoughts as some certainly were, but inspired and challenged through them.

Niebuhr was committed to a discussion of society’s problems and wrestled with their solutions. His prominence at Union alongside fellow ethicist colleague Harry Ward established an environment, supported by Coffin, which fostered intense debate and welcomed disagreement as part of the process of education and growth. The mid-1930s at Union, while further defined by difficult cutbacks due to economic constraints, was characterized by student protest, as students grew increasingly discontent with the poverty and distress evident in surrounding areas.

It is into this Union that Mitchell stepped, with her inclination toward social protest fed by Bethune and her understanding of African American religion developed by Nicholson, to

discover the social theory of Niebuhr. Though it is not entirely clear all that was discussed in Mitchell’s classes with Niebuhr and others, Niebuhr’s writings offer insight into his thought and teachings.

Niebuhr’s thoughts would challenge Mitchell’s sacrificial tendencies and commitment to service. They would challenge her commitment to liberation:

Though educators ever since the eighteenth century have given themselves to the fond illusion that justice through voluntary co-operation waited only upon a more universal or a more adequate educational enterprise, there is good reason to believe that the sentiments of benevolence and social goodwill will never be so pure or powerful, and the rational capacity to consider the rights and needs of others in fair competition with our own will never be so fully developed as to create the possibility for the anarchistic millennium which is the social utopia, either explicit or implicit, of all intellectual or religious moralists.\(^5^5\)

He indicates that “neither the prophets of Israel nor the social idealists of Egypt and Babylon, who protested against social injustice, could make their vision of a just society effective.”\(^5^6\) Mitchell was not so naïve as to believe that a utopia was attainable through her actions, however, her actions demonstrate a commitment to unconditional giving that contradicts Niebuhr’s struggle with the continued dominance of capitalism and poverty.

Niebuhr’s view that “self-interest and collective egoism” are dominant in all groups is in contrast to Mitchell’s understanding of the underpinnings of West African culture where she indicates that altruism and concern for others abounds.\(^5^7\) Despite the seeming futility of


\(^5^6\) Ibid., 13.

\(^5^7\) Ibid., xx.
liberation efforts, there are some who choose to believe and to press toward an ideal. Frantz Fanon in his work *The Wretched of the Earth* demonstrates through the existence of colonialism that has indentured people of color across the world that systems are designed to keep them subjugated and that revolution is mired with difficulty. Reinhold Niebuhr in his book *Moral Man and Immoral Society*, speaks for the ongoing frustration of a deepening national depression without adequate corporate response and refers to an idealism and fanaticism that also does not bode well for the possibilities of freedom and equality. Capitalism is pointed to as an evil influence that is never satisfied and seeks to gain more for an elite class at the expense of a working class. Yet, the religious idealism has inspired some to try, against the evidence of human history, to cling to examples of liberation in divine and human history and to believe in something more.

Niebuhr affirms the rationale for discrimination in society, indicating that “unity within an organised social group, or within a federation of such groups, is created by the ability of a dominant group to impose its will.” Niebuhr, however, acknowledges the impetus for social protest saying, “whenever a minority believes that it has some strategic advantage…and whenever it is sufficiently intent upon its ends, or desperate enough about its position in society, it refuses to accept the dictates of the majority.”

Certainly, Mitchell heard in these words those of a kindred spirit and thought back to the day she refused to move from her seat on the bus and to the department store protest when she, too, refused “to accept the dictates of the majority.”

58 Ibid., 4.
Niebuhr notes that “religious idealists” distinguish between the types of motives that result in social injustice. According to Niebuhr, they assume that selfishness is the cause rather than ignorance. These religious idealists are in contrast to rationalists who suggest that a growth of human intelligence could eliminate social injustice. From this, Niebuhr indicates that “education can no doubt solve many problems of society, and can increase the capacity of men to envisage the needs of their fellows and to live in harmonious and equitable relations with them.”

Fanon, applying examples of colonization in Algeria, Angola, the Congo, and Kenya in the 1950s and 1960s, indicates that education is used as a tool of the oppressor to reinforce the status quo among the oppressed, arguing that the colonial world makes the native culture appear flawed and evil. Mitchell’s doctoral dissertation presents an example of education gone awry, indicating that education without social context and caring relationships is useless in forming character and morality. This stands in contrast to Niebuhr’s statement that “growing rationality is a guarantee of man’s growing morality.”

Mitchell was certainly challenged by Niebuhr’s sentiments about the human conscience. Niebuhr indicates that “Most individuals lack the intellectual penetration to form independent judgments and therefore accept the moral opinions of their society. Even when they do form

59 Ibid., 23-5.
60 Frantz Fanon, The Wretched of the Earth (New York: Grove Press, 1963), 31.
61 Ibid., 33-4.
their own...there is no certainty that their sense...will be powerful enough to overcome the fear of social disapproval." Yet, Mitchell did just this.

Mitchell was likely affirmed in Niebuhr’s view of asceticism, indicating that it “remains a permanent characteristic of all religious life,” and is reflected in the absence of “self-seeking as a goal of life.” It is in this that Mitchell’s liberation spirituality can be seen as a modest form of asceticism, a denial of self in search of a life that pleases God. When Niebuhr states that society’s injustices cause the “religiously sensitised soul” to “despair of society,” thereby seeking “the perfection of God in either quietistic absorption or ascetic withdrawal from the world,” with a perfection that is “defined and experienced in purely individualistic terms,” Mitchell would demonstrate an ability to live in a less extreme case that embodied a balance of optimism and idealism with realism and frustration (despair). Niebuhr’s words were surely a source of caution and reflection as Niebuhr asserted that “religion draws the bow of life so taut that it either snaps the string (defeatism) or overshoots the mark (fanaticism and asceticism)...The greater the vitality of religion, the more it may either support or endanger morality. It may create moral sensitivity and destroy moral vigor by the force of the same vitality.”

Niebuhr further notes the emphasis on love as a religious ideal. Rationality, for Niebuhr, would place the needs of others in tandem with the needs of self. In contrast, he indicates that

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63 Ibid., 36.
64 Ibid., 56.
65 Ibid., 71.
the Christian ethic “insists that the needs of the neighbor shall be met, without a careful computation of relative needs.” He indicates that “religion absolutises the sentiment of benevolence and makes it the norm and ideal of the moral life.” Further, “love meets the needs of the neighbor...It is therefore ethically purer than the justice which is prompted by reason.”

This is reflected in Mitchell’s dangerous journeys to the Furnace Quarters while a student at Talladega and in her preaching throughout her adult life.

Niebuhr is clear that this affinity toward self-abnegation is a result of religious belief. He leans on the statement of William Ellery Channing in stating that fraternity and peace are only possible to the extent that one understands a relationship with God and God’s purpose.

Mitchell’s unwillingness to accept the limitations imposed on her by gender, race, social class, or other factors is akin to Niebuhr’s statement that “the religious imagination is as impatient with the compromises, relativities and imperfections of historic society as with the imperfections of individual life.” Even with this, Niebuhr makes repeated reference to untrue motives which can cause someone to appear altruistic though motivated by selfishness.

Niebuhr asserts that “every genuine passion for social justice will always contain a religious element within it. Religion will always leaven the idea of justice with the ideal of love.” Mitchell’s commitment to love is rooted in the understanding that all people are

66 Ibid., 57.
67 Ibid., 59.
68 Ibid., 60-1.
created in God’s image and worthy of love. Mitchell demonstrated the resultant unconditional love to people regardless of their social class, ethnicity, age, or gender. For Niebuhr, this ideal of love “will prevent the idea of justice, which is a politico-ethical ideal, from becoming a purely political one, with the ethical element washed out…there must always be a religious element in the hope of a just society.” This is necessary because, at its essence, it is impossible. It is only the religious person who will believe in the face of this impossibility. Mitchell would interpret this as faith, while Niebuhr calls it illusion “which may be partially realised by being resolutely believed. For what religion believes to be true is not wholly true but ought to be true; and may become true if its truth is not doubted.” 69 This is possible because in Christianity, “the cross is the symbol of love triumphant in its own integrity…The man on the cross turned defeat into victory and prophesied the day when love would be triumphant in the world.” This is only possible through God’s grace in an eschatological hope. 70

Mitchell surely connected with Niebuhr’s optimism as much as she rejected his pessimism. As Niebuhr expressed that “religion is always a citadel of hope, which is built on the edge of despair,” Mitchell certainly stirred in her seat and recalled conversations with Nicholson as she studied religion at Talladega, her own experiences of discrimination and injustice, and the unique upbringing she was afforded in her childhood as she rotated between churches playing piano and organ and singing in their choirs. For Niebuhr, it is the

69 Ibid., 80-1.
70 Ibid., 82.
“absolute,” God, which inspires people to move from complacency in their individual and communal realities. This was Mitchell’s reality, inspired by a deep belief in God which liberated her to challenge society and its norms.

Mitchell found a kindred spirit in the expression of racism, classicism, and social ill; the need for revolution and the struggle that it would entail. However, she would not agree that this position is universal. She would call it Western and contend that West African societies, where communal relationships prevailed, were indeed evidence of social cooperation beyond class and status. Idealistic, perhaps, but deeply rooted in her outlook and solutions as expressed in a dissertation she wrote many years later, in 1974.

Mitchell demonstrates that she was deeply interested in and influenced by her experience at Union, both in and beyond the classroom. She indicates that her work in the Union Library on weekday evenings caused her to be acquainted with many of her professors beyond the classroom. Mitchell appreciated opportunities to continue to explore new concepts with her professors as she notes, “In class sessions, but also at numerous other events, I enjoyed personal contact with my major professors, like Harrison Elliot, Sophia Fahs, Frank Herriott, and Mary Ely Lyman,” and that “sometimes I would drop in on Thursday nights when the Niebuhrs were at home to students.” Mitchell notes that this experience ultimately drew her to the field of Christian Education. She says, “I felt strongly drawn to Christian Education,

71 Ibid., 62.
not only because that was where women were accepted, but because of the support and the model of profs like these.”

In 1943, she became Union’s second black female graduate, with a Master of Arts degree in Religion. Notably, Mitchell also met her husband, Henry Mitchell, while matriculating at Union. They were two of the six African American students at the seminary at that time and two of only three to enter in 1941, though in different degree programs. The two met on an elevator in the administration building on her first day and became very good friends.

While in seminary, Mitchell began field work at St. James Presbyterian Church in Harlem, New York, where her first cousin Robert Pierre Johnson had been pastor and her aunt Henrietta Johnson Abrams was a member. After seminary, Mitchell became the youth minister at Church of the Master, Presbyterian, in New York. In this role, Mitchell led Sunday church school and evening programs for youth and worked with the church’s community center, nursery, and visitation ministry. In Mitchell’s words, this placed her “on the edge but not in to the fine art of preaching.” Mitchell indicates, “Very few churches were able to afford a Minister of Church Education so I was fortunate to work for Church of the Master. Women who did have these jobs were paid very low wages. I worked there while we lived in New York.”

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74 Mitchell, interview.
Even in seminary, Mitchell suffered from what she perceived as a lack of female role models in the area in which she felt called. As a youth, there were no role models of women in religion. As a young adult, Mitchell found models of women in religious education but none with which she connected in preaching. Among those she found while in seminary, Sophie Lyon-Fahs, the editor of *Parents* magazine who also wrote for the Riverside Church in New York, New York; Mary Lyman, a theologian at Union Theological Seminary; and Georgia Harkness, who taught at Garrett in Chicago, Illinois, none were African American. Mitchell indicates “there weren’t any African American role models anywhere.”

For a model of a female who was not only pursuing religious studies and writing but who was a preacher, Mitchell reached to England. Of role models Mitchell says, “There weren’t many. In fact I don’t remember any. I don’t, except white women, and there was one woman in England who was a preacher. My role models in seminary were all in religious education.” This dearth made Mitchell a trailblazer of sorts, and demonstrates her intimate connection with liberation spirituality as discussed herein. Mitchell is clear that her purpose was not to attempt to make a point but to live life as she felt she should. Hence, her spirituality was not a show, but an internal decision with external implications. Of her journey into ministry, Mitchell said, “I’m not trying to establish any new thing. I broke a lot of rules by going into ministry, I know that, and now they look back on me and say gee whiz,

75 Poussaint, interview, 15.

76 Ibid.
you were a pioneer. I didn’t feel I was a pioneer.” Mitchel instead saw herself as an
obedient servant of God, not limited by the prejudice of society.

Mitchell indicates that she did not begin to see herself as a preacher until her college
years. She connected more naturally with religious education. In speaking with one of her
professors about going into the ministry, Mitchell was advised to “always wear dark clothes,
don’t wear flowery things.” As a result, Mitchell “wore navy blue, dark green and black,
brown, all the time.” Mitchell adds, “and then he said another thing. When you get into a
position where you’re serving, wear a gold wedding band on your hand. That is to protect
you.” Mitchell admits, however, that she was never a flashy dresser. In fact, Mitchell
considered herself plain, like her mother. In Mitchell’s family, she was the largest of her
sisters and had the darkest complexion, both factors that fed a sense of insecurity. Mitchell’s
father playfully referred to her with the nickname “Ole Big” throughout his life.

In college, Mitchell was stretched beyond her comfort level in her appearance, being
forced to wear make-up as part of sorority initiation activities in 1938. This was one of the
only times Mitchell ever wore make-up. The sorority also led her to dress up and wear high
heeled shoes. This practice did not become a habit for Mitchell either. Later, Mitchell’s
husband would encourage her to invest more in her appearance and encourage her to affirm
her own beauty.

77 Ibid., 16.

78 Ibid., 12.
After becoming the second black female graduate of Union in 1943, with a Master of Arts degree, Mitchell earned a Doctor of Ministry degree from the, Claremont School of Theology, Claremont, California in 1974. Mitchell’s doctoral research depicted the strong connection between the Black Church and religious roots in West Africa, applying the West African model which emphasized nurture, self-worth, and life context for education as a response to what she referred to as the failure of the American Sunday School. In her dissertation, Mitchell notes the significance of a belief in justice and ethics, the security of unconditional love and unconditional acceptance, a belief in the providence of God, and a commitment to service, themes which are parallel to those of Galilea and consistent with Mitchell’s liberation spirituality.⁷⁹

F. Marriage and Adult Life

Ella Pearson met Henry Mitchell⁸⁰ in 1941 on her first day at Union Theological Seminary in New York. They shared an elevator ride that evolved into a life-long friendship. On the elevator, Ella confesses she was trying to determine who this man was, whether a student or member of university staff. Both were engaged to others throughout the majority

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⁸⁰ Dr. Henry Mitchell is an ordained minister in the American Baptist Church and the author of books including *Black Church Beginnings: The Long-Hidden Realities of the First Years*, *Black Preaching: The Recovery of a Powerful Art*, and co-authored works with his wife Ella Mitchell. Mitchell was born in Columbus, OH in 1919, and awarded a Bachelor of Arts degree at Lincoln University, the Bachelor of Divinity and Master of Divinity degrees at Union Theological Seminary, the Master of Arts in linguistics from California State University and the Doctor of Theology degree at Claremont School of Theology. He has served as the first Martin Luther King, Jr. Professor of Biblical Studies at Colgate Rochester Divinity School, professor of Pan African Studies at California State University, Dean and Professor of History and Homiletics at Virginia Union University, and Visiting Professor of Homiletics at Interdenominational Theological Center, in addition to numerous pastorates primarily in California.
of their years at Union, with plans to marry shortly after graduation. They developed a strong bond as very close friends that each likens to a big sister-little brother relationship. This relationship would cause them to travel to doctors appointments together, to go bowling, and for Ella, to strive to keep Henry awake in class. Both, however, realized shortly before graduation that their fiancés did not understand or fully embrace their passions for ministry, missions, and church. Henry’s engagement ended first, then Ella’s, eventually creating an opportunity for their friendship to grow into marriage. Ella’s fiancé quipped, “You might as well be married to the church,” to which she replied in the affirmative, ending their relationship.\footnote{Mitchell and Mitchell, \textit{Together for Good: Lessons from Fifty-Five Years of Marriage}, 11.} After prodding from his parents, Henry awakened to the God-given idea of marrying his good friend Ella Pearson.

The two intensified their conversations and time together as Henry secretly pondered the possibility of marriage. One night, to Ella’s total surprise, Henry wrapped his arms around her and “kissed her good night, on the lips.” A few weeks later, Ella called Henry and jokingly said, “Henry, let’s get married.” When he responded with an emphatic yes, asking her to set a date, she was shocked and it took Henry two months to convince her to take his proposal seriously. They were married one year after her graduation and a few days after his, when in 1944 she became Mrs. Ella Pearson Mitchell, at St. James Presbyterian Church.\footnote{Ibid., 36-7.}

The Mitchells’ initial friendship was based on their mutual love for God and the church. Through this marriage Henry and Ella loved and supported each other for over six decades.
With this support and encouragement, Ella was strengthened to fight and overcome the barriers that confronted her. As she delayed her pursuit of ordination, Ella confides that she “never had anything but encouragement from Henry. He was already a rebel against sexist barriers, and he insisted that I…accept every preaching invitation that came my way.”

Their initial move was to North Carolina, as Henry accepted a position as Dean of the Chapel and began teaching in the English Department at the North Carolina College for Negroes, now North Carolina Central University, in Durham, North Carolina. Their first child, Henry, IV, came in 1945 just before their move to California. This move placed the Mitchells in the midst of the period known as the “great migration,” characterized by the mass exodus of African Americans, primarily from southern states to the west, midwest, and north, in search of economic opportunity. The onset of World War II (1939-1945) fueled wartime industry which generated opportunities for employment in urban areas. This migration was in full swing in the 1940s and contributed greatly to the opportunity that was set for Mitchell when she and Henry moved to California in 1945.

Their second child Muriel was born in 1947. In 1948, Ella’s father was diagnosed with incurable cancer and given only a few months to live. He and Ella’s mother moved in with Ella and Henry as a result of his illness and he survived for another nineteen years. In the meantime, in 1949, Ella and Henry’s third child, Elizabeth, was born.

Throughout Ella’s life, the entire family was integrated into the work she and Henry performed. Each year, the family would vote on outreach projects, ranging from sending

83 Ibid., 20.
blankets to communities in Africa to sending donations to the Southern Christian Leadership Conference. In 1960, Ella was especially moved when, as she was presiding over a service, their ten year old daughter Elizabeth came down the aisle to confess her faith. In the church, each of the children was involved in the youth ministry and served actively.

In 1956 Ella once again embodied the model of Jesus and she and Henry became adoptive parents of their second son (fourth child), Kim. Kim had been abandoned in the wheat fields of Korea as an infant. When he came to the U.S. he was badly malnourished and distrusting. Ella worked hard to nurse him to health and gain his trust.

Both Ella and Henry had grown up in conditions that ensured they could live with limited resources. Ella could sew and even made coats for the family, one of which Henry owns to this day. Of this Ella says, “We struggled in the early years, both of us worked and we lived very frugally. We had three children and I would sew their clothing—even their coats, when things were tight.”84 Skilled at many crafts, Ella could also make purses and made virtually everything she wore. Both Ella and Henry attended to household repairs and both could repair household appliances and do wiring for their home. These skills were particularly coveted as Ella and Henry served in California and often lived with meager incomes and resources.

Mitchell’s experience as the “poor” or “dispossessed” as noted by Galilea was not limited to her humble upbringing, childhood racial tensions, or objection to her calling as a preacher. It was in 1949 that Mitchell’s sister-in-law Marty, who was deeply rooted in activism and

84 Mitchell, interview.
community service, was killed. Marty worked at a drug store that was robbed shortly after closing. Racial tensions were heightened through this crime because it was reported that both victims, Marty and the pharmacist, were white. Ella and Henry’s community rallied behind the African American man who committed these murders, to the dismay of Mitchell and her family. Even once the community learned that the media had reported errant information, their staunch support for the suspect did not wane, causing the Mitchell family to feel isolated and betrayed.

Further hardship hit when, in 1972, Ella and Henry’s son, Henry, Jr. (Hank) died of leukemia at age twenty-six. Mitchell recalls a visit with Hank while he was sick and her worry for both Hank and Henry, Sr., as the pain of seeing their son in this condition was almost unbearable. Henry became so sick over their son’s death that he had to be taken to the hospital for apparent heart troubles. The family recognizes his death as avoidable, connected with his exposure to radiation during atomic physics research he conducted during a national science internship. This loss was devastating to both Ella and Henry, and repeatedly caused physical sickness for her husband, Henry. Even in her final years Mitchell noted, “We still have not fully recovered from the loss” of our son.85

Mitchell’s life, though extremely blessed, has been acquainted with pain and hardship as well as suffering and loss. These experiences define and fuel her liberation experience, demonstrating her personal conversion and her intent to work for the good of others.

85 Ibid.
G. Christian Education and Higher Education

Mitchell began in California by teaching, ministering and providing worship music in a war-emergency temporary housing unit known as Codornices Village. After several years, she became an instructor for the Oakland-Berkeley Council of Churches Released Time Religious Education program. Mitchell taught fourth through sixth grade and developed a curriculum for this program, aiding other teachers in lesson planning as well. Mitchell also became a member of the Commission on Children’s Work for Northern California Baptists and returned to the familiar practice of playing piano and organ at various area churches. Mitchell taught and led curriculum development and teacher training at numerous schools. She acknowledges that opportunities were available to her because “there was a scarcity of people specializing in early childhood,” and she was “almost alone at [her] level of expertise.”

This occurred for Mitchell as religious education continued to rebound and grow in significance across the nation. In the 1920s the field attracted large numbers of women so that by the 1930s, seventy-four percent of those in religious education were female. Some of the support religious education ultimately received in theological circles has been attributed to its intellectual basis as “part of the common wisdom of educated people,” which

may have helped to balance the sometimes difficult theories discussed in theological education.\textsuperscript{88}

In 1951, after taking some time off for childbearing, Mitchell resumed her career as an adjunct professor in religious education at Berkeley Baptist Divinity School, now American Baptist Seminary, Berkeley, California. She continued in this position until 1959. Religion Dispatches online newsletter indicates, “Though she began her career in the 1940s directing choirs in the Bay area of California, her status as an educator cannot be reduced to her role as trailblazer for African American women…she, along with her partner Henry, also introduced the world to the aural vivacity and theological sophistication of the black spoken word tradition that extends back to the West African griot.”\textsuperscript{89} By the 1950s most schools of religious education had been joined with nearby seminaries due to financial constraints. This shift ensured that future religious education professionals received training similar to and alongside future theologians, an experience Mitchell had already received through her studies at Union.

The Mitchells’ journey in California occurred during the height of the Civil Rights Movement and as many African Americans migrated to California from mostly southern states. As African Americans moved to this area they fueled church growth, which largely occupied Henry’s time and generated new opportunities for both of them to serve.

\textsuperscript{88} Ibid., 576.

\textsuperscript{89} Walton, “Rev. Ella Pearson Mitchell.”
Mitchell developed a considerable reputation in Christian Education during their years in California. She introduced training on children’s curricula to churches in different parts of the state. In addition to teaching Christian Education at the Berkeley Baptist Divinity School (1951-59), from 1967-69, Mitchell taught Early Childhood Education at Compton College, Los Angeles, CA. From 1974-82, she taught at LaVerne University, LaVerne, CA. From 1959-73, Mitchell served on the Board of Educational Ministries of American Baptists, serving four years as the Board president. She also taught at a number of other colleges and universities, including early childhood education at Santa Monica City College in the 1960s and at Fresno State College at a critical juncture, as they outreached to low-income populations. Her Teacher Enrichment class size grew to three hundred, requiring the hiring of assistant instructors.

Mitchell recognized initial resistance to her presence in this field and the ways students would challenge her knowledge and authority. This quickly waned as Mitchell’s knowledge became evident and her reputation spread throughout the community. Mitchell became sought after as an instructor in this field and, even as she moved with Henry, Mitchell never experienced difficulty finding interest in her teaching skills.

Mitchell’s experience teaching education extended beyond the church to include teaching in the public school system. Mitchell was also the Minister of Church Education at Second Baptist Church, Los Angeles, CA, from 1980-82. She ended this position when she and Henry moved to Richmond, Virginia where he was Dean of the Proctor School of Theology and she was an associate professor of Christian Education and Director of the Nontraditional Hours Degree Program, both at Virginia Union University from 1982-86.
Mitchell was called upon to become the first female dean of the historic Sisters Chapel at Spelman College, Atlanta, GA, where she mentored a generation of African American women at one of the nation’s leading historically black colleges. Mitchell served in this position from 1986-88 before becoming a visiting professor of homiletics at the Interdenominational Theological Center, Atlanta, GA (1988-2001) and United Theological Seminary, Dayton, OH (1988-99).

H. Struggle in the Pulpit

Mitchell admits having thoughts about entering the ministry as early as age nine or ten. Of this she says, “I knew I couldn’t be a preacher; girls were not allowed.” It was many years later, after the death of Mitchell’s mother in 1976 that Mitchell began to revisit her call to ministry. She had been licensed into the ministry in 1943 by the Church of the Master Presbyterian Church in New York City, where she served as Minister of Education for two years, working with the church’s nursery, community center, visitation ministry, among other tasks. Mitchell was ordained in October, 1978 at Allen Temple Baptist Church, in Oakland, California. The agreement of Mitchell’s ordination council, which included a white female and white male and underscores the reach of Mitchell beyond African American religious tradition, is recorded on a certificate in which the pre-printed “he” was clearly replaced with the word “her” in two locations. Of this experience, Mitchell explains:

While we were in Los Angeles, we were members of Trinity Baptist Church. I went to the pastor to talk with him about my interest in ordained ministry. He did not respond to me at all. Henry and I were preaching all around at that time, so we were

90 Mitchell and Mitchell, Together for Good: Lessons from Fifty-Five Years of Marriage, 129.
not in attendance at our home church every week. The next Sunday that we were in attendance, I approached the Pastor with my request again. By this time, the deacons and members were asking when I would be ordained. He felt compelled to respond to me because of this…It had been scheduled for October and I thought it was all set. That summer (it was 1978) Henry and I went to a conference for Baptist ministers. A call came for Henry and I waited for him…The call was from our Pastor, Rev. Elliot Mason. He told Henry, ‘Tell Ella we cannot ordain her. The Holy Spirit told me not to.’…Rev. Alfred Smith, who was standing there when Henry told me…wasted no time. ‘I will ordain you!’ he said, right away. I was ordained that year with a white woman who had been serving in a church in San Francisco. She was a missionary and her pastor refused to ordain her as well. J. Alfred Smith ordained us both in a big service with guests who were local and national. Some people were very happy about my ordination and some were not. Some of them are still unhappy. There are some that won’t have me in their pulpits, even today. Henry was a member of a national Baptist church in Atlanta whose pastor would not have me anywhere near his pulpit. He left [after eighteen years] and joined Ebenezer Baptist Church where we are both members. I was invited to preach there on Sunday morning.91

Mitchell’s journey echoes the theme of struggle and liberation throughout. It has been noted that, beyond the challenges experienced personally due to the deaths of her first son and sister-in-law, Mitchell experienced challenges directly connected to her belief that she had been called to preach. This began with her own mother’s objection to her preaching. Mitchell notes that “mama did not love the idea of women preaching. All of the women she knew in religion were missionaries. She felt that I should have been a missionary and not a preacher.”92 Her mother’s perception was that it was commonly accepted that women served as missionaries. Mitchell credits this for her delay in seeking ordination, for thirty-five years after she was initially licensed to preach.

91 Mitchell, interview.

92 Ibid.
Despite these factors, Mitchell pressed toward ministry throughout her adult life. Recall that, as an undergraduate student at Talladega College, she urged and ultimately convinced the college to launch an undergraduate major in religion. When applying to seminary, Mitchell was denied at Yale though initially accepted and then sold her car to find the funds to attend Union Theological Seminary in New York. Mitchell recalls the dearth of female role models, particularly African American role models. Of females preaching, Mitchell indicates she was taught that women “cannot do it because one of the things is if she has to spend time out of there when she’s unclean. Menstrual period was to them a curse.”

Mitchell recounts numerous instances in which she was told she could not preach or was given limitations that were not normally given to scheduled speakers. On one such occasion, Mitchell was invited to preach but later told that she could not do so from the pulpit. Instead, she would have to preach from the floor. Mitchell was also instructed not to offer the invitation to Christ. When she finished, the pastor was gone—he had departed while she was preaching. On another occasion, Mitchell notes that she was told to preach from the floor and the amount of time she would speak was limited. On that day, a man got saved saying, “I knew a woman could do it, and she’s changed my whole attitude toward women.” In 2004 on the occasion of her fiftieth reunion, Mitchell was invited to preach but the preacher refused to allow it because she was a woman. It was determined instead that she could read the scripture.

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93 Poussaint, interview, 24.

94 Ibid.
Over and over again, Mitchell notes that God moved people’s hearts during her preaching and that this helped to pave a path for her. One such occasion was for a doctoral summer session held at the Interdenominational Theological Center in Atlanta, Georgia. Mitchell recalls that she was asked to preach for their morning devotions because it was noted they had not had a woman do it yet; “after the worship experience…some of the ones who just hated the…idea of my preaching, were draped over the side,”\(^\text{95}\) and filled with the spirit of God.

Of the question surrounding the lengthy delay between her licensing and ordination, Mitchell responds:

> Well, because there were several reasons. One of them might have been because…in the Baptist Church, men were reluctant to have women in the pulpit. The competition they did not want to face.

> Another reason was that…they said the churches didn’t want it, weren’t ready for it yet.

> And maybe another reason was that women were very much opposed to women in ministry. Our greatest enemies, most of the time, were women.

> Why? Because the men were superior. They were much too superior for you to be advancing in their territory. After all, they’re the leaders, they’re the head of the house, they’re the leaders in the church.\(^\text{96}\)

Fortunately, Mitchell overcame these objections and stigma to follow the path she believed God had called her to, a path not limited by society’s prejudices. It is this strength and boldness that defined Mitchell’s experience and makes her a model for those who likewise seek to fulfill their purpose in the midst of societal oppression. Mitchell was able to

\(^\text{95}\) Ibid., 25.

\(^\text{96}\) Poussaint, interview, 24.
do this because she internalized the message of God—because she was converted by the love and example of Jesus and lived evidence of this conversion through life. This is what makes Mitchell’s remarkable life a lived example of liberation spirituality.

I. Pioneering Achievements

Mitchell, referred to as one of the “Mothers in the Gospel Ministry,” has been referenced on The Early Show, CBS News, the *Journal of Religious Thought* (2001), various local newspapers, and journals. While teaching, Mitchell published numerous articles in journals, devotionals and other publications. In 1983 Mitchell became the first woman to preach at the historic Hampton Ministers’ Conference in Hampton, Virginia, an annual gathering of African American ministers with a history extending back to the nineteenth century. In a 2002 interview Mitchell recalled “a time when women had to sit in a separate section of the [Hampton Ministers’] conference apart from men…because of an unwritten ban against women ministers,” a reality that further underscores the significance of her becoming the conference’s first female preacher.


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Mitchell expresses that these books were extremely important to her because female preachers “don’t get promotion anywhere else. Nobody else had been doing it. I was in a book called And Blessed Is She,\(^99\) with people like Amy McPherson…but there are only two…black women in this book.”\(^100\)

While in California, both Ella and Henry were active advocates of social justice and were part of the 1960s Civil Rights Movement. In 1964, they helped organize a march in Fresno, CA for which civil rights advocate Martin Luther King, Jr. was present. Mitchell was also the co-founder of the Ecumenical Center for Black Church Studies, New Orleans, LA.

It was during a missionary journey to West Africa in 1971 that Mitchell began researching the connection between African American and West African religious tradition. She was appointed as a Martin Luther King, Jr. Fellow for the 1971 sponsored trip to Ghana, West Africa and became the Deputy Director of the Martin Luther King, Jr. Fellows program from 1972-75. This became the initial basis for her 1974 dissertation, which linked the cultural tradition of West Africa to African Americans in a discussion of the failures and needs of Christian education. In 1984, Mitchell was invited to the Colgate Rochester Divinity School to deliver the Mordecai Wyatt Johnson Lectures. Mitchell was awarded an honorary doctorate of humane letters in 1989 by her alma mater Talladega College, Talladega, AL.

\(^{99}\) And Blessed is She: Sermons by Women, David Albert Farmer and Edwina Hunter, editors, is a collection of twenty-five sermons by American women. It was published by Harper and Row in 1990.

\(^{100}\) Poussaint, interview, 29.
Mitchell was consulted by *Ebony* magazine in the production of a list of notable female preachers in the Black Church tradition. Unbeknownst to her, she would also be recognized in the November 1997, issue of *Ebony* magazine as one of the fifteen greatest women preachers. She served as co-president of the Academy of Homiletics of the U.S. and Canada in 2000. In 2008, Mitchell was awarded a lifetime achievement award by this academy, founded in 1965 at the impetus of a small group of Catholic priests. Mitchell has been included in the seventeenth edition of Who’s Who Among African-Americans (2004) and was inducted into the National Visionary Leaders Project. The 2011 presidentially appointed International Ambassador of Religious Freedom Susan Johnson Cook previously acknowledged that her own “leadership wouldn’t be possible without the contributions of women such as the Rev. Ella Mitchell of Atlanta.”

Mitchell was the first African American woman elected to the Board of Education and Publications of the American Baptist Convention, the body responsible for publishing church school literature. She was only the second African American elected to this board, after Samuel DeWitt Proctor. In the early 1960s, during the last four years of her fourteen year tenure on the board, she became president. In this capacity, Mitchell presided over annual national convention meetings including the meeting at which the decision was made to build a new headquarters facility in Valley Forge, PA. The racial implications of the appointment were not lost on Mitchell. Mitchell describes the challenge she experienced in remaining impartial as the board voted about divesting from South Africa during apartheid. Mitchell

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101 Wamble, “Ministers Conference Elects Female President.”
would later accuse the board of racism when they did not recommend an African American staffer for what seemed to her a natural promotion. Rev. Bennett W. Smith, Sr., President of the Progressive National Baptist Convention referred to Mitchell as “a woman messenger commissioned by none other than the risen Christ.”

In 2010, Union Theological Seminary established a chair in Mitchell’s honor. This chair is to be held by a scholar committed to the interdisciplinary exploration of the intersections of religion, race, and gender. Union calls Mitchell “a distinguished pioneer and mentor for women in ministry and theological education.” Mitchell is one of the first ten Union graduates to receive the seminary’s Unitas Award (1994), honoring her for inspiring generations of women in preaching and ministry. In 2008 Mitchell was recognized by Union as a Trailblazers honoree and received the Claremont School of Theology distinguished alumni award.

When Mitchell died, November 20, 2008, at the age of ninety-one, she was affectionately known as the “Dean of Black Women Preachers” for her multi-volume collection of sermons by Black women preachers and her leadership to decades of women in preaching and ministry. Though this term has been widely shared in deference to Mitchell’s legacy,
Religion Dispatches adds that “This moniker is too limited in scope and modest in terms of her immense influence.”\textsuperscript{105}

\textsuperscript{105} Walton, “Rev. Ella Pearson Mitchell.”
Chapter Four

A Liberating Journey

A. Personal Experience of Christ: The Word in Life

Catholic Priest Henri Nouwen (1932-1996) contends that “the minister is called to recognize the sufferings of his time in his own heart and make that recognition the starting point of his service.”\(^1\) Centuries earlier, spiritual master Augustine of Hippo (354-430) also offered thoughts on the value of suffering. In Augustine’s *Confessions*, he speaks to God with the words, “You fashion pain to be a lesson, you strike to heal, you bring death upon us so that we should not die apart from you” from the Septuagint Ps. 93:20 and Deut. 32:39.\(^2\) Through history, the value of suffering has been a recurring theme in Christian literature. It is most clearly depicted in the example of Christ. In a multi-faith context the theme still resonates, as Raimundo Panikkar notes “This heart has to be broken, or, rather, once the heart is broken open one can begin anew by setting out to make it whole again in a wider and deeper way than before.”\(^3\)

Jesus’ life and more particularly, his death, demonstrates and embodies the importance of suffering as a component of meaning. Edward Schillebecckx notes the growing significance of suffering in prophetic tradition and as part of the validation that Jesus was indeed the


Christ who had been awaited. Assuming the personal experience of Christ, then, necessarily means embodying a willingness to suffer.

Mitchell’s experience depicts suffering repeatedly, as an African American child growing up in the segregated south and as one isolated from childhood friends because of her race. Then there was the death of her eldest child which she continued to mourn for the remainder of her life. Further, there were the sacrifices of her family for ministry, and her own repeated experiences of rejection as she lived her call and ultimately pursued ordained ministry.

Mitchell was a woman deeply acquainted with suffering. In this experience, though she did not actively seek suffering, she readily embraced it as a meaningful and significant part of her journey. Mitchell encapsulates the words of Galilea, that “in many places, the only way for the light of Christianity to penetrate is via the gospel life of a person of faith. What new generations are asking of Christians today is that they consciously live their personal faith.”

Mitchell was cautious not to overstate the suffering she experienced in her lifetime. She would not portend to be a wounded, sacrificial hero, but there are real experiences of pain and rejection that represent defining moments in her life’s journey. Mitchell’s childhood and adult experiences connected her with the suffering of the oppressed, the poor, the rejected, and the bereaved, among others.

The Oppressed

One aspect of suffering is found in the experience of oppression. Oppression reflects an experience that was shared by African Americans, particularly during Mitchell’s formative years. The years that marked Mitchell’s childhood and young adulthood are classified into a period known as the Jim Crow Era, recognized as such for legalized segregation in the aftermath of slavery. This period was marked by violence and intimidation that punished African Americans for perceived wrongs without trial or proof and discouraged them from seeking economic, educational, or political advancement. Most notable among intimidation tactics were the public lynchings of thousands of African Americans in communities across the south, often for allegations that had been fabricated or for the perception that African Americans were challenging their oppression. Mitchell was born in the timeframe that included the founding of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) civil rights organization, the migration of African Americans to the north which sparked the Harlem Renaissance, and World War I.

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5 The National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) is a civil rights organization formed in 1909 to “ensure the political, educational, social, and economic equality of rights of all persons and to eliminate racial hatred and racial discrimination,” by a diverse group of white and African American leaders that included W.E.B. DuBois, Ida B. Wells, and a former slave holder. The founding occurred in response to violence that was widespread and an event that erupted into a race riot in which white residents of Springfield, Illinois burned the homes and businesses of African American community members in 1908.

6 The Harlem Renaissance was a cultural movement centered in the New York city neighborhood of Harlem during the 1920s and 1930s. It was defined by the expansion of literature, theater, music, and art within the African American community that buoyed the African American middle class and grew out of this new class. These new forms of expression often challenged the status quo, both in culture and in politics.
Less than a century before Mitchell’s birth, social, cultural, and economic disparity, coupled with the cultural divide between free white Americans and slave Africans, led Christian slaves to pursue communal forms of worship apart from their white, free counterparts. This reflects the beginnings of the Black Church movement. “Slaves interacted with and adapted to a new land and a new religion. Their blending of West African cosmology and Western Christianity produced a distinct religion that met the needs of those who sought the presence of the divine in the midst of their struggle to survive.”

By the 1770s and 1780s the Baptist Church began licensing African American men to preach. Simultaneously, Reformed and Episcopal churches began forming African American congregations that operated separately though subject to oversight and leadership from the larger church structure. The Baptist and Methodist churches, in particular, became the first institutions in America to allow, sanction, and encourage African Americans to organize and lead one another. In places like South Carolina, where Mitchell was from, the near slave revolt led by Denmark Vesey led Presbyterian, Congregationalist, and some other denominations to limit African American church independence in efforts to thwart potential future uprisings.

These practices form a foundation for the Black Church as a primary source of

\[\text{\textsuperscript{7}}\text{ Townes, } \textit{In a Blaze of Glory: Womanist Spirituality as Social Witness}, 19.\]

\[\text{\textsuperscript{8}}\text{ Denmark Vesey (See n. 10).}\]

\[\text{\textsuperscript{9}}\text{ The emerging discussion led many African American intellectuals to reject the homogeneity of the Black Church and the importance of religion in African American culture as a whole. Evans notes that “arguments about African American religion and the developing image of blacks as naturally religious made it difficult to}\]
leadership development and practice for this community through the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Several “African” churches had been established by 1800, some selecting their own pastors and officers and sending delegates to association meetings with white churches. Prayer meetings, teachings, shouting and moaning are all described as the unique aspects of the slaves’ Christianity. A former slave, Lucretia Alexander, expresses: “the preacher came and…he’d just say, ‘Serve your masters. Don’t steal your master’s turkey…Do whatsomever envision them as independent and free persons in the nation”’ (Curtis J. Evans, *The Burden of Black Religion* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 20). In the 1920s and 1930s, debate emerged among educated African Americans about the role of the Black Church, a broad debate which continues into the twenty-first century. For AME Bishop Daniel Alexander Payne, the Black Church offered an independence to African Americans which, Evans notes, countered “the claim that blacks lacked the capacity for self-government” (Evans, *The Burden of Black Religion*, 101).

Carter G. Woodson characterized the Black Church of the Reconstruction Era as devoid of political influence and engagement, indicating that the debate about the Black Church was a result of disagreement over its political role in the future of the African American community. For Woodson, the failure of the educated African American “progressive” to overtake and shift the norms among the majority of African American churches caused them to abandon these churches (Savage, *Their Spirits Walk Beside Us*, 34). Alternately, writer Zora Neale Hurston suggests that the uneducated churches rejected the educated, ridiculing them and saying they sounded like white men (Savage, 82-3). Despite the disappointment W.E.B. DuBois’ “talented tenth” of educated African Americans felt with the church, Savage notes “to dismiss the black church as irrelevant was not an easy option for these scholars” (Savage, 35). Woodson is noted for emphasizing the significance of the church to virtually all political struggles and organizations within the African American community. The NAACP is heralded as an example of this truth (Savage, 36). Drake and Cayton note that the emerging African American middle class succeeded in transforming the church into a relevant structure for their needs. This group emphasized the church’s role in fostering social and political progress for racial advancement (Savage, 96).

For Savage, Woodson’s view of the Black Church’s mission is “that of politicized racial work rather than religious toil” (Savage, 36). This sentiment is echoed in Raboteau decades later who sees a central nature to African American religion as rooted in indigenous African and Caribbean religious traditions and, particularly, in the social struggle of African Americans.

Woodson is noted for his distinction between the practices of churches with educated African Americans and those with uneducated African Americans (Savage, 37). Anthropologist Hortense Powdermaker conducted a study of African American rural life in Mississippi in the early 1930s through which she observed a tradition in African American churches which she concludes was not distinct along denominational lines though varied by class and geography. Powdermaker also notes the significance of church as a location for socializing and leisure activity (Savage, 86). Theologically, Powdermaker notes the difference between the African American churches and white churches in the communities she studied, noting the “Christian duty” to love one’s neighbors as central to African American Christians (Savage, 87).
your master tell you to do,’” but sometimes her father “would have church…and they had to whisper…when they want a real meetin’ with some real preachin’…They used to sing their songs in a whisper.”

Many churches, particularly those of the Reformed traditions, attracted free African Americans as members as well. Whether enslaved or free, the options for African Americans were limited, forming a shared experience of oppression that fed what Eric Lincoln calls the “black sacred cosmos.”

While African Americans were being ordained, primarily in Baptist and Methodist denominations, and exercising some level of religious freedom and leadership, they were still subject to the direction and control of the white Christian churches from which they grew. During this era of increasing anti-slavery sentiment, religious principles were consistently the basis for both pro and anti-slavery arguments and more African Americans agreed they needed their own churches to express their religious beliefs and priorities. By 1815, this had been accomplished, as the Union Church of Africans was formed; the African Methodist Episcopal Church in 1816, after over two decades of battle with the Methodist Church for control; and the African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church in 1821, the third independent African American congregation.

As African American Christianity grew out of the social relevance of the Christian message, African American preachers in the 1800s became the voice for social concerns of


this community, issuing rallying cries for the African American community to become free. Gabriel Prosser (1776-1800), Denmark Vesey (c.1767-1822), and Nat Turner (1800-1831) are each black ministers who organized major slave revolts between 1800 and 1831. Richard Allen’s interpretation of Christian values fueled his involvement in social concerns and the formation of the American Society of Free Persons of Color. The overarching social concern of the era, freedom, was consistently fought on the grounds of church and religion among educated and uneducated African Americans, those born free and with a level of affluence and those acquainted directly with slavery and its legacy. This concern for freedom was met in varying forms, as some sought greater levels of education, others explored religious practice, and still others rejected social norms in their quest to be free.

In each case, the evolving African American Christianity, referred to as the Black Church, is seen as emerging from and responding to the needs of the African American community, wherever they were. This institution spoke to and affirmed their humanity through eschatological hope, educational hope, and social hope. The morality arguments offered in this tradition are no different from those offered by the church of Martin Luther, or

12 Gabriel Prosser was a literate slave who planned a slave rebellion in Richmond, Virginia in the summer of 1800. The rebellion was discovered and he, along with twenty-five other organizers were hanged. Prosser’s actions were significant in that they resulted in numerous Virginia laws restricting the education, movement, and work practices of free and enslaved blacks. Denmark Vesey was brought to the United States as a slave from the Caribbean. He purchased his freedom, helped found the African Methodist Episcopal Church, and also planned a slave rebellion that was to engage thousands of slaves in and around Charleston, South Carolina in 1822. Vesey persuaded slaves to support the planned revolt based on biblical appeals. This rebellion was also discovered, Vesey was executed, and the African Methodist Church in Charleston from which Vesey drew most of his supporters was destroyed. His story later served as a rallying cry for Frederick Douglass. Nathaniel “Nat” Turner successfully led a slave rebellion on August 21, 1831 through which a contingent of over seventy slaves killed fifty-five slave owners prior to being suppressed. Two months later, Turner was caught and was ultimately hanged and his body dismembered.
of Protestant and Catholic traditions of the twenty-first century which witness scandals of power abuse, child abuse, and financial mismanagement and compel the church and the Christian to uphold a higher standard.

Benjamin E. Mays, according to Savage, concludes that “the conceptions of God held by black people were driven not by any urge toward a separate racially specific theology or philosophy, but entirely by the shifting political and social restrictions under which they lived…the consequence of the common conditions under which they suffered.”

For Mays, this common suffering demonstrated that the Black Church is not rooted in some inherent characteristics of “Blackness” but it is in the shared experience of oppression in America. This is further evidence of the truth of Niebuhr’s sentiment when he expresses that “conflict is a seemingly unavoidable prerequisite of group solidarity.”

Author Richard Wright asks, “To what extent has racial religion replaced Christian religion in thousands of Black Belt Churches?” Savage records his statement, “we can see how the Negro has had to take Protestant religion and make it into something for his own special needs, needs born of an imposed Black Belt existence.” This reality is affirmed in Niebuhr’s statement that “inequalities of privilege are due chiefly to disproportions of power.”


These disproportions were evident as a dividing line between African American culture, regardless of class and education, and white culture. Evans notes the view that the American Colonization Society\(^\text{17}\) expressed to Congress in 1820 that “free blacks could never be happy or useful in America and…their increase in number did not translate into an increase in the ‘physical strength’ of the nation,”\(^\text{18}\) a sentiment which demonstrates the disdain held for African Americans both free and enslaved, educated and uneducated, poor and middle class. As evidence, Niebuhr notes the statement of Senator Vardmann of Mississippi, as recorded by Paul Lewinson (Race, Class and Party, 1963), who articulated his opposition to voting by African Americans saying, “I am just as much opposed to Booker Washington as a voter, with all his Anglo-Saxon reinforcements, as I am to a cocoanut-headed, chocolate-colored typical little coon, Andy Dotson, who blacks my shoes every morning. Neither is fit to perform the supreme function of citizenship.”\(^\text{19}\) This is further demonstrated through the Dred Scott court decision of 1857 which held that even free African Americans would not sue in federal court as citizens of the U.S.

This shared experience is evident in the belief system that emerged for African American religion. Not tied to a preexisting condition of race, the demonstration of biblical and ethical principles by African Americans was seen as a direct result of the “shared experiences and

\(^{17}\) The American Colonization Society, founded in 1816, was a proponent of the deportation of free African Americans to Africa to address the problem of free blacks in America. Their efforts resulted in the development of a colony in Liberia, West Africa, in 1821-22 for free African Americans to return to Africa.


\(^{19}\) Niebuhr, *Moral Man and Immoral Society: A Study in Ethics and Politics*, 120.
similar conditions of oppression.” This developed a “group affinity” that was shared by the race because “they had endured the horrors of slavery and had relied more fully on God because of their oppressed condition.”

The collection of religious experiences that have coalesced into the term, “Black Church,” reflect a conglomerate of institutions which have given voice to a muzzled and suffering people—either through ecstatic expression, political motivation/mobilization, social outreach, and/or self-governance. Ultimately, it was the same voice which spoke saying that white America’s version of Christianity was inauthentic, inadequate, and hypocritical. It said in unison, “We must seek a God of truth, humanity, equality, and kindness.” Through varied forms of worship and expression, it has.

Through this common voice, the role of the Black Church has been that of a consistent and significant influence in the African American community. Savage notes that the “first generation of African American scholars” (early twentieth century) “all conceded, though sometimes grudgingly, that churches were pivotal institutions in black communities.”

Evans offers the examples of Benjamin Tanner and Henry McNeal Turner, two 1870s African Methodist Episcopal Church ministers for their rejection of the religious practices of southern African Americans and desire for a “more refined faith.” The African Methodist Episcopal (AME) Church, however, has its roots in the social solidarity and protest evident in the conceptual Black Church.


The AME Church is the first organization of African Americans to be recognized as such by the courts of the United States, in 1816 after a lengthy legal battle. It began this process in 1792 when a group of African Americans, some of whom had once been slaves, grew weary of the discriminatory practices instituted by the white St. George’s Methodist Episcopal Church in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. The AME Church continued to promote the advancement of African Americans economically, educationally, and socially throughout the period in question. Savage acknowledges an “insufficiency of secular financial resources” which “thwarted the evolution of a black business and philanthropic class and of independent political institutions.”22 In this absence, the Black Church, as the sole institution of the African American community, was turned to for support of the broad social, financial, and political needs of the community. While the church was not equipped to fulfill this broad mission, it was thrust into these roles by necessity.

Savage notes that much of the analysis of the Black Church that occurred during the 1930s and 1940s assumed that ecstatic and charismatic practices could not coexist with intellectualism and political savvy23 and has centered around these worship practices as the means of defining a central experience. Indeed, proslavery advocates pointed to “African heathenism and superstition,” as revealed in religious practices, as evidence of the need for

22 Ibid., 9.
23 Ibid., 14.
slavery to help manage and protect those who were “intellectually inferior” to whites. The “unruly emotions and innate religiosity” of African Americans were seen as “primitive or culturally inferior.”

This inherent assumption reflects the overarching dilemma that took root during the Reconstruction Era, during which the tide of sentiment among those who were inclined to support the freedom of African Americans from slavery on the basis of justice, humanity, and morality, shifted due to perceptions that African Americans were irresponsible and immoral. This was exacerbated by perceptions that the religious practices of uneducated former slaves did not produce positive impacts on their work ethic, honesty, sexual practices, or other areas identified with morality and progress in the larger culture.

During this time, a wave of church sponsored educational institutions was established, primarily in southern states, to educate African Americans. Fanon notes the significance of education as a proponent of the status quo promoted by the dominant culture. The school Mitchell attended (and her mother as well), the Avery Institute, was one such school. The progress of African Americans was tied wholly to education as a tool to equip them with the intellectual and moral fortitude for racial progress.

This value assessment is also reflected in the dichotomy of the Black Church, as educated African Americans sought to separate themselves from forms of worship that had been

25 Ibid., 65.
26 Fanon, The Wretched of the Earth, 31.
labeled as “primitive” and to call for an educated African American clergy to guide the Black Church and for more refined worship among the less educated populace. These African Americans, having received some semblance of privilege in a dominant culture, were in the precarious position of adopting the perceptions of mainstream culture as their own. Their embrace of more refined forms of worship reflects their assimilation to this overarching norm. The comments of educated African Americans in the 1880s largely reflect this as they demanded “a rational style of preaching” without “musical intonation.” Evans offers the comments of Hightower Kealing, president of St. Paul Quinn College, an AME Church sponsored college in Texas; T.B. Snowden, a professor at Centenary Biblical Institute in Maryland; Francis Grimké, pastor of a Presbyterian Church in Washington, DC among the examples of African American leaders in the 1870s and 1880s who concurred with this sentiment.27

Slave (and post-slave) religion had become tied to the ecstatic traditions witnessed among them, traditions that are largely tied to those found in West Africa.28 Their practice among this poor and uneducated class of people who were seen as uneducated, lazy, and immoral, despite their commitment to worship and experience of conversion, led many to question the authenticity of their Christianity. As African Americans migrated from the south, this style of worship spread as well.


28 Savage, *Their Spirits Walk Beside Us*, 72. Cater G. Woodson and Charles Johnson, author of *Shadow of the Plantation*, which was a study of rural life among African Americans in Macon County, Alabama, rejected this connection, saying instead that the emotional worship form reflected the practice of southern whites during slavery.
The emerging discussion led many African American intellectuals to reject the homogeneity of the Black Church and the importance of religion in African American culture as a whole, though Mitchell has chosen to embrace this concept. Evans notes that “arguments about African American religion and the developing image of blacks as naturally religious made it difficult to envision them as independent and free persons in the nation.”29 While it would be an overstatement to suggest that all African Americans are religious, the tremendous influence of religion in recently freed African American communities is undisputed.

In a review of practices during slavery, William Ellery Channing, a Unitarian minister and antislavery advocate, is noted for concluding that slaves were “peculiarly susceptible” to religion. For Channing, this was evidence that they should be freed.30 Harriet Beecher Stowe’s classic novel Uncle Tom’s Cabin (1852) is credited with promoting this view that African Americans were naturally religious.31 In a 1930s study conducted by Charles Johnson in Macon County, Alabama, of 612 families, all but seventeen belonged to and regularly attended a church.32 In the book Black Metropolis, authored by St. Clair Drake and Horace Cayton, a social anthropologist and sociologist, respectively, from the University of Chicago, used 1930s data to demonstrate that despite ongoing debate about the existence and


30 Ibid., 28-9.

31 Ibid., 35.

32 Savage, Their Spirits Walk Beside Us, 73.
significance of the Black Church, these churches continued to grow and expand. They indicated the existence of a “mutually shared core of religious custom that cuts across denominational lines” resulting in easy shifts between churches. Further, Drake and Cayton contended that the churches were central to ritual, custom, social activity and the “rhythm” of the community. Most notable, their study demonstrated this not solely for rural southern communities as did other studies, but extended into northern urban migrant communities.33

The needs of African Americans after slavery cannot be understated. Savage notes, “Freedom had brought an end to slavery, but by the early twentieth century it had yet to yield an emancipation from gross inequalities, cruelties, and exploitation. The need for liberation continued as did the search for the material and spiritual tools with which to achieve it.” Savage articulates the varying perspectives that emerged as African American culture shifted, grew increasingly diverse, and reflected differences in worship style that were in line with different tradition, geography, social class, and education.34

In this, Savage works to dispel the “illusion” and “metaphor” that the Black Church is “a powerful entity with organized power.” In this, Savage applies the same methodology that is used to demonstrate the weaknesses of Protestantism, with its diffused structure. Indeed, it is not, nor has it ever been an organized power or entity despite its centrality of purpose. As the

33 Ibid., 94-5.
34 Ibid., 6.
title has survived into the twenty-first century, its meaning has shifted through time. By the mid-twentieth century, this moniker of African American existence had expanded in meaning to encompass the diverse religious traditions that are considered a part of mainstream African American religion, which embraces varying denominations of Christianity as well as the Nation of Islam, Voodoo and Santeria practices, and others.

Just as Richard Allen, Francis Grimké and other black preachers found a parallel between the promises of the Christian gospel and the social well-being of the African American community, African American leaders during the Civil Rights Era have also been tied to religious callings, with the cry for freedom shifting to education, employment, and economic justice. As over four million members of the African American community migrated to urban areas in the north and midwest, many found stability by connecting with


36 The discussion of early twentieth century scholars demonstrates that, though some may have desired the development of a conglomerate “powerful entity with organized power” as referenced by Savage, the use of the term which has been credited to W.E.B. DuBois in 1897 has consistently referenced a central understanding of the role of religion among an oppressed people with a history of slavery in the dominant American culture. Though on the surface it has been used to suggest that ecstatic worship is the singular norm among all African American worshippers, in truth it has defined a body that through time has responded to the unique and nuanced needs of the community of black people in America and a diversity and dispersed structure reflected in Protestantism itself. DuBois himself is noted for indicating in Souls of Black Folk that there was a Black Church before African Americans became Christians (Evans, 162-3).

37 Richard Allen (1760-1831), a slave who purchased his freedom, is recognized as the founder of the African Methodist Episcopal Church, the first independent black denomination in the United States. Allen began the first church in 1794 in response to discrimination experienced in the Methodist Episcopal (now United Methodist) Church in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. In 1816 the body became recognized by the United States. Allen became the church’s first consecrated bishop.

38 Francis James Grimké (1852-1937) was a Presbyterian minister committed to social justice for African Americans. He was a co-founder of the NAACP and its predecessor, the Niagara Movement.
the church. Stepping to the forefront of politics during the Montgomery Bus Boycott, preacher and civil rights leader Martin Luther King, Jr. (1929-1968) articulated beliefs similar to those held by Allen nearly one hundred years before: that civil rights are a part of God’s plan for His people and the church must be concerned about spiritual well-being as well as physical.

During this migratory era, in the 1940s through 1970s as African Americans sought new opportunities in western states, the popularity of other religions also began to increase in the African American community, often in response to social concerns. Among them are Judaism, the Nation of Islam, Santeria, Voodoo and Spiritualism with flamboyant charismatic leadership figures like Father Divine (1876-1965), who founded the International Peace Mission movement and claimed to be God; and Daddy Grace (1884-1960), who founded the United House of Prayer for All People, which has become its own denomination with over 3.5 million congregants. The spread of many of these religions was in direct response to the social morays typically connected with Christianity because they were defended by and purported in Christianity’s name, just as slavery had been decades earlier.

Mitchell became a part of this migratory trend and had personal experiences that connected her with the discrimination and segregation of her community. Mitchell also connected with the liberating influence of the Christian message. It has been noted that

39 The Montgomery Bus Boycott was a year-long protest that began in December, 1955, in Montgomery, Alabama. The boycott protested racially segregated seating on the city’s public transit system and was launched when Rosa Parks, an African American woman active in the local NAACP refused to yield her seat to a white person and was arrested. The boycott’s financial impact crippled the transit system and drew national attention prior to the full integration of bus service in Montgomery.
Mitchell grew up near a former slave auction block which reminded her of a practice that was only outlawed fifty-two years before her birth, was isolated from childhood friends due to race, recalls not being able to sit on buses, and the hushed family history of a grandmother whose “unknown” father was a slave owner. These experiences connected Mitchell with what has become generally defined as a common African American experience in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. It is an experience that led her to ask questions as a child, to stage independent protests as a young adult, and to connect with the Civil Rights Movement as an adult. In her twenties, Mitchell witnessed the launch of the Tuskegee Airmen segregated flying unit for African Americans and World War II. Childhood experience was further magnified for Mitchell as a woman who dared to believe she was called to ordained ministry in a time when this was not permitted and during a new wave of the women’s liberation movement. It was not only an anomaly in the broad church

40 The Tuskegee Airmen were a group of African American pilots who overcame discrimination to fight in World War II. They represented the first African American pilots in the U.S. armed forces.

41 Within mainstream Christian denominations, the Anglican Church was the first to ordain women in 1944 in Hong Kong, China. Both the Presbyterian Church and the Methodist Church approved ordination of women in 1956 and Leontine Kelly became the Methodist Church’s second female and first African American female bishop in 1984. In 1974 the first women received full ordination as elders in the Episcopal Church, in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, a decision that was not recognized by the church’s general assembly until 1976. It was 1980 when the first woman, Marjorie Matthews, would be ordained a bishop in the Methodist Church in Wisconsin at the age of sixty-four. She served for four years and died in 1986. The Methodist Church’s consecration of a female bishop occurred one year after the Evangelical-Lutheran tradition appointed Marie-Louise Caron president-superintendent in France. It was 1989 before the first woman, Barbara Harris, would be ordained bishop in the Anglican Church, in Massachusetts, followed by Penelope Ann Bansall Jaimeson in New Zealand, 1990. Within the African American Church, the African Methodist Episcopal (AME) Church was the first to ascribe rights to females as preachers. Jarena Lee was the first woman licensed to preach in the AME Church under much controversy and resistance in 1819 but was never ordained. It was 2000 when the first woman was ordained bishop in the over two hundred year history of the AME Church.
tradition, but also in the Black Church. Galilea acknowledges that “even among oppressed people one can find racism and the exploitation of women.”

Mitchell faced a special form of discrimination and oppression as a woman seeking a place beyond Sunday School and missionary in the Black Church. By Mitchell’s own admission, she often felt inadequate and insecure. During her doctoral studies she believed she would not succeed in passing comprehensive exams, as a woman she believed herself to be unattractive, and in the field of Christian education she initially lacked confidence in her expertise and skills. In each case, Mitchell overcame these insecurities—much through the support and prodding of her husband, Henry.

Mitchell was deeply acquainted with an oppressive element that excluded her from the rights, privileges, and opportunities that God guarantees. The broad cultural backdrop ensured this oppression was economic, cultural, and personal. Galilea discusses the significance of oppression in the formation of a spirituality of liberation. Applying the Bible story in the book of Exodus through which God pronounces, “I have witnessed the affliction of my people…so I know well what they are suffering,” Galilea establishes that God is “concerned about the suffering and oppression of his people” and is “a liberating God.” Further, in the book of Isaiah Galilea recognizes God’s mandate of “setting free the

Among other denominations, Alma White was appointed senior bishop in 1918 by The Pillar of Five in the United States. In 1929 the Catholic Church of the Maravites began appointing women as bishops beginning with Archbishop Antonina Izabela Wilucka in Poland. This church underwent a drastic reduction as in 1932 the church had twelve female bishops and around one hundred fifty female priests and diacons and in 2000 there were three female bishops and twenty female priests (only five male) in the church.

42 Galilea, The Way of Living Faith, 94-5.
oppressed and breaking every yoke” (Isa. 58:6-8). For Galilea, “The Christian God is the liberator of the oppressed. He is the God of hope for the poor.” In essence, he is the God of Ella Mitchell.

The Poor

Mitchell’s family would likely have been considered among the more privileged of African American families in her community. With two educated parents, one working as a pastor and the other at times as a teacher, they surely experienced a relative degree of comfort. Mitchell indicates that much of the family’s blessing resulted from reuse, repair, and resourcefulness and from the community’s generosity. At times she reflects on these experiences and indicates that she did not realize at the time how little her family had.

As a child, Mitchell benefitted from her father’s influence throughout the community. He was well-known and respected. Between his pastorships, teaching, and trade skills, he provided for the family’s needs. Through the relationships he developed, the family often benefitted from gifts of baked goods and food products from church members. There would often be buckets of fish and crabs left on the back porch. This was significant because their family would not have been fully provided for otherwise. “From earliest childhood I had been accustomed to living frugally,” she says. Because of the family’s limited means, Mitchell’s father identified ways to supplement his income, like shoe repair, and Mitchell and her sisters learned to use all available resources to make things they needed. Mitchell

43 Ibid., 26-7.

could not only sew basic clothing, but slips, bloomers, and coats as well. She could also make purses. Mitchell indicates that their “family economy was based on bartered blessings.” She owned two pairs of shoes, “one for school and one for Sunday-go-to-meeting” though her father was a trained cobbler. Mitchell expresses that in her teen years, she felt self-conscious about not being able to catch the trolley like other youth due to financial constraints. Even as a student at Union, Mitchell recalls “walking to save a nickel subway fare” because she “had no choice.”

Mitchell’s married life was defined by a miraculous power that always supplied for each of her needs. She and her husband marveled at how they were able to pay their bills and live their lives. With each new challenge and opportunity, however, their needs were met. This began at the onset of their marriage, with a wedding that was on “so tiny a total budget” but “amazingly deluxe” as Henry describes it. “This turned out to be a foretaste of all of our abundant life together…simple creativity, with taste and talent…[we] remember the spirit and the faces, not the frills.” As a couple, Ella and Henry “began by putting all the bills on the kitchen table, together with all [their] resources; two small paychecks and an occasional honorarium” and when “the total [they] owed was more than the cash [they] had available, [they] numbered the obligations according to their priority,” according to Henry.

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46 Ibid., 45.
47 Ibid., 63.
Their experience included that of being economically poor and of becoming a part of poor communities, communities that experienced lack. As Ella and Henry prepared for what would be thirty-four years in California, this lack was evident in churches and in resources. “I wanted to be a missionary…yet here at home I was discouraged by small, poorly maintained church buildings,” recalls Henry. In California, Ella and Henry discovered “they needed help in ministering to the thousands of immigrants from the South who came to work in the war industries.”

In California, Ella and Henry leaned on each of their abilities to cook and can foods, sew, make electrical repairs, and do carpentry around the house. At one point, their children began complaining about the lack of spending money they were allotted only to discover how limited were the family’s resources. They learned this when their parents allowed them to write the family’s checks and attempt to balance the check book. They quickly panicked and returned this task to the care of their parents. Throughout their thirty-four years in California, the family moved repeatedly, often experiencing reductions in salary, to answer the call they believed God was voicing in their lives. The Mitchells had to give up their first new car because they could not afford this luxury. From 1945 to 1952, the family lived in public housing and, even after moving into church parsonages and other living quarters, the number of people in their household was consistently higher than the number of bedrooms. Mitchell continued to make the family’s clothing, as she had done as a child, and the family devoted itself to giving to others. They donated rabbits for breeding in Ecuador, Braille storybooks...
for blind children, clothing for flood victims in Mississippi, and welcomed an orphaned teenager into their home. Eventually, the Mitchells legally adopted a four year old Afro-Korean boy who had been abandoned in Korea.

Mitchell’s life consistently connected her with the experience of poverty. Though the initial experiences of being poor were a natural part of her upbringing, subsequent experiences were voluntary, they reflected a choice that was based upon the purpose to which they were called. This is significant in that “What it is that sustains our hope in the midst of a practice of liberation can have no a priori answer. But perhaps we can say this: that, when all is said and done, hope lives by love. One who has radically, disinterestedly, loved the poor of this world, has done something absolutely good.” Mitchell chose to move to California and to each location as they journeyed across the state. Mitchell chose to raise her children with sensitivity for those in need and to share the family’s limited resources with others. Finally, Mitchell chose to adopt a son who had been abandoned in the fields of Korea, traumatized as a child, and severely malnourished. She chose to be poor in the same vein that Jesus chose to connect with and become one with the poor of society. The words of Galilea are manifest in Mitchell’s life, “Love of our poor brother or sister is the proof of fraternal love. The love of the poor—our special brothers and sisters—translated into mercy, solidarity, and the struggle for their just causes, is a constant in the spiritual tradition of the Church. Not only is it an

inescapable demand of Love, but it is also the source of spirituality and the experience of God.”

_The Rejected_

Mitchell felt a sense of rejection even as a child. She was heavier and darker in complexion than her sisters. Given these physical traits, Mitchell’s sisters were perceived as more attractive than she. Mitchell expresses that she “had always felt overweight and underattractive.” She carried a stigma related to this and her playful nickname, “Ole Big,” into her adult life. Though this insecurity diminished over time, it never disappeared from Mitchell’s life. Upon entering married life, Mitchell confesses, “I dreaded getting undressed. I was almost as bad as my mother, who bragged that after fifty years of marriage and four babies her husband had never seen her in the altogether. Our honeymoon was nearly half over before I bravely revealed my entire body to my husband.” Further, “I greatly appreciated [Henry’s] attempts at comforting me, but no one can erase twenty-seven years of feeling inferior with a few kind comments.”

While pursuing doctoral studies, Mitchell expressed this insecurity as doubt that she was capable of completing her language comprehensives. Mitchell notes that despite many accomplishments and recognition for expertise in her field, “I was almost alone at my level of expertise,” she did not surrender her “feelings of being less than fully accepted” until she

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50 Galilea, _The Way of Living Faith_, 125.

became the second African American (and first African American female) elected to the Board of Education and Publication of the American Baptist Convention, a national appointment responsible for publishing church school literature and oversight of regional directors of Christian Education.\textsuperscript{52} This notable appointment occurred in the 1950s, when the nation was embroiled in civil rights protests and activity.\textsuperscript{53} Mitchell was president of the Board from 1959 to 1973.

More so, Mitchell lived the stigma of rejection as a woman in ministry. As discussed, though initially accepted into the Yale Divinity School, Mitchell’s acceptance was withdrawn because of limited placements for African Americans in general and African American females, in particular. As a female preacher, Mitchell was repeatedly denied the opportunity to preach after invitations had been extended. This does not account for what were assuredly many invitations that were never extended. Further, Mitchell was often given stipulations about her preaching, barring her from pulpits with instructions that she must speak (not preach) from the floor, that she could not extend the invitation to Christian discipleship, or that she could only speak for a certain amount of time. Mitchell shares, “Throughout the span

\textsuperscript{52} Ibid., 129.

\textsuperscript{53} A wave of landmark actions occurred in the 1950s which forever impacted American culture. Segregation was outlawed on several levels by the U.S. Supreme Court, including in public colleges and universities, law schools, railroad dining cars, and ultimately in the historic Brown \textit{v.} Board of Education which challenged “separate but equal” public education. The U.S. Army announced that it would desegregate, schools began to integrate, and President Eisenhower signed the Civil Rights Act of 1957. The Montgomery Bus Boycott, sparked by Rosa Parks’ act of defiance, was launched in 1955. Nonviolent sit-ins, which became a major tool in the civil rights struggle, began in 1939 but were catapulted into the mainstream in 1960 by four North Carolina A&T State University students now known as the “Greensboro Four” who initiated a sit-in at a lunch counter of a downtown department store known as Woolworths. This sit-in grew in number as students rotated shifts at the counter, prompted a wave of similar sit-in protests, and gained media attention that ultimately impacted change.
of my many years in kingdom service, I have faced many rebuffs as a woman.”54 These experiences were often also reflected in the churches in which Ella and Henry maintained membership while in California.

Mitchell had to ponder the question articulated by Womanist theologian Jacquelyn Grant who asks, “What does it mean to do Christology out of the context of women’s experience?” Though called by the African American Lectionary the mother of the Womanist Preaching Movement, Mitchell’s legacy does not seek to directly articulate a response to Grant’s question. Instead, Mitchell lived the response through her own experience and sought to preach, teach, and minister in ways that empowered other women to do the same and challenged all to create space for a woman’s experience. She was among the women who “were able to see the relationship between religion and the oppression of women” and to respond in ways that both illuminated and challenged this reality.55

Henry recounts one occasion as follows, “She preached at a church one Sunday and they didn’t have a pastor and the fellow that was presiding ruled that she could preach but she had to stand down on the floor. Well, six men joined that Sunday and it was a little church—six men! One of them was a police man, one an ex-Roman Catholic. And he had said she can’t do the invitation. After she preached she turned around to tell him to do the invitation, it’s

54 Mitchell, “Reflections on Strength for Sisters.”

time to do that now and he had disappeared.”56 On another occasion Mitchell recounts being told to preach from the floor and given a very limited timeframe for speaking. A man accepted Christ that day saying, “I knew a woman could do it, and she’s changed my whole attitude toward women.”57

Townes expresses that “gender bias and discrimination is so integrated into our lives and our institutions that it becomes like breathing—present until we die.”58 In 2004 Mitchell had been invited to preach for her class reunion but upon arrival was told that she could only read the scripture because she was a woman. In response to these experiences, Mitchell adopted the philosophy of Rev. (now Bishop) Leontine Kelly,59 “who says all the time: ‘I’m so glad you didn’t call me. It was God, and when are you taking the place of God?’”60

Mitchell shares, “I suppose my greatest disappointment was when I was not allowed to go with Henry on a government sponsored trip through Ethiopia. The letter never denied my going, but carefully avoided answering Henry’s request. I found later that the prohibition was against all women, who were not permitted to set foot in the major church.” On another occasion at a church where a family friend served Mitchell says, “we went to greet Dr.


57 Ibid.


59 Leontine Turpeau Kelly (1920–), a United Methodist minister, was the first African American woman to be elected bishop of a mainline Christian denomination, elected in 1984. She was the second woman to be elected bishop.

60 Poussaint, interview, 26.
Caesar Clark…Two burly deacons, one on each elbow, escorted me off the rostrum, saying that I was welcome to speak with him from the choir stand…Dr. Clark was extremely embarrassed, so I didn’t need to be. And all the more so because the host pastor had ordered it.”\textsuperscript{61}

When Mitchell expressed an interest in becoming ordained, this too was met with opposition. Mitchell was scheduled to be ordained on September 30, 1978, in Los Angeles, California. One month prior to the ordination, it was cancelled. The pastor had changed his mind, asserting God had instructed him otherwise. Mitchell’s ordination was rescheduled to October 1, 1978, at Allen Baptist Church in Oakland, California.\textsuperscript{62} Mitchell’s responses to her delay in ordination until 1978 have been noted and are many: “there were several reasons…because…in the Baptist Church, men were reluctant to have women in the pulpit…Another reason was that the churches, they said the churches didn’t want it, weren’t ready for it yet…another reason was that women were very much opposed to women in ministry. Our greatest enemies, most of the time, were women.” She adds that household duties and menstrual cycles were included as reasons against the ordination of women.\textsuperscript{63}

In defense of rejected women preachers Mitchell quips, “Jesus had disciples who were women but we…don’t lift those out, you know. We let those be unseen, and we don’t read about them in the public…and then they, they try to disgrace Mary Magdalene who was

\textsuperscript{61} Mitchell, Reflections on Strength for Sisters.

\textsuperscript{62} Mitchell and Mitchell, Together for Good: Lessons from Fifty-Five Years of Marriage, 225-6.

\textsuperscript{63} Poussaint, interview, 23.
probably one of Jesus’s greatest disciples.” Mitchell further draws a parallel between the struggle of women in the church and that of blacks in slavery saying, “it’s like the slavemasters. They choose. It was selective reading that they did. They choose the verses that they want people to hear, like slaves obey your master. But they didn’t read the next sentence that says: Jesus loved the church and it was his bride.”64

Mitchell indicates that “African American Churches have a great record in matters of civil rights and socio-political activism, but that record is tragically flawed. Even while they proclaim racial justice and equality, they lag far behind in applying these values to the professional options open to women. There are still rigid exclusions of women from ordination and placement in the pulpits and pastorates of African American churches. In this area, equality is still the exception and not the rule.”65 This directly contradicts the premise of liberation spirituality as it ensures the oppression of women by African Americans even as they fight for racial freedom. For Galilea,

The fact of a common Father allows us to overcome all discrimination, because it eases any pretext of distinction or superiority. It allows us to overcome the temptation to live a purely secular and fraternal Christianity because, since God revealed himself in Jesus as Father, every sincere effort at creating human fraternity leads us to the Father (even implicitly) and prefigures the definitive fraternity of all people with him. Finally, the fact of a common Father allows us to rise above the idea that liberation is a purely temporal and political task; rather it is the radical action within history of Christ the liberator, gift of the Father, although it is manifested in a specific place and time.66

64 Ibid., 26.
65 Mitchell, Reflections on Strength for Sisters.
Mitchell began to see herself free of the limitations and discrimination others had placed on her, and she determined to help other women experience the same freedom. Mitchell’s preaching reflects this, along with the series of books she published to give voice and draw positive attention to female preachers. Mitchell draws upon the example of biblical women to attest to women’s value, recognizing “the stateswoman Abigail, or the businesswoman Lydia, or the humanitarian Dorcas, or the women of faith who went to the tomb to do something when everybody else was in shock and ‘out of it.'” Mitchell’s words demonstrate that she, like Christ, embraced her purpose and self-worth.

In this, Mitchell embodied a womanist spirituality though she did not necessarily preach from this perspective. Townes notes that this “is a spirituality rooted in community and concerned for the individual,” which guides her to an understanding of “spirituality as social witness.” Townes indicates that contemporary womanist spirituality has been greatly influenced and fed by the Black women’s club movements. The Women’s Club Movement and its prevalence began near the end of the nineteenth century. The women involved in these organizations were committed to motherhood, household and family, chastity, among other virtues. They upheld biblical images of women like Mary, mother of Jesus, as examples of motherhood. Mitchell follows in this legacy.

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67 Ella Mitchell, untitled, (speech, Claremont College School of Theology, Claremont, CA, March 6, 1975), Private Collection.

68 Townes, In a Blaze of Glory: Womanist Spirituality as Social Witness, 43.

69 Ibid., 36.
Townes notes that this legacy for African American women is vastly different from that experienced by white women. The image of femininity portrayed by mainstream society was never a role that could be filled by the African American woman, who had to work and demonstrate a strength that was often contrary to femininity. Townes indicates, “African American women have been forced to play a highly functional and autonomous role within the family and Black society due to economic and social conditions that have devalued and ill-defined African American women and women historically.” In reference to the ideals of hegemonic masculinity and privileged femininity established by society for gender roles, Townes notes, “The result of privileged femininity for Black women is a legacy of being called matriarchs, Sapphires, and castrators. This is due largely to the active role many Black women have had to play in the support of children, husbands, and Black society.”

This sentiment was interpreted by Sojourner Truth as she fled slavery, later became one of the most respected abolitionists of her time, and is known for her poignant question, “Ain’t I a woman?” Like Mitchell, Truth’s words challenged Christians to see the word of God and embrace her as fully human. Mitchell knowingly builds her belief upon the experience of Truth and others like her. Mitchell indicates that “My theology is based in the experience of my walk with God, as a Black woman, for all these years, and the fact that all theology must be generated on the basis of need and function.”

70 Ibid., 74-5.

Church minister Teresa Fry Brown similarly expresses, “Women understand women’s issues best because of their social location. They are black women in America. They live inside and outside social constrictions specific only to black women. They survive and thrive in spite of what others say or do about their personhood.”72 It is a practical belief that seeks to reconcile injustice.

Mitchell’s boldness is evident in the statement, “knowing that the Trinitarian formula and creeds were Greek answers to Greek intellectual questions (the term trinity is not in the Bible at all), I feel free to work with it [the formula] to meet my needs as well. Traditionally, we speak of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. My soul demands symmetry in the trinity; my womanist theology sense of justice requires a balance in the gender specific pronouns…the metaphors for God…need revision…Here is my set of metaphors…”73 Mitchell pinpoints injustice and oppression and speaks against it, using the Bible as a standard and justification for her challenge. Her challenge is to “contend with race, sex, class, and other sources of fragmentation…then articulate a positive moral standard which critiques the elitism of dominant ethics at its oppressive core and is relevant for the African-American community and the larger society.”74

Mitchell uses the words author Toni Morrison spoke at the Spelman College 1978 commencement ceremony to express this process, “There is nothing as magical; there is


73 Mitchell, “My Womanist Theology.”

nothing as potentially powerful; there is nothing so fierce; nothing as nurturing as a
community of Black women who know who they are.”³⁷⁵ Mitchell recognizes the need for
liberation and reflects her own participation in the liberating process for herself and others.
Mitchell’s words will be offered in detail in section three as evidence of her conversion in
liberation spirituality.

The Bereaved

Two significant losses are recalled repeatedly by Mitchell in her writings and interviews.
The first was that of her sister-in-law Marty who, as has been said, was murdered in 1949 at a
pharmacist’s office where she worked. This loss was coupled with a feeling of rejection
because the community responded to Marty’s murder by rallying around the accused
murderer. The murder of Marty and the pharmacist became a racially charged issue because
news reports indicated that both victims were white and the accused was African American.
Marty’s race was reported erroneously through the media due to her complexion. Mitchell
expresses feelings that the family grieved Marty’s death in isolation as the community
banded together to raise money for the defense of the accused and those neighbors whom
Marty had befriended and supported refused to offer honest testimony to secure justice for
her.

The second loss, another which Mitchell repeatedly records and recollects, was the loss
of her eldest son, Henry, IV (Hank). In this, Mitchell felt the depth of loss experienced by a
mother losing a child. Mitchell recalls falling into a state of shock as a result of the phone

³⁷⁵ Toni Morrison, speech delivered at Spelman College commencement exercises, Atlanta, GA, 1978.
call in which Henry notified her of their son Hank’s condition in 1971. In the subsequent
days Mitchell shares, “I spent hours just staring blankly into space…it was a destructive,
desolate escape, my soaring into nothingness.” His death was not sudden, so Ella and Henry
were not with Hank as his condition deteriorated to his death in early 1972. Mitchell
understood loss in the deepest sense through the death of her first born child and son at age
twenty-six.

*The Suffering*

Each of the dimensions of Mitchell’s experiences discussed above can be considered
within the broad context of suffering. The experience of oppression, poverty, rejection, and
ultimately bereavement, each caused an intense level of discomfort that can be classified as
suffering. Mitchell suffered from the realities of discrimination and segregation in her life;
she suffered from the impact of poverty and lack; she suffered from the overwhelming sense
of rejection that followed her through life; and she suffered from the violent death of her
sister-in-law and young death of her son.

The emerging theology of medieval mystics like Catherine of Siena76 provides a model of
suffering that is relevant to the experience of Mitchell. During the twelfth through fourteenth
centuries the emphasis shifted from the glorified Christ to the suffering Christ, resulting in a

76 Catherine of Siena (1347-1380) dedicated her life to helping the sick and the poor. She dictated many
letters intended to influence church and social affairs and persuaded Pope Gregory XI to return his
administration to Rome in 1377. Catherine had her first ecstatic experience at age five or six, in which God
expressed love toward her. As a teenager, in protest to an arranged marriage between herself and her deceased
sister’s widower, Catherine stopped eating and cut off her hair. She became associated with a Dominican order
and lived in solitude with her birth family. Catherine’s life was one of protest, in which she gave freely and
suffered willingly as a mark of her piety. Catherine’s letters and *The Dialogue* are considered to be among the
great literary works of her time.
wave of art that depicts Christ’s suffering rather than resurrection. This shift is in line with an increasing emphasis placed on suffering as a mode of drawing nearer to Christ, experiencing Christ’s love, and demonstrating total obedience to God. Christ’s voluntary suffering is both evidence of divine mercy and “a startling portrayal of God’s love for humanity.” It is Christ’s willingness to endure such tremendous pain and suffering that is the perfect portrayal and affirmation of God’s tremendous love for humanity.77 Suffering teaches the sufferer to “perceive God as love.” Further, “the experience of pain functions as a way to God, as a means to religious understanding.”78 Donald Mowbray, in describing twelfth century religious suffering, indicates that suffering is fundamental to humanity’s “knowledge and understanding.”79 During these centuries, it was widely believed that the soul could only experience things through the body.80

Suffering was seen both as punishment for Original Sin caused by Adam and Eve and as a redemptive measure in imitation of Christ. “Intensifying the physicality of Jesus Christ through magnifying Christ’s wounded body” is central to spiritual transformation. “The presence of the suffering God is personalized by focusing on Christ’s torn and wounded


80 Ibid., 41.
flesh,” which “initiates a process by which the person identifies in a personal way with the suffering Christ.”

The eighteenth century slave in America experienced this suffering, as articulated by examples like Truth, as did Mitchell, a woman who welcomed the rejection and hardship of her life’s choices.

Though the suffering endured by mystics like Catherine may be seen through a modern lens as an excessive devotional practice, it is evidence of a theology that persists into the twenty-first century. Though the form of suffering differs drastically, the conclusions of Mitchell, Renita Weems, and Barbara Brown Taylor are the same: it is through suffering that the believer grows closer to God and begins to understand more fully who God is. Further, Christ’s suffering is evidence of his humanity. It is in this humanity that people can connect with Christ as one who fully understands their condition. Mitchell reflects a similar thought, except that she begins with the suffering of Jesus’ earthly life rather than with the suffering of his crucifixion, finding her own conclusion to Anselm’s question, “Cur deus homo?”

The appropriate response to God’s love is to love God, self, and others in return. The wounds of Christ are evidence of God’s love that, when witnessed and experienced by humanity, evoke a loving response. This serves as the impetus for women like Catherine to welcome and induce suffering so readily and it is the impetus for women like Mitchell to embrace and approach suffering with the same readiness. Also central to medieval suffering

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and devotion was the belief that God’s mercy is available to all, no matter how sinful. This belief is reflected in Mitchell’s experience, which affirmed the humanity and worth of all of God’s people.

The twelfth through fourteenth centuries also marked a period which redefined the role of women within the church. By the twelfth century, many of the formal roles women had previously been able to perform in the church had been transferred to men. The emergence of female mystics, though typically operating under the law and direction of the church, validated women’s experiences and affirmed women’s power in new ways. These experiences were “highly structured” with form and content of recognized experiences controlled by the church. These centuries are recognized for an influx of writings by and about women. The visions experienced by these women imbued them with influence and freed them from the social constraints of their time.

According to Laurie Finke, the religious women of medieval times were revolutionaries for their time—much as Mitchell was one in her time. They respected the institution of the church and its leadership even as they sought ways to express their beliefs amidst gender oppression within the church. They “developed a means of transcending their own secondariness.”

82 Ibid., 27.


84 Ibid., 29.
These women are described as “soldiers under military discipline” who “fasted and mortified their flesh to train their souls for battle.” Their subjection to pain and suffering was engaged as they “developed their weapons with courage and initiative.” This is significant, for McNamara explains that “where men fought heresy with theology and the stake, the tangible power of the institution they controlled, women fought with their own bodies,” the tangible power of the institutions that they, as women, controlled.\(^8^5\) These women, who emphasized fasting, sexual purity, flagellation, and other bodily experience, fought in their own way to achieve the goals of their faith.

Finke clarifies, “the female mystic of the Middle Ages did not claim to speak in her own voice.” Instead, she was clear that she was a conduit for God. She “could claim no spiritual authority” individually or institutionally through the church. She, like Mitchell, was “the instrument of a divine will.”\(^8^6\) Ross explains that none of these medieval female mystics seeks suffering for its own sake. In each case, it is sought out of a desire to grow closer to God.\(^8^7\)

For Catherine the painful experience of suffering is not simply valuable, but it is in fact a mark of holiness that is in some ways desirable and necessary. It includes not only the sense of the abandonment of God, but the manifestation of the Passion of Christ in one’s life. The


\(^8^6\) Finke, “Mystical Bodies and the Dialogics of Vision,” 44.

\(^8^7\) Ross, The Grief of God: Images of the Suffering Jesus in Late Medieval England, 96.
Passion encompasses the suffering aspect of Christ’s sacrifice, apart from the earthly ministry or glorious resurrection. It is a time when the pain grows so intense that it yields a feeling of abandonment and desire for relief, as evidenced in Jesus’ prayer in the Garden of Gethsemane and his cries of anguish from the cross. The longing of the spirit for the presence of God, relief from God, or other resource in the midst of suffering are, for Catherine, evidence of a deepening spiritual journey.

Mitchell likewise sees the significance of the Garden of Gethsemane and cross experiences as part of Jesus’ willingness to suffer, noting, “There is a garden here where Jesus prays sometimes. He tells eight of His disciples to wait near the gate, and then He takes Peter and James and John, and goes deeper into the garden. Then He says to them, ‘My soul is overwhelmed with sorrow, to the point of death…please stay here…stay awake and watch with me!’ The disciples say, ‘Of course, Lord; we’re happy to do it,’ but in their minds they are saying, ‘Wow! I never saw Him like this before.’” Mitchell admits that her “probing mind asks, ‘Why the sudden shift?’ Jesus has predicted His death several times and appeared quite resigned to it—even comfortable with the idea. Now He is overwhelmed with an unspeakable sorrow, and manifesting a kind of human vulnerability.”88 Mitchell concludes that prior to this moment,

The **full** weight of the impending suffering was remote, hitting him full force only now, for perhaps the first time. Even now, Jesus chooses to break down only with those three disciples closest to him. He has just told Peter that He will deny Him, yet He knows that Peter is still stronger than the others…He needs somebody close as He

faces the grim specter of suffering and death. No one of us will ever understand how dark was that night for our Lord.\footnote{Ibid.}

Of the cross, Mitchell adds, “Jesus \textbf{did} take His crucifixion without a mumblin’ word—without a single complaint to the wicked Herod, to Pilate, the priests, the soldiers or even the crowd. It was this struggle in the Garden that prepared our Lord to keep his marvelous composure on Golgotha’s hill.”\footnote{Ibid.}

For Catherine, a primary source of suffering was a desire to be nearer to and more faithful to God. Suffering was not merely accepted as a source of spiritual growth, it was desired fervently to foster this growth. Julian of Norwich (c. 1342- c. 1416) and Margery Kempe (c. 1373-c. 1440), contemporaries of Catherine, are offered by Ross and Wiethaus in the identification of three types of spiritual suffering. These three dimensions, contrition, compassion, and longing, each demonstrate aspects of the ideal relationship with Christ. Contrition guides the believer to recognize God’s mercy, compassion connects with humanity, and longing reflects a deeper desire for nearness to God. Twelfth century Dominican Albert the Great (c. 1206 – 1280) identified three ways the soul can suffer: through bodily senses, the perception of good or evil, and through sickness or injury (dissolving the union between body and soul), clarifying that both body and soul are necessary components for the suffering to occur.\footnote{Mowbray, \textit{Pain and Suffering in Medieval Theology: Academic Debates at the University of Paris in the Thirteenth Century}, 18-9.} It is through this discussion and process

\begin{footnotesize}
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\item Ibid.
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\item Mowbray, \textit{Pain and Suffering in Medieval Theology: Academic Debates at the University of Paris in the Thirteenth Century}, 18-9.
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that a vocabulary emerged to identify and further validate this trend and its practice. Thomas Aquinas distinguished between interior and exterior suffering based on its impetus from one’s appetite (interior) or association (exterior).  

From this conversation, the suffering of Christ was considered with varying conclusions about whether or not Christ actually suffered. Bonaventure, believing that Christ did suffer and experienced pain in his soul as a result of his soul’s union with the body, resolves this conflict internally by concluding that Christ simultaneously experienced divine joy in his soul in the Passion experience. It was essential to acknowledge Christ’s suffering as this connected him to humanity by demonstrating his own humanness. Franciscan Matthew of Aquasparta (1240-1302) is noted by Mowbray as further clarifying that this suffering was a “suffering of compassion,” which was greater than personal suffering. It is the motive of the suffering which magnifies it and provides the impetus for those who seek to imitate it for likewise divine motives.  

By connecting fully with the suffering of Christ, piety, “for virtually all the female mystics,” was “palpably physical.” The medieval believer deepened his or her relationship with God “by encountering the bleeding flesh of the wounded Jesus.” They gained “spiritual authority” by “imitating the enfleshed God—through sacramental life, prayers for the dead, 

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92 Ibid., 21.
93 Ibid., 37-8.
94 Ibid., 39.
95 Finke, “Mystical Bodies and the Dialogics of Vision,” 38.
liturgical role-playing, and even Christological self-wounding.” These practices became increasingly popular in the fourteenth century along with rituals of purgation, penance, and salvation. As women engaged these rituals and proclaimed mystical experiences, they (perhaps inadvertently) demonstrated a level of independence that challenged the church’s authority even as they operated within the church’s authority. Their influence is reflected in women like Catherine, who labored to bring the papacy back to Rome after it had been moved to Avignon.

As indicated, Catherine is not unlike other medieval Christians in this regard. Hildegard of Bingen, Julian of Norwich, Beatrice of Nazareth and others expressed desires for suffering as necessary components of their desires to grow in faith and faithfulness to God. Mitchell did not desire the most intense suffering she experienced, but learned to embrace it as an integral part of her growth.

Within the context of loss of life, Catherine provides a perspective that is relevant to Mitchell. In Catherine’s conversation with God, God says to Catherine, “You know that love always brings suffering if what a person has identified with is lost.” It cannot be avoided.

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97 Hildegard of Bingen (c.1098-1179) was a Benedictine nun in Germany known for her writings and musical compositions. Hildegard founded two monasteries. She was her parents tenth child and was sick from birth. Hildegard began experiencing visions at a young age (age three) and was given to the church by her parents as a child. Hildegard’s writings tell of her struggle, suffering, and tribulations. Julian of Norwich, who has been previously discussed, experienced a series of intense visions while ill; visions of Christ’s crucifixion in which she felt the physical pain of Christ as he hung on the cross. Beatrice of Nazareth (c.1200-1268) was a Cistercian nun of Flemish origin and is recognized as the first prose writer using the Dutch language. Beatrice was sent to a religious community at age seven after the death of her mother. Her *Seven Ways of Holy Love* describes the process of purifying and transforming love in order to return it to God. Beatrice is known for an intensity of experience, believing that Jesus used a fiery dart to pierce her heart. Among Beatrice’s practices was the wearing of a girdle of thorns and tying her body with cords.
because “the soul cannot live without love. She always wants to love something because love is the stuff she is made of, and through love I [God] created her.”

Catherine traces the roots of suffering and the desire that caused suffering back to love, which is a necessity of life. If love is to be truly experienced, suffering is a necessary byproduct. This love is a choice made by a soul which longs for love, for “I have told you that the will alone is the source of suffering.” God wants to be desired and chosen by humans in this manner, so choosing suffering is affirming and welcoming God. As Mitchell welcomes God, accepts God’s love, and chooses to love others, she enters fully into both the love and suffering described by Catherine. This transforms suffering from an unwelcome necessity of love into a noble affirmation of faith, and changes what was perceived as bad and painful into something that is good and fulfilling.

Mitchell demonstrates her willingness to welcome suffering by describing her emerging understanding of purpose and the struggles that accompany the acceptance of this purpose. This is accomplished by using the imagery of the cross, an analogy which builds on Jesus’ admonition that “Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me,” explaining her “cross” or burden in life as follows,

I submit…that my cross is no longer a place of torture—my cross is, in fact, my thing, what I am all about…the responsibility with which I was endowed at birth; the very purpose for which I was born, and for which I was equipped by God. It is the

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99 Ibid., 98.

100 Holy Bible (NIV), Matthew 16:24, Mark 8:34, Luke 9:23.
activity which for me is joy and fulfillment. It is a burden and in a broad sense a cross but it is in me and it must be expressed and if I refuse to “take it up” and “carry it,” my life will be greatly impoverished. To squelch this much of my being—the real “me,” is to breed deep depression and utter frustration—indeed it is as “spiritual” suicide—destruction of my soul.  

Catherine records God saying, “And because my servants are stripped of their own will and clothed in mine, they feel no grief in suffering but feel me in their souls by grace and are satisfied. Without me they could never be satisfied even if they possessed the whole world. For created things are less than the human person. They were made for you, not you for them, and so they can never satisfy you” and further, “I send people troubles in this world so that they may know that their goal is not this life, and that these things are imperfect and passing. I am their goal, and I want them to want me.” Mitchell similarly urges in prayer that one, “Pour out your soul in petition for the things for which your very soul cries. But start with ‘If it fits into your holy and righteous and providential will, let this or that be done.’ And just to be sure God doesn’t get the idea that your prayer was a grocery list for God as grocery boy, be sure to say, ‘Nevertheless. Nevertheless. Nevertheless, not my will but thine be done.’ This prefaces a conversation on the meaning of suffering for Catherine, as it was a significant component of spiritual growth. It is reminiscent of Mitchell’s experience, which did encompass grief—in the case of her son, it was a life-long grief—but it was not crippling, it was empowering. Mitchell became a mother for generations of others, sharing freely a love

101 Ella Mitchell, “Self Denial—Mark 8:34” (sermon, Emory University Canon Chapel, Atlanta, GA, September 11, 1988), Private Collection, 7-8.

102 Catherine of Siena, Catherine of Siena: The Dialogue, 98-100.

that stemmed directly from God. All of this occurred because Mitchell desired a closer relationship with God and valued all of God’s creation.

A central theme for Catherine is that suffering is spurned by the soul’s love and desire for God. The soul that cares for and wants God in this way will seek out and readily accept suffering in order to prove itself and in order to achieve a closeness to God that would not otherwise be possible. For Catherine, the stirring of the soul is its process of rising in its “desire for God’s honor.”\(^{104}\) Though Mitchell did not seek the loss of her son or sister-in-law, she accepted these losses and turned to God in their midst.

Mitchell also did not seek much of the rejection she experienced in life but she did not allow early experiences of rejection and oppression to cause her to turn away from them in her life. Instead, Mitchell sought out opportunities to rise to the calling God had placed in her heart, knowing this would cause her to face rejection and discrimination, saying of her response of fortitude and love, “The only person who could make me bitter would be me.”\(^{105}\) For Mitchell, this was not an acceptable alternative. Mitchell chose to stand for what she believed was right and to touch those whom others hated and disdained. Mitchell’s life demonstrates Catherine’s willingness to accept suffering and to approach it with God’s love and a sense of God-given purpose.

This willingness to suffer is significant because it impresses the soul’s desire upon God. It lets God know that the desire is sincere and, as such, makes God happy. God says to

\(^{104}\) Catherine of Siena, *Catherine of Siena: The Dialogue*, 25.

Catherine, “The willing desire to suffer every pain and hardship even to the point of death for the salvation of souls is very pleasing to me. The more you bear, the more you show your love for me. In loving me you come to know more of my truth, and the more you know, the more intolerable pain and sorrow you will feel when I am offended.”\(^{106}\) This statement is the nexus of Catherine’s desire. Suffering is noble and the greater the suffering, the greater the nobility. For Catherine, suffering is so significant to one’s justification before God that it should be sought.

Catherine, leaning on the words of the Gospel according to Mark, indicates, “suffering and sorrow increase in proportion to love: When love grows, so does sorrow. So I say to you: Ask and it shall be given to you” (Mark 11:24).\(^ {107}\) This belief leads Catherine to make a leap that, while normative in the Medieval time period of her experience, may seem overzealous in the twenty-first century context: it is to ask for suffering. Catherine’s explanation for this desire is plausible. Love should lead the person who loves God to ask for suffering. Perhaps this is inherently what Mitchell did when she accepted the call to ordained ministry, or when she stood up to the police officers with guns drawn in the Furnace Quarters, or as she kept her seat on the segregated bus. Mitchell demonstrated a willingness to welcome suffering in exchange for the freedom of the oppressed.

Catherine introduces a reversal of the commonly held views of God, the Sunday School view of God, in which God removes all suffering and heals all pain. God is presented in

\(^{106}\) Catherine of Siena, *Catherine of Siena: The Dialogue*, 33.

\(^{107}\) Ibid.
modern theology as a relief from suffering, not a source of suffering and certainly not
justification for it. God’s words to Catherine are, “So you see, every soul desirous of grace
loves me—as she ought—without limit or condition. And with my own infinite love she
loves her neighbors with the measured and ordered charity I have described, never bringing
on herself the evil of sin in doing good for others. Saint Paul taught you this when he said
that charity cannot fully profit others unless it begins with oneself. For when perfection is not
in the soul, whatever she does, whether for herself or for others, is imperfect.”108 Within this
context, Mitchell’s statement, “When you put the kingdom of God first you are then
protected against having your unselfish love exploited by some lesser goal,”109 bears
repeating.

Catherine is also echoed by the thoughts of Galilea, demonstrating the communal nature
of God’s love as it outreaches to and helps others. As God’s love is fully experienced, it
overflows to others. Catherine is describing a form of conversion that is akin to Galilea’s. It
is to suggest that the full experience of God’s love leads to suffering not merely due to
personal response but because it connects the person more fully to humanity and the
suffering—the needs—of those around him or her.

The challenge Catherine authors is one that truly questions the sincerity of commitment
to God. For Catherine, total commitment must be demonstrated and the desire of the soul
should be completely consuming—it must be fully converted. The penetrating desire leads

108 Ibid., 44.

the soul to rise up, “restless with tremendous desire for God’s honor and the salvation of souls,” and to love and serve in the model of Galilea. Mitchell expresses similar intensity in the statement, “Whatever you do, do it now—but do it with all of your strength, with full commitment.” For Catherine, this soul does not only pursue God at some isolated or distinct moment, she (the soul) “has for some time exercised herself in virtue and has become accustomed to dwelling in the cell of self-knowledge in order to know better God’s goodness toward her, since upon knowledge follows love. And loving, she seeks to pursue truth and clothe herself in it.” The soul becomes completely engrossed in and surrounded by God—the soul is converted and fully internalizes God’s love.

God speaks of these souls with assuredness and what seems to be a sense of pride. These have proven their love and demonstrated it consistently. They have made God happy and fulfilled God’s desire for reciprocating love. Because of this, God is sure that if they suffer and are “tempted in order to test their virtue, they stand firm.” This is ensured because their suffering has developed a humility which reassures them that their suffering is deserved. Since this suffering is deserved, it must be borne without complaint.

Being clothed in suffering, wearing it as a mantle, is to be totally consumed by it and completely surrounded by it. It is an inseparable reality of life—suffering, like clothing,

111 Catherine of Siena, Catherine of Siena: The Dialogue, 25.
112 Ibid., 93.
113 Ibid.
clings to the subject. Catherine adds a new dimension to the reason for suffering in this statement, indicating that suffering is not merely an unfortunate reality of life or a necessary part of love. It is deserved. Suffering is deserved because one is “unworthy of spiritual peace” and therefore suffering is to be accepted without complaint or disturbance. Mitchell applies the biblical example of the woman who had a bleeding disorder that persisted for twelve years as an example of one who suffered and had no special claim to justification, saying, “Our nameless heroine of faith…had access to the unlimited powers of our Lord—It was not because she was a spiritual giant, but because she was willing to let Him be the LORD!” This woman was in a posture of surrender to God.

This, for Catherine, is central to spiritual growth and development. Catherine challenges the believer to not only seek suffering through a sense of nobility and an attempt to honor God but to accept suffering precisely because of a lack of nobility and inability to honor God. It is precisely this humility that allows one to bear suffering joyfully, because it is wholly deserved. Galilea’s edict to be in solidarity with the poor is to share their suffering without complaint. An example of this is evident in Mitchell’s life, with a childhood family economy that “was based on bartered blessings,” and limited resources, “walking to save a nickel subway fare” as a student at Union Theological Seminary, and selling the first family car

114 Ibid.

because she and Henry could not afford to keep it.\textsuperscript{116} The experience of lack likens one to Jesus and demonstrates a conversion that connects the converted to Jesus and to neighbor undeniably.

This statement completes the circle of justification for suffering, for it is both desired (as is solidarity with the poor) and deserved. Catherine provides an exhortation that further justifies the necessity of suffering even for those with no sense of nobility or honor. In the midst of these difficult statements that suffering is deserved, Catherine’s words reassure the reader of the goodness of God, who says to Catherine, “I am goodness itself and cannot will anything but good. And I send these things out of love, not hatred.”\textsuperscript{117} The fact that “history [is] in the hands of God”\textsuperscript{118} is Mitchell’s articulation of the assurance and trust in God’s providence and love. It is love that connects the believer to this aspect of Jesus’ experience and that compels the believer—the converted believer—to embrace suffering as part of loving God, self, and others.

Catherine explores what is not a novel concept, that suffering is often too uncomfortable, even for the staunchest believer and most strict adherent to the rules of God and laws of the church. For the believer who may be struggling with the idea or reality of suffering, it is further presented as a strategy used by God to intensify one’s desire and faith. Catherine demonstrates that suffering will only make one stronger and draw one nearer to God. God


\textsuperscript{117} Catherine of Siena, \textit{Catherine of Siena: The Dialogue}, 93.

\textsuperscript{118} Mitchell, “Faith of Our Ancestors (An Exodus of Our Own),” np.
says, “Sometimes…I will let her desire them when she cannot have them. Because she cannot have them her hunger grows, and with her hunger her self-knowledge grows because in her humility she considers herself unworthy. Then I make her worthy.”119 Mitchell not only demonstrates a willingness to suffer without complaint, but she demonstrates the growth and reflection that occurs through suffering to draw one nearer to God.

Catherine’s words are echoed by common modern sentiment. The novelty of Catherine is the exegesis of the sentiment. The Dialogue provides a clear explanation for suffering beyond the simple faith statements that: “God will provide,” “God will not allow more than the person can bear,” or “God will heal.” Catherine explains why God allows it and what God intends to accomplish through it. For both the rational and irrational, this explanation provides structure to the often chaotic and overwhelming experience of suffering. To all of this, Catherine adds, “the value is not in the suffering but in the soul’s desire,”120 as a further admonition to accept suffering gladly and, more so, to desire suffering for its goodness. Likewise, Galilea and Mitchell contend that the value in outreach to the poor is not in the act but in the heart of the act. It must stem from an unconditional and unwavering love, as does Catherine’s desire for suffering.

One of the key results of suffering is that it draws the believer inward, so that the person learns about him or herself. Of her son Hank, Mitchell reflects, “he had called us back to our basics, and his smile now mirrored the joy of a kind of triumph…it’s still blessing us.”

119 Catherine of Siena, Catherine of Siena: The Dialogue, 293.

120 Ibid., 29.
Further, “we would have to trust God on the basis of all the other experiences that had eventually ended in good.”\textsuperscript{121} Mitchell proves Catherine’s premise, that the prolonged exposure to hardship and the searching for meaning and for God, inevitably help the sufferer to find out more about self. This self-awakening is humbling, as the soul sees itself and its imperfections. It is a process described by Renita Weems and Barbara Brown Taylor\textsuperscript{122} as well, as a self-discovery becomes both a by-product and prerequisite of the successful quest to be nearer to God. This self-revelation underscores the justification for suffering, “As the soul comes to know herself she also knows God better, for she sees how good he has been to her. In the gentle mirror of God she sees her own dignity: that through no merit of hers but by his creation she is the image of God. And in the mirror of God’s goodness she sees as well her own unworthiness, the work of her own sin. For just as you can better see the blemish on your face when you look at yourself in a mirror, so the soul who in true self-knowledge rises up with desire to look at herself in the gentle mirror of God with the eye of understanding sees all the more clearly her own defects because of the purity she sees in him.”\textsuperscript{123} Though the soul sees its imperfection, it also sees God’s love and, in this, it is converted.

\textsuperscript{121} Mitchell and Mitchell, \textit{Together for Good}, 205.

\textsuperscript{122} Renita Weems is an Old Testament Bible scholar and an ordained elder in the African Methodist Episcopal Church. (See chap. 1, n. 13).

Barbara Brown Taylor (1951-) is an Episcopal priest and professor at Piedmont College, Demorest, Georgia. Taylor has written numerous books on faith and spirituality and has been awarded the Emory Medal by the Emory University Alumni Association. In 1996, Taylor was named one of the twelve most effective preachers in the English-speaking world by Baylor University and in 2010 was named one of the ten most influential living preachers by the Southern Baptist Convention.

\textsuperscript{123} Catherine of Siena, \textit{Catherine of Siena: The Dialogue}, 48.
Similar to Catherine, for Taylor pain draws one deeper into an understanding of God and God’s purpose. The pain prompts disillusionment with God, the world, and self. It is a dismantling of previously held notions about the character and quality of God in order to rebuild a new, true concept of God, “to turn away from the God who was supposed to be in order to seek the God who is.”

Mitchell has been noted as clarifying that God is not a “grocery boy” to whom a checklist can be given; instead, one must approach God with a desire for God’s will to be fulfilled. Taylor’s sentiments echo those of Catherine but with the caveat that the previously held understanding of God may have been more than inadequate, it may have been false. For Weems there is a discovery that God is broader than previously understood. Mitchell contends that this revelation comes through the experience of God, saying, “the Jews learned who they were by watching what God did for them in the Exodus, so we must learn who WE are by looking at what God has done for us.” Of the biblical story of the parting of the Red Sea, Mitchell adds, “Because this was the most amazing feat since the flood, the Hebrew children saw themselves in a totally different light. Prior to this, they hadn’t really known who God was.” Further, “If you don’t know your spiritual history, you don’t know your identity under God. Which is to say that you don’t know WHO you are as a believer, and can’t defend your faith in a hostile world.”


To Galilea this means discovering that God is a God of the oppressed and that, to be one with God, one must be in solidarity with the oppressed. For Catherine, there is a deepening understanding of God in this process. Mitchell leans on a God who understands the rejection and pain of slavery because of the lived experience of Jesus. For Taylor, God is personally in touch with experiences of pain. Taylor indicates, “We need a God who knows about pain. Anyone who has suffered through even one night of deep hurt knows what it is to beg for relief.”

The pain, or suffering, experienced by the believer is one also shared by God. For Taylor, it is more than the result of humanity’s sin; it is God’s ability to fully connect with the human condition.

In this pain, Taylor admits that the presence of God is felt and that this presence overrides the feelings of pain. Taylor says of their pain, “those who have been there will often say that the strange, sweet presence of Christ in their suffering becomes dearer to them than the hope of recovery.” Like Catherine, the purpose of the suffering makes it more bearable for Taylor. Mitchell notes, “The best of our [African American] past includes a repertoire of understandings or beliefs or insights which confer upon the greatest adversities, the most absurd and tragic horrors—the possibility of some ultimate meaning…Black history is dominated…by just such affirmations which keep us alive and well even today.”


128 Ibid.

For Mitchell, knowing there is purpose in her suffering makes it something she can endure and something African Americans have endured throughout time. Catherine, Taylor, Weems, and Mitchell each maintain that suffering has value and yields tremendous results. This leads each to conclude that earthly pain should be accepted and borne without preoccupation or complaint. This view that redemption occurs through suffering is in contrast to the frustration of Townes, who expresses that “a womanist ethic must be dedicated to eliminating suffering on the grounds that its removal is God’s redeeming purpose”130 and Fanon who, in analysis of colonialism expresses that “violence is a cleansing force.”131

In repeated cases, this noble conclusion about the value of suffering does not stop Taylor and Weems from complaining, especially in Weems’ case, showing their humanity and the overarching difficulty of the experience of pain and suffering. In the case of her son, Mitchell complains, too. Taylor poignantly expresses the repeated disappointments through a series of questions that ultimately lead to a greater understanding of who God is through a better understanding of who God is not. This negative theology is instrumental in Taylor’s model of dispelling the “lies we have mistaken for the truth” which have been commonplace in tradition and teaching. Taylor says that this is an intentional process initiated by God and that

Every letdown becomes a lesson and a lure. Did God fail to come when I rubbed the lantern? Then perhaps God is not a genie. Who, then, is God? Did God fail to punish my enemies? Then perhaps God is not a cop. Who, then, is God? Did God fail to make everything run smoothly? Then perhaps God is not a mechanic. Who, then, is God? Over and over, my disappointments draw me deeper into the mystery of God’s

130 Townes, *A Troubling in My Soul: Womanist Perspectives on Evil and Suffering*, 84.

131 Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, 73.
being and doing. Every time God declines to meet my expectations, another of my idols is exposed. Another curtain is drawn back so that I can see what I have propped up in God’s place. No, that is not God. Who, then, is God? It is the question of a lifetime, and the answers are never big enough or finished.132

Taylor describes a process of searching that ultimately leads to conversion. It is at this point, that their theologies are reconciled with that of Townes, who indicates that “through the Suffering Servant, God has spoken against evil and injustice…The resurrection moves humanity past suffering to pain and struggle. The resurrection is God’s breaking into history to transform suffering into wholeness—to move the person from victim to change agent.”133

For Taylor, this discovery experience necessarily includes self discovery and creative discovery. Weems introduces the concepts that the deepening relationship with and knowledge of God also result in deepening knowledge and appreciation of oneself and of creation. Taylor expresses that, while God has been found “in books, in buildings, and even in other people,” that “the most reliable meeting place for me has always been creation.”134

This journey nurtures a compassion within Taylor that would not have otherwise been present. Taylor expresses that the inward journey cannot occur without an awakening compassion and empathy for others, saying, “Day by day, the practical implication of this feeling of communion was that I could not walk by a hurt thing without hurting too.”135

Taylor, in this statement, connects with Galilea most clearly—fraternal love is key. In it

132 Taylor, God in Pain, 20.
133 Townes, A Troubling in My Soul: Womanist Perspectives on Evil and Suffering, 84.
134 Taylor, Leaving Church, 79.
135 Ibid., 25.
Taylor also connects with Mitchell, who says, “To be sure, we need warmth, we need support systems, we need interest and concern, sharing and caring but above all we need love, love the ingredient that makes human existence human and therefore possible!”

Catherine, Taylor, and Weems demonstrate that which Galilea articulates throughout his writings: one must seek a deeper relationship with God and, as one does so, he or she will find a deepened love for others. This love will compel the converted to stand in solidarity with the poor, not simply tossing gifts to them but truly loving them and connecting with them in their experience. It is a choice to accept God’s love in this way, to be converted, and to stand with all others in unconditional love as Mitchell did daily.

B. Faith in Action: The Word in Works

Mitchell’s actions, and in particular her writings, demonstrate a combination of belief and action that is reminiscent of the ministry of Jesus. Mitchell’s faith is not an intangible, hypothetical, or academic exercise—it produces results that include outreach and activism. Galilea notes that Jesus’ model of spirituality was not simply rooted in belief, but that it was active. It was an intense and unwavering belief that compelled Jesus to act throughout his life and to his death. This was demonstrated through radical stands against all odds and through extreme acts of love to strangers and sinners. This willingness to act was equally apparent in the life of Mitchell in the early twentieth century as she grew up and throughout the twentieth

and early twenty-first centuries as she lived. Gregory of Nyssa,\textsuperscript{137} the fourth century mystic, indicates that “The perfection of the Christian life…[is] not only by our mind and soul but in all the actions of our lives.”\textsuperscript{138}

Though Mitchell’s transformative faith began with overcoming low self image, it ultimately yielded action that fostered the transformation of others. A trailblazer of the twentieth century, Mitchell was the product of African American women who grew up in the nineteenth century American culture both through family and extended influence. Their tradition interpreted Bible narratives like the Exodus from Egypt literally and as proof of God’s concern for the oppressed. Unlike Gregory of Nyssa who interpreted this narrative figuratively, likening the Egyptian army to the “passions of man’s soul which enslave him,”\textsuperscript{139} this narrative served as proof of God’s intent to provide not only for internal needs but for external ones as well.

Mitchell became an instrument of God’s will to provide for the needs of others at a young age through outreach and activism. Key aspects of Mitchell’s life will be revisited to demonstrate this commitment. Mitchell began visiting the sick as a child with her father saying, “I took them on as part of my responsibility too…and [to] make dresses, and slips,

\textsuperscript{137} Gregory of Nyssa (c.335-c.394) worked to demonstrate that Christian philosophy was superior to Greek philosophy. He served as bishop of Nyssa, located in modern day Turkey and was a part of the Second Ecumenical Council in 381. Gregory is best known for being partially responsible for the doctrine of the trinity (that God, Jesus, and the Holy Spirit are one), and for positing that salvation is infinite and universal.


\textsuperscript{139} Ibid., 91.
especially, for some of the little girls.” This became a regular part of Mitchell’s routine and she engaged in visits not only with her father, but also on her own. She would prepare food for those she visited and looked forward to this outreach. Mitchell further acknowledges, “I was always in one church or another, so I didn’t just start getting interested in religious work…I would play the piano for the Methodist church, I would sing in the Catholic church…I played for an Episcopal church Sunday school and played for our church.”

Mitchell committed her childhood to service.140

In addition to direct outreach, Mitchell fostered a growing awareness of injustice as a child. While reflecting on the disturbing presence of a slave auction block as not far from her home, Mitchell says, “Right there…I shudder to think, sometimes…I still don’t understand it, really.” This awareness eventually grew into an activism that challenged injustice. Mitchell explains her growing sense of activism, indicating that initially she “was not going to make ‘any waves’” or create any problems for herself or anyone else. As a teen, however, Mitchell refused to move from a seat on a segregated public bus though ordered to do so by the driver. She explains, “I got to the place where I would dare to do all kinds of things like sitting on the bus where I wanted to sit on the bus in South Carolina, and having the driver tell me, ‘You can’t sit there.’” After this Mitchell began to walk to all of her destinations.141

140 Poussaint, interview, 11.

141 Ibid., 7.
As a young adult in college, Mitchell began journeying to an impoverished area known as the Furnace Quarters. It was “dark and dirty,” recounts Mitchell and “the students I invited to help me begged off.” Despite the danger and solemnity of the journey, Mitchell visited this place each week. “Some of my female schoolmates did help me with the layettes we made for expectant mothers, but I always went down to the Quarters alone. It was said to be a dangerous place,” says Mitchell. “The only people who ever bothered me were the town police, who stopped me one Sunday and insisted that no college student should be down there,” yet Mitchell continued to go faithfully. Mitchell delivered needed supplies to these families each time she went to teach a Bible class.142

Mitchell emerged as a leader who paved her own unique path for the benefit of others. She extended outreach to families and individuals and she stood against systemic injustice. Mitchell was a leader in a demonstration in Birmingham, Alabama that occurred when her group was prohibited from sitting in the same section of the auditorium as first lady Eleanor Roosevelt. Mitchell also describes an impromptu protest in a store known for discriminatory practices where she sat down in an area for whites and refused to move. On another occasion, when Mitchell was refused the use of a restroom she threatened to urinate on the floor in the store at which point the store clerk acquiesced. Mitchell demonstrates a practice of engaging in social protest against oppression.

In 1943, Mitchell began a cross-country road trip with two friends, one African American and one white. Mitchell describes this trip as “adventurous” given the risks associated with their traveling together. During this trip, Mitchell could not stay in the same room as her white friend while in Tulsa, Oklahoma nor enter the property’s front steps. In Little Rock, Arkansas, Mitchell’s cousin was terrified of having a white woman stay at his house, so he paid for her to stay somewhere else. Despite these and other challenges, Mitchell continued the trip and modeled the future of race relations in the U.S.\textsuperscript{143}

In her married life, Mitchell continued a practice which served the poor and challenged injustice. She and Henry helped organize a march in Fresno, California in which Martin Luther King, Jr. participated. She and her husband adopted an orphaned, starving child from war torn Korea. The annual family practice during Christmas was to donate gifts to others, leading them to send clothing to children in Africa and house an orphaned teen, among other things. It is during this time that Mitchell began preaching and teaching with regularity, through which she ensured her voice served as inspiration to others for service and equality.

Mitchell believed her life belonged to God. With that, despite deeply rooted insecurities, Mitchell believed she had rights. She grew to a place in which she would assert these rights for herself and for others. Mitchell asserted Galilea’s belief that “by giving that suffering a sense of mission it [the Christian community] is able to represent other communities before

\textsuperscript{143} Poussaint, interview, 17.
the Father and to redeem the suffering of the many.”\textsuperscript{144} Even as she spoke up and staged protests, Mitchell believed she was embodying the message of God. Beyond this, Mitchell believed each person had value, regardless of social or economic standing and she treated each person with a dignity and respect that stemmed from this belief. Mitchell finds a parallel in women like Sojourner Truth, who also struggled with self worth and struggled against injustice.

Mitchell follows on the heels of a legacy of nineteenth century women who recorded their experiences in the struggle for liberation. Mitchell speaks of this generation of women, saying, “Granmas, ye were spiritual giants. You managed to stay alive and loving (you never got bitter), only by faith. Your names, too, are inscribed in a Hall of Spiritual Fame somewhere in the Kingdom of God.”\textsuperscript{145} In understanding Mitchell’s spirituality, it is helpful to visit the examples of these women whose generation Mitchell venerated, and to review their interpretation of the Bible, and their experience as African Americans. These women, Sojourner Truth (c.1797-1883),\textsuperscript{146} Jarena Lee (1783-c.1850),\textsuperscript{147} Zilpha Elaw (1790-

\textsuperscript{144} Galilea, The Way of Living Faith, 118-9.


\textsuperscript{146} Sojourner Truth was born Isabella Baumfree, a slave in Swartekill, New York. In 1843 she renamed herself Sojourner Truth in response to an ecstatic experience in which God spoke to her. Truth was brutally beaten as a slave and was separated from her parents and children. Truth escaped from slavery in 1826 with her infant daughter after her master reneged on an agreement to release her and became an abolitionist and women’s rights advocate. Truth filed legal proceedings for the return of her son, who had been illegally sold. Truth is one of the most widely known African American female abolitionists and one of few African American women in her time to have a written record of her life, providing unique insight into her experience. Her 1851 speech on racial inequality has been dubbed, “Ain’t I a Woman,” from a phrase repeated by Truth during the
c.1845, and Maria Stewart (1803-1879), each lived their adult lives during the nineteenth century and each profess a calling from God and each converted her faith into action to improve her life and the lives of oppressed people in society. Each bore the shared struggles associated with her race and gender and spoke to these experiences in her writings. Indeed, their writings form a rare collection of autobiographical accounts from nineteenth century African American women. The boldness exhibited in either writing or commissioning to write their life stories demonstrates a unique trait in each of these women, a trait that separates them from their counterparts and casts them as exemplars for others. In each case, the women express a firm understanding of the segregated reality into which they were born, each experienced hardship and suffering through loss and discrimination, each felt speech, and fueled her popularity as a preacher and speaker for slave and women’s rights. William Andrews, ed. Classic African American Women’s Narratives (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003).

147 Born free, Jarena Lee is the first woman who was licensed to preach by the African Methodist Episcopal Church and the first to write an autobiographical account of her life. Lee, too, fills a unique position as one of few African American women of her time to leave a written account of her experience. Lee requested ordination for many years and was repeatedly denied. Her licensing came as a result of an extemporaneous message Lee delivered when the scheduled preacher became ill. Though licensed to preach, Lee was never ordained. Lee began experiencing visions as a child and engaged in months of sanctification to feel worthy of God’s call. William Andrews, ed. Classic African American Women’s Narratives (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003).

148 Zilpha Elaw was born free, began experiencing visions of God as a child, and accepted the call to preach in her twenties. She worked as an independent itinerant preacher, supporting her ministry for over one decade. Elaw moved to England and recorded her spiritual memoirs, which share her personal struggle, feelings of rejection, and calling by God. William Andrews, ed. Classic African American Women’s Narratives (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003).

149 Maria Stewart stands apart as one of only a handful of African American women of the nineteenth century with a written record of her experience. She was orphaned at a young age and lived with a family that abused her and deprived her of education. Stewart had a hunger for God and sought to learn more about God and the church. Mitchell battled with depression and suicidal thoughts for many years, being freed from this by the experience of God. Mitchell was an avid abolitionist; she started a school and regularly spoke in public, later publishing her written works. William Andrews, ed. Classic African American Women’s Narratives (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003).
called by God, and each responded to this call in a way that placed them at odds with the norms of society and, in some cases, at odds with those closest to them. They are the trailblazers who forged a path for Mitchell’s generation, inspired women like Mitchell in their accomplishments, and provided parallel experiences that empowered Mitchell and her generation to confront and overcome hardship.

The experiences of Truth, Lee, Elaw, and Stewart are offered to demonstrate parallels in the experience of nineteenth century African American women and that of Mitchell, a twentieth century African American woman, in the move toward liberation through faith. Common to their experiences are feelings of fear or inadequacy that were overcome through experience with God, hardship and suffering as a result of discrimination and personal loss, and bold public messages against oppression. Each of these is also shared by Mitchell as key components in her liberation.

As Sojourner Truth fled slavery, first telling God that she was afraid and then thanking God for the clear instructions about when to leave, she demonstrated the insecurity followed by boldness that Mitchell would later confess. Truth shares Galilea’s belief that “Human history—which due to Christ is the history of the liberation and salvation of humanity—is dominated by the idea that this salvation is made possible by a remnant (chosen people) selected from among the multitude and that serves, and in a certain way represents, that
multitude. God saves everyone by means of the historical mission of a few.¹⁵⁰ Truth’s action reflects a belief that God spoke directly to her, “So, receiving it as coming direct from God, she acted upon it”¹⁵¹ and she became one of the most respected abolitionists of her time.

Truth’s words challenge Christians to hear the word of God and note the inconsistencies between God’s word and their behaviors. She says Americans are “professing to believe in the existence of a God—yet trading in his image, and selling those in the shambles for whose redemption the Son of God laid down his life! Professing to be Christians—yet withholding the Bible, the means of religious instruction, even the knowledge of the alphabet, from a benighted multitude, under terrible penalties!”¹⁵²

This theme of challenge is repeated throughout the narrative as Truth recounts her experiences of mistreatment, both in slavery and out of slavery. Truth’s message is clear—action is required to correct injustice. Further, Truth’s experience is perhaps one of the most dramatic of those recorded by nineteenth century women, as she lived several decades in slavery and, therefore, suffered some of the harshest forms of physical abuse. Truth died only thirty-four years before Mitchell’s birth, and exhibits significant similarities to Mitchell’s experience despite their different backgrounds. Truth boldly proclaims:

Americans! We hear your boasts of liberty, your shouts of independence, your declarations of hostility to every form of tyranny, your assertions that all men are created free and equal…but mingling with all these, and rising above them all, we

¹⁵⁰ Galilea, The Way of Living Faith, 115-16.


¹⁵² Ibid., 44.
also hear the clanking of chains! The shrieks and wailings of millions of your own
countrymen, whom you wickedly hold in a state of slavery…We see your banner
floating proudly in the breeze from every flag-staff and mast-head in the land; but its
blood-red stripes are emblematical of your own slave-driving cruelty, as you apply
the lash to the flesh of your guiltless victim, even the flesh of a wife and mother,
shrieking for the restoration of the babe of her bosom, sold to the remorseless slave
speculator!\textsuperscript{153}

The very underpinning of American tradition is seen in conflict with the core of Truth’s
understanding of Christianity. When her own son was illegally sold she determined, “I’ll
have my child again…Oh, my God! I know’d I’d have him agin. I was sure God would help
me to get him.”\textsuperscript{154} When Truth received her son, who had been brainwashed and badly
beaten, she voices thoughts of vengeance, saying, “Oh Lord, ‘render unto them double’ for
all this! Oh my God!”\textsuperscript{155} Truth’s expression of concern for vengeance, however, is limited as
she spends more time reflecting on her own vileness and lack of worth. Similar to Mitchell,
Truth reflects the impact of a communal sense of unworthiness, feeling that it is impossible
to measure up to society’s standard—due to the color of her skin.

Truth’s theology emerges in the likeness of liberation theology, which connects God with
the experiences of the suffering. It also develops a theology of resistance and discontent—
one which sees God involved in and concerned about not just spiritual redemption, but also
physical redemption. This leads Truth, like Mitchell, to demonstrate a boldness that causes
her to step out of “her place” and to challenge society not only collectively but individually.

\textsuperscript{153} Ibid., 43.
\textsuperscript{154} Ibid., 65.
\textsuperscript{155} Ibid., 70.
When Mitchell indicates, “My theology is based in the experience of my walk with God, as a Black woman, for all these years, and the fact that all theology must be generated on the basis of need and function,” she goes on to clarify that “It is…an African assumption that God made Bibles and doctrine to serve us, not God, just as Jesus said that the Sabbath was made for man and not man for the Sabbath (Mark 2:27).”\textsuperscript{156} This struggle to find one’s place is evident in Galilea’s description of conversion and in the experience of Mitchell as well as Truth.

Truth demonstrates her struggle in the statement, “She desired to talk to God, but her vileness utterly forbade it.”\textsuperscript{157} This sense of moral and spiritual ineptitude as expressed positioned Truth to experience God and informed her Christology. It reflects the struggle of inadequacy that Mitchell experienced, one which was common to the experience of African American women who had been marginalized throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. The feeling led Truth to hope for a mediator to fill the gap that existed between her and God and to speak on her behalf. Truth’s narrative expresses, “Then a space seemed opening between her and God, and she felt that if someone, who was worthy in the sight of heaven, would but plead for her in their own name…God might grant it.” The result was the appearance of Jesus and a conversion experience which Truth recalls in meticulous detail:

As the vision brightened into a form distinct, beaming with the beauty of holiness, and radiant with love. She then said, audibly addressing the mysterious visitant—’I know you, and I don’t know you.’ Meaning, ‘You seem perfectly familiar; I feel that

\textsuperscript{156} Mitchell, “My Womanist Theology.”

\textsuperscript{157} Truth, \textit{Narrative of Sojourner Truth}, 78.
you not only love me, but that you always have loved me—yet I know you not—I cannot call you by name’...‘Who are you?’ was the cry of her heart, and her whole soul was in one deep prayer that this heavenly personage might be revealed to her, and remain with her. At length, after bending both soul and body with the intensity of this desire, till breath and strength seemed failing, and she could maintain her position no longer, an answer came to her, saying distinctly, ‘It is Jesus.’ ‘Yes,’ she responded, ‘it is Jesus.’

Truth’s encounter of a real Jesus with human characteristics through this ecstatic experience reflects the thoughts of Galilea in that, “God’s historical integration with the human race through Jesus, the son of Mary, is neither a myth nor an abstract idea. It means that he forever remains our brother (Rom. 8:29) in no way different from his other brothers and sisters (Heb. 2:17).” It also reflects those of Mitchell who looks to the overwhelming sorrow Jesus expressed when praying at the Garden of Gethsemane as evidence of his full identification with humanity. This transformative experience exposes both the significance of Jesus and the ecstatic in Truth’s belief system. It is not unlike the experiences of others, including Lee and Elaw, who shall be discussed later. Each experienced a miracle of biblical proportions through unexplained visions and speaking. These experiences represent marked shifts in their lives, moments when their understanding of and relationship with God forever changed. They also represent moments that clarify the women’s uniqueness and value and compelled them to take action. These experiences are reminiscent of the biblical narratives of Moses who saw the bush engulfed in flames though it was not burning, Balaam whose donkey spoke to him as a human, and Elijah who heard a still small voice while alone on a

158 Ibid.

mountain, in the books of Exodus and Kings in Old Testament scripture. These Old Testament accounts were not merely stories for Truth and others, they were lived experiences that evidenced what God could do to speak to them.

This lived faith also imbibed Truth with what appeared to be a fearlessness that caused others to marvel—a fearlessness demonstrated by Mitchell in the face of organized and impromptu protests and police threats in the Furnace Quarters. Of the latter situation, Mitchell responded with a determination “not to give in to their brutish intrusion” and the decision, “before I’d run off—I’d go on home to my Lord.” Truth’s biography recounts an occasion when it seemed that a mob was coming after her. It says, “Under the impulse of this sudden emotion, she fled to the most retired corner of a tent…saying to herself, ‘I am the only colored person here,’” but then “Shall I run away and hide from the Devil? Me, a servant of the living God? Have I not faith enough to go out and quell that mob, when I know it is written—‘One shall chase a thousand, and two put ten thousand to flight.’” When, to the amazement of those around her, Truth went out, she began to sing and the young men who were thought to be rioters, armed with sticks and clubs, encircled her and asked her to sing and talk to them. Once again, Truth travels in the footsteps of Moses who said that


161 Truth, Narrative of Sojourner Truth, 107.

162 Ibid., 108.
they would kill him if he went before the people. He went and he changed their lives—so did she.

Jarena Lee was born a few years prior to Truth, on February 11, 1783 at Cape May, New Jersey. Lee’s experience was vastly different from that of Truth and of Mitchell. According to Richard Douglass-Chin, hers is only the second known autobiography of a woman of African descent in America, written in 1833. Lee’s biography offers specific insight into the accepted roles of women within the African American religious context of the nineteenth century, reflecting prejudices which continued into the time of Mitchell. She was denied full licensing as a minister and, after much persistence was given a preaching license as a minor concession to her requests. In preparation for the third printing of her biography, Lee requested assistance from the church so that she could expand the work. This request was also denied.

Lee was born free, yet she was removed from her parents at the age of seven, when she was sent to live as a servant maid. Lee’s narratives indicate an overwhelming sense of personal sinfulness, a sentiment also expressed by Truth. This feeling was so overwhelming that Lee strongly considered committing suicide. The sense of sinfulness and sickness led Lee to search for something that would resolve these feelings. Those in her new household led her to church, which resulted in an experience with God that strongly impacted her decisions and development.

Ultimately Lee, like Mitchell, drew upon the examples of other women such as Mary of Magdala of the New Testament in validation of her call to preach. For Lee, Mary was the first woman to proclaim the Gospel and, therefore, stood as an example for her. Mitchell recounts the biblical story of Jesus meeting a Samaritan woman at the well and calls her the “first evangelist.”\textsuperscript{164} Lee, like Truth, tells of a supernatural experience in which a voice instructed her to “Go preach the Gospel!”\textsuperscript{165} Lee’s calling is validated through a biblical model of calling that is similar to that of Joshua and Moses.

In response to this sense of calling from God, Lee was emboldened to stand for women’s rights and to ignore the lack of validation from the church to continue to travel the path she believed God had ordained for her. Like Mitchell, Lee waited many years for the church to validate her calling. Mitchell says, “I think my whole life has been like that—wait for your chance, wait for your opportunity. And when it comes, seize it, be the person that you are.”\textsuperscript{166} Lee was eventually licensed to preach in the African Methodist Episcopal Church, a denomination that was formed by slaves and freed slaves in response to racial discrimination experienced in the Methodist Episcopal Church. Her licensing came after many years of denied requests and an occasion in which the scheduled preacher was unable to speak, at which point Lee stood to bring forth the morning message extemporaneously. As a result of this experience, she was licensed but was never ordained as a minister by the church. Of

\textsuperscript{164} Mitchell, \textit{Women: To Preach or Not to Preach: 21 Outstanding Black Preachers Say Yes}, 7.


\textsuperscript{166} Poussaint, interview, 20.
ordination, Mitchell acknowledges resistance as well stating, “I believe I was conceived in
the womb for the purpose of preaching, but Mama didn’t know it, nor did she ever agree that
it was so.”167 When Mitchell was finally scheduled for ordination, it was abruptly cancelled
due to opposition from the pastor.

Maria Stewart is a third example of very few narratives which exist from Mitchell’s
African American female predecessors, women of the nineteenth century. Stewart, born in
1803, began studying the Bible as a child. She was vocal about what she perceived as
hypocrisy in the practice of Christianity in early nineteenth century America. Hence, her
writings were designed to challenge readers. Stewart wrote of her dreams, hopes, and
disappointments. In the midst of this, she spoke mostly of the calling of God for all people to
make a difference in the lives and situations of Africans in America. Stewart internalized the
words of New Testament apostle Paul and agreed that Christianity was a form of warfare.
She voiced the poignant question, “How long shall the fair daughters of Africa be compelled
to bury their minds and talents beneath a load of iron pots and kettles?”168

Stewart, like Mitchell, Lee, and Truth, was closely acquainted with the experience of
oppression. For Stewart, the inability to explore one’s talents and live one’s dreams
represented the greatest injustice, so Stewart spoke up. Like Stewart, Mitchell said, “I say
what I want to say but I don’t use my voice in a very ugly manner…I say to them: I’m glad

167 Mitchell, “Reflections on Strength for Sisters.”

you didn’t make the decision about my life. I am here with God, and I believe that God called me. You can’t do anything about it.”

Born free, the cruel beatings experienced by Truth in slavery were foreign to Stewart, yet there was a shared experience of injustice and mistreatment. Stewart said, “We have never had an opportunity of displaying our talents; therefore the world thinks we know nothing.”

This injustice caused Stewart to turn again and again to biblical scriptures for solace and direction. The result is that Stewart voices her own version of liberation theology by lifting Holy Scriptures for direction.

Stewart establishes that the ability to pursue one’s dreams is subject to racial disparity. This is significant because it is a privilege that is selectively and unjustly denied. Stewart says, “Few white persons of either sex, who are calculated for anything else, are willing to spend their lives and bury their talents in performing mean, servile labor. And such is the horrible idea that I entertain respecting a life of servitude, that if I conceived of there being no possibility of my rising above the condition of a servant, I would gladly hail death as a welcome messenger.” This unimaginable disparity causes Stewart, like the others, to consider eternal rest a favorable alternative and instead to discover the strength to fight for justice as Mitchell would do years later.

169 Poussaint, interview, 26.
170 Stewart, Spiritual Narratives, 17.
171 Ibid., 53.
Stewart foremost expresses a confidence in her ability to make a difference for and in the community. Stewart’s words are not just of confidence in self, but in the total community. Her words challenge both whites and African Americans. In a lecture delivered at Franklin Hall in Boston, Massachusetts, September 21, 1832, Stewart says, “Come let us plead our cause before the whites: if they save us alive, we shall live—and if they kill us, we shall but die. Methinks I heard a spiritual interrogation—‘Who shall go forward, and take off the reproach that is cast upon the people of color? Shall it be a woman?’ and my heart made this reply—‘if it is thy will, be it even so, Lord Jesus!’”172

These early experiences caused each of these women, including Mitchell, to long for help and for deliverance. As they were taught about the Bible, they drew parallels between the stories of Israel and the realities they experienced in America. Even those who were not enslaved were vastly aware of the enslavement of their people and of their own subordinate status even though free. In addition to the individual feelings the women drew from their experiences, there was a recognition that their difficulty was due to a larger, systemic reality.

The reality that each woman’s suffering was not isolated, due to her own family or situation, transformed her pain into a communal experience. This is seen as they provide similar accounts of women very much aware that their skin color marked them as inferior. Mitchell’s experience reflects this not only in blackness but in its degree, as the reality that she was of darker complexion than her sisters was seen as a negative trait. It is in this that the biblical parallel is most apparent—as a modern day community oppressed and mistreated just

172 Ibid., 51.
as the nation of Israel had been a community oppressed and mistreated some millennia earlier.

From this understanding that their experience was a parallel to that of the Israelites and that African Americans were, indeed, God’s new Israel, these women and others in their community called upon God to be their deliverer. This is certainly evidence of a theology strongly rooted in the word of God, in biblical teaching. Theirs became a literal tradition that interpreted God’s word as modern truth, evidenced by their status in society. Galilea says, “The sacrifice that pleases God is to break the unjust chains, untie the yokes, free the oppressed, share bread with the hungry, house the homeless poor, clothe the naked…That is, charity to the needy brother or sister, to the poor, has a religious value for God.”173

Chosen People

The African American community leveraged the belief that they, like the Israelites, were God’s chosen people, destined to be freed from oppression by God’s mighty hand. This understanding meant they bore a responsibility for holiness. Throughout the nineteenth century narratives is a preoccupation with being holy and upright. Truth indicates that she would allow her hungry child to cry rather than steal food to feed it and allow the child to think that stealing was justifiable.174 Stewart says, “Purge us from all our dross; hide thy face from our iniquities, and speak peace to our troubled souls…Bless all the benighted sons and


daughters of Africa.” Lee and Zilpha Elaw speak of the consciences that convicted them when they did wrong. Lee, though she had not yet learned about God, felt a conscience that she has since interpreted as God’s presence, that would bother her when she lied. Elaw, too, speaks of becoming overwhelmed by feelings of sinfulness.

Nancy Gardener Prince, another early African female writer born around 1799 voiced the need for Africans to be upright in their behavior. In order to be God’s chosen people, they must behave in a Godly manner. This, too reflects a literal interpretation of biblical teachings, as God gave Moses the Ten Commandments, promised that he would be their God if they would be God’s people, and required that the people walk uprightly before him and obey his commandments. This “new Israel” was no exception to the rules established for the biblical Israel. The women expressed a belief that God’s deliverance was contingent upon their holiness as individuals and as a community. As such, they are found urging one another to be honest and upright in their behavior.

Their own uprightness serves as further vindication of their unfortunate reality. As they are seen as blameless, there is no reasonable justification for their enslavement and their mistreatment. The words of these early writers echo early strands of liberation theology, defined by Gustavo Guttiérez as “a theological reflection born of the experience of shared


efforts to abolish the current unjust situation and to build a different society.” In it, salvation is more than an eschatological hope for a future life, it is a present hope for the current life. God can save them from this life and God can save, or deliver, them in this life. Stewart notes, “I am this day a living witness to testify that thou art a God, that will ever vindicate the cause of the poor and needy.” For Mitchell, God has proven this in history, defeating the Egyptians and abolishing slavery in America, saying that God opened the Red Sea in both locations. This reflects a profoundly different Christian belief from that of their white counterparts, who while vastly concerned with the afterlife generally did not share the desire to escape or be rescued from their present.

This perspective and necessity generate an alternate theology for those who are oppressed or familiar with what seems as unending degree of suffering in life. Stewart easily states

You may kill, tyrannize, and oppress as much as you choose, until our cry shall come up before the throne of God; for I am firmly persuaded, that he will not suffer you to quell the proud, fearless and undaunted spirits of the Africans forever; for in his own time, he is able to plead our cause against you, and to pour out upon you the ten plagues of Egypt. We will not come out against you with swords and staves, as against a thief; but we will tell you that our souls are fired with the same love of liberty and independence with which your souls are fired. We will tell you that too much of your blood flows in our veins, and too much of your color in our skins, for us not to possess your spirits.

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178 Stewart, *Spiritual Narratives*, 49.


Conversion

For Elaw, God’s deliverance is interpreted not merely as relieving the oppression, but changing her ability to bear the oppression. Reminiscent of David’s biblical Psalms which would begin in lament but end in praise though the enemies and situations of which he complained had not been removed, Elaw’s words speak of the ability to find a reservoir of peace in the midst of maltreatment. Elaw acknowledges a life of suffering and of “divine comforts” and being “hid in the cleft of the rock” and says, “How vast a source of consolation did I derive from habitual communion with my God.”¹⁸¹ She learns to draw upon a strength from her time with God that reflects a transformed relationship with God. This experience is reminiscent of Mitchell’s account of Jesus’ attitude as he approached his crucifixion saying, “Jesus’ strength after Gethsemane is influenced by his great intensity in prayer. It was, as we say, no form or fashion… I tell you, talking to God from the gut is powerful, and this helped Jesus to bounce back.”¹⁸²

Elaw offers an alternate view of deliverance—not deliverance from the work itself, but a lifting above the drudgery of the work, “The love of God being now shed abroad in my heart by the Holy Spirit, and my soul transported with heavenly peace and joy in God, all the former hardships which pertained to my circumstances and situation vanished; the work and duties which had previously been hard and irksome were now become easy and pleasant; and


the evil propensities of my disposition and temper were subdued beneath the softening and refining pressure of divine grace upon my heart.” Mitchell states, “I am convinced that each of us has to have her own space, her own place to stand, her own means of maintenance. We are dependent, of course, on the God who gave us our very life and all our talents. But let us never be dependent on any man OR woman for the necessities that undergird life and ministry…Priscilla sewed tents so she could VOLUNTEER to teach theology to the fledgling Apollos.” These statements demonstrate a changed view of self for each woman through God.

The result was closeness to God that fostered a sharing and trust in all things, large and small. This grew out of an understanding and acceptance of God’s love, for surely these things could only be entrusted to a God who cared for her deeply. Truth’s biography indicates, “She related to God, in minute detail, all her troubles and sufferings, inquiring, as she proceeded, ‘Do you think that’s right, God?’ and closed by begging to be delivered from the evil, whatever it might be,” seeking comfort in God’s companionship rather than action. God was a refuge for the women and knowing the presence and care of God created a sense of solace for them. When the abuses of her mistress “often sent [her] to the throne of grace, to seek the sympathy of Him who is touched with the feeling of our infirmities,” she

184 Mitchell, “Reflections on Strength for Sisters.”
knew that “He [God] will not abandon in the times of war and conflict.”187 Within the view of Galilea, these prayers hold substantial meaning. Galilea contends, “Prayer is a means because it makes us redeemers like Jesus, through which we influence life and events. Prayer makes us redeemers with Jesus because, like the Lord in the loneliness of the desert, in the garden of Gethsemane, or on the cross, we carry the sin of the world and we liberate our brothers and sisters as well as ourselves from the roots of evil, of selfishness and blindness.”188

These women were taught faithfully, consistently to turn to God in their times of difficulty, as was Mitchell. Just as the biblical Israelites turned to God, these women must turn to Him and trust that God would hear. Truth “had ever been mindful of her mother’s injunctions, spreading out in detail all her troubles before God, imploring firmly and trusting him to send her deliverance from them.”189 Mitchell notes that it is on the basis of God’s past acts that one can rest assured that God will act in current cases of injustice and oppression.

For them, earth was not only distant from the heavenly promise, it was a torturous alternative. Life was miserable because of maltreatment, separation from family, inability to live one’s dreams, absence of someone who cared for them, and a host of other reasons. They had been robbed of the right to live life to its fullest—they had been oppressed. As children

187 Ibid., 58.
189 Truth, Narrative of Sojourner Truth, 74.
of God, this was seen as an injustice that, if not corrected on earth, should be corrected in heaven.

This reality gave them a fearlessness that was remarkable. Noting that one could only die once, Stewart and others moved forward in the spirit of the biblical Esther, saying, “If I perish, I perish.” Their beliefs were worth dying for and dying was a welcome alternative to the status quo in life. Hence, “and we claim our rights. We will tell you, that we are not afraid of them that kill the body, and after that can do no more; but we will tell you whom we do fear. We fear Him who is able, after he hath killed, to destroy both soul and body in hell forever. Then, my brethren, sheath your swords, and calm your angry passions. Stand still, and know that the Lord he is God,” were the words of Maria Stewart.\textsuperscript{190} The latter portion of this quote can be found verbatim in the Old Testament books of Exodus and Kings when the Israelites faced their oppressors.

The alternative of a heavenly home helped to minimize the power of earthly masters and emphasize the power of God as the true Master. It was a reversal of power for slaves and other oppressed African Americans who took control of their lives and willingly handed it over to God. In this way, religion became a liberator for this oppressed people.

Each woman demonstrated a comfort with God that allowed her to bear her greatest fears, strongest doubts, and biggest questions before him. There was no pretense or concern for cordiality. They spoke with God frankly and wholly expected God would hear and respond. They were like the Old Testament Job who, when afflicted, asked God, “Why?” and awaited

\textsuperscript{190} Stewart, \textit{Spiritual Narratives}, 20.
a response. Similarly, David, Abraham, and Moses can be seen in the Old Testament petitioning God, conversing with God, and even arguing with God. Of Truth, her editor says, “She talked to God as familiarly as if he had been a creature like herself; and a thousand times more so, than if she had been in the presence of some earthly potentate. She demanded, with little expenditure of reverence or fear, a supply of all her more pressing wants, and at times her demands approached very near to commands.”191 Their situations were dire and their needs were serious. This was so much the case that these women did not prolong their requests or shy away from them. They approached God with a boldness that affirmed their faith in God’s power and their belief in God’s care.

Truth and the others demonstrate the familiarity that comes from years of laboring with and trusting God. Evident in twenty-first century African American spirituality is a closeness, a nearness to God that is reminiscent of this camaraderie expressed by Truth. An old hymn instructs, “Tell him all about our troubles..he will hear our faintest cry and he will answer by and by.” For Truth, while God was certainly greater than she, God was so intimately connected with her through her sufferings that he could be spoken to without pretense or hesitation. It is a spirituality that grew out of extreme need. This is the form it took for the poor, downtrodden, afflicted, and abused. Like Job, Truth reached a point where politeness gave way to the real and true anguish of her body, heart, and soul. There is an inherent closeness and familiarity in this type of sharing and it is likewise demonstrated by Mitchell.

191 Truth, Narrative of Sojourner Truth, 74.
God is Trustworthy

Inherent in the type of sharing demonstrated by these women is the understanding that the conversant God cares about their petitions, their complaints, and their concerns no matter how large or small. These women demonstrate the belief that God truly cares for them and will not hesitate to address their situations, individually and collectively. In Old Testament literature, the children of Israel were often reminded of the miracles God had performed on their behalf and of God’s promise to always be with them. This ability to remember “the God who brought them out of the land of Egypt” was the underpinning for their continued faith and faithfulness, letting them know that “God is all-powerful; and God works inside history, to save the oppressed.”

This is no different for the women discussed herein, who recalled God’s miracles for the children of Israel as a basis for their own faith development. Because God had demonstrated his concern for the poor and mistreated through the deliverance of the Old Testament Israelites, God could be depended upon to deliver the eighteenth and nineteenth century Africans in America. This fueled the boldness with which these women approached God. God had already proven that it was in his power and will to deliver them, so they were not arbitrarily asking God to fulfill their personal whims. They were asking God to be true to his nature as established and witnessed through the Bible. Much like the Old Testament prophets Hosea, Jeremiah, Amos, Habakkuk, and others, they challenged God to be God in their nation.

192 Mitchell, “Faith of Our Ancestors (An Exodus of Our Own).”
Truth’s narrator indicates, “She felt as if God was under obligation to her, much more than she was to him. He seemed to her benighted vision in some manner bound to do her bidding.”\(^{193}\) In this statement, the writer’s subjectivity is evident as she assesses Truth’s concept of God from her own separate lens of understanding. Truth demonstrates consistently in her writings and her actions that she felt bound to do God’s will, to be upright and to serve God’s people. This does not, however, negate her understanding that God was responsible for her life. This is not insubordination as much as it is reverence. God, as creator, is recognized as the only power that can help Truth through her trials; “God must have a place to exercise God’s justice.”\(^{194}\) God, as pure love, is recognized as caring and compassionate and, therefore, not indifferent to her suffering. God is, therefore, called upon to help. The directness and brashness in which this is expressed may be difficult for one who has not suffered as Truth to comprehend. It is, however, foundational to an emerging theology embodied by people who have endured individual and collective sustained suffering—that God is the only power who can help and God’s love and character demonstrate that he will be compelled to do so.

_God is Awesome_

For these nineteenth century women, God was so awesome that they felt unworthy of his presence. This is a difficult dichotomy, in that they felt justified turning to God since they had been identified as his chosen people yet unjustified because of their own sinfulness. For

\(^{193}\) Truth, _Narrative of Sojourner Truth_, 74.

\(^{194}\) Mitchell, “Faith of Our Ancestors (An Exodus of Our Own).”
Truth and Elaw, this lack of worth is mediated by the presence of Jesus as an intercessor and by virtuous acts that make them holy. Each woman, in fact, describes her own feelings of inadequacy and lack of worth. This reality is still evident in the African American community, where women in particular battle low self-esteem and suicidal thoughts in the twenty-first century, and was evident throughout the life of Ella Mitchell who struggled to overcome low self-esteem throughout her life. Mitchell speaks to this broad experience using the Old Testament story of Rahab, prostitute and ancestor of Jesus, saying,

As I recall the awful lust of the slave masters and the mixed blood testimony to their sin, how I wish I could tell this Bible story to my female ancestors! From my very own mother all the way back, they were so ashamed of their life stories that they wouldn’t tell me anything about anything. How I wish I could comfort them with the truth of the love of God: you who trusted as my folks did are acceptable with God... Go find Rahab. I know she’ll tell you I’m right about it.195

This reality combines to heighten the significance of intercessors. Evident in virtually every Black Church denomination is a belief in intercessory prayer, often through holy men and women referred to as mothers, deacons, or some other church group that is endowed with power to pray for someone when he or she cannot pray for self, usually due to sinfulness or some other perceived weakness. This reality also heightens the significance of Jesus in this tradition, as Jesus is the model intercessor, ensuring that prayers are heard by God. Galilea asserts, “Prayer includes us in the prayer of Christ to the Father, ‘since he forever lives to make intercession’ (Heb. 7:25) for us, and through that prayer we begin to share in the experience of God himself in his humanity and in his redemptive activity. Through prayer we

follow the praying and contemplative Christ.”196 He further states that “On the level of identifying us with the will of God, prayer is efficacious (Luke 11:9-13). Christ has promised us that if we pray constantly, the Holy Spirit will be given to us; our being and acting will be converted, we will grow in the life according to the Spirit and in imitations of Christ. This will happen to us and to those for whom we pray.”197 Mitchell’s reference to the example of Jesus’ prayer at the Garden of Gethsemane, “where Jesus prays sometimes,” has already been noted. Applying Jesus’ model, Mitchell adds, “An effective, healing, empowering prayer life may not take a lot of words, but it will take a lot of time…The best prayers are not word intensive; they are feeling intensive.”198 As intercessors, believers are modeling the life of Jesus and the legacy of Christ and, in so doing, are drawing nearer to God.

God of the Oppressed

Permeating the understanding these women developed of God is their own social standing. Though most of them were not enslaved, they were born, raised, and lived in an environment that considered them inferior and subhuman. As African Americans and as women they were subjected to a range of abuses, both physical and emotional. They typically had little choice about the courses of their lives unless they were willing to defy masters, husbands, and culture. Truth decided to run away, Lee stood against the Black Church in affirming her call to preach, Elaw disagreed with her husband concerning her purpose, and

197 Ibid., 105.
198 Mitchell, “Nevertheless, Thy Will..”
Mitchell dared to become the first African American woman in so many arenas due to her unorthodox call to ministry.

For these women, their God was a God of righteousness. As such, there was a self-imposed morality, which led to righteous indignation and finally challenged American Christianity to be Christ-like. They believed that where righteousness was not evident in society, God would overturn society, as he did for the people of Israel in the Old Testament time and time again. Hence, their spirituality was one that challenged their oppressor. For Africans to accept Christianity from the hands, mouths, and hearts of the whites who enslaved and discriminated against them, they had to reconcile an inherent inconsistency. If Christianity was a religion of love, if they were created by the hands of the same God, if God delivered the Israelites from Egyptian slavery, then why were they enslaved, abused and mistreated? Why were the virtues and love of Christ not evident in their daily interactions with their white Christian counterparts? Of this Mitchell acknowledges that though slaves were prohibited from learning to read, they still managed to learn the Bible, saying, “We STOLE the Bible and read it OUR way,” as they “memorized the Bible on a few hearings.”

These questions were among those that guided the Civil Rights Movement and guides strands of liberation theology today. These questions connected these women just as they connected the people of Israel in earlier days and those who fought for freedom and civil

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199 Mitchell, “Faith of Our Ancestors (An Exodus of Our Own).”
rights later. They were compelled to believe that God was for them and would help them overcome their oppression. This belief emboldened them to stand against injustice, for they had total faith in God to save them. This shared experience of oppression uniquely molded their Christian experience and heightened the importance of the concept of God as a deliverer.

_Lived Faith Community_

The communities that educated these women about God and supported their spiritual development were significant to their decision and growth. Though each had vastly different experiences, ranging from Quaker to Pentecostal, Methodist to cultic, the relevance of community cannot be underestimated. Elaw, in particular, notes that when taken out of her faith community as a child, she began to stray away from God and to sin. Truth was initially guided by her mother and then by a range of religious leaders over a span of time.

Though these women each had deeply personal experiences with God and spent much individual time seeking God, they were knitted into a community of believers. These communities helped to awaken and define their initial searching and then to encourage and inform their continued growth. As previously noted, Galilea’s expression that “Christianity as well as human liberation is founded upon, in its most radical aspect, following Christ (Jesus as truth and way) as well as participating in the life of Christ (Jesus as sanctifying and liberating life),”\(^\text{200}\) is significant to the communal formation of belief. This sociological aspect of religion is present in faith communities today, which are essential to religious

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\(^{200}\) Galilea, _The Way of Living Faith_, 53.
formation. What is notable for these women is that they often still felt alone. Truth would find children to read the Bible to her, so that she could be sure to hear the word without editorializing. Lee was shunned by the leadership of her church and even her husband. Their experiences separated them from larger society and community though community was still essential in their development. Within this context, Mitchell’s statement that “We are to be…beyond our age and generation—citizens of Heaven as it were,”\(^{201}\) bears significance.

With the experience of these women and others like them as a backdrop, Mitchell grew into an understanding of God that was firmly rooted in her history. Mitchell internalized the knowledge of God depicted by these women and reflects a similar understanding. It is in this vein that Mitchell understands and embraces God’s love, takes action on behalf of the oppressed and calls others to be converted and do the same.

C. Call to Conversion: The Word Proclaimed

The end result of the previous two aspects of liberation spirituality is a call to a radical form of conversion—a call to follow Christ at all costs. For Mitchell this meant maintaining her seat on a bus, journeying to the slums to teach Bible study, adopting an abandoned Afro-Korean son, uprooting self and family for ministry, speaking against evil and injustice, and demonstrating unwavering love without prejudice. Julian,\(^{202}\) though removed from Mitchell by time and culture, demonstrated a similar commitment to radical conversion. Julian was willing to share in Christ’s suffering at all costs as a representation of the extreme love


\(^{202}\) Julian of Norwich (See chap.2, n. 23).
demonstrated by Christ. This love holds a power that is both evidence of an internal conversion and an impetus toward the conversion of others. Mitchell demonstrated a love for God and for others that motivated sacrifice, risk, and suffering in her own time. Mitchell’s journey is evident in three ways: a personal process of liberation through which Mitchell journeys and redefines her self-concept, an action-orientation which leads Mitchell to seek and to promote the external expression of love and liberation through service, and a faith-basis that motivates, encourages, and enables Mitchell throughout a life of lived liberation spirituality.

i. Personal Liberation

Mitchell’s journey begins with the critical step espoused by Galilea, that of personal liberation. For Galilea, liberation spirituality is not simply what one does, but who one is. It involves a reorientation of the personal sense of worth and a liberation of sorts from the limitations and boundaries established by others and by society. Mitchell experienced this liberation as she overcame racism of the early twentieth century and sexism in ministry. It is evident in her journey that she gradually stretched beyond the realm of acts and self-concept deemed acceptable for someone in her state.

Mitchell acknowledges her personal struggles, noting racial discrimination experienced as a child in the deep south of the United States and the poignant reality that women were not permitted to vote at the time of her birth. The loss of childhood friends due to racial segregation and experiences on buses and in stores impacted Mitchell deeply. Rejection as a female preacher further molded Mitchell’s experience. Beyond the forms of discrimination
prevalent in her life, Mitchell was scarred by the nickname ascribed to her by her family, “Ole Big.” This name, though apparently affectionately intended, daily reminded Mitchell that she was the largest of her sisters and somewhat overweight. Step by step, it is evident that Mitchell overcame each limitation placed on her though she battled low self-esteem for much of the remainder of her life. Of the experiences of discrimination, Mitchell indicates, “With the help of God I have come through all of this blessed and unscarred.”

**Self**

Mitchell’s manuscripts evidence a journey through which she was liberated from the expectations and limits of society. She embraced her own sense of worth as a child of God and, in so doing, developed an expectation of equal treatment and equal standing for herself and others who were oppressed in any sense. To reach this place Mitchell, like Truth, applies examples from the Bible as both justification and proof that her assertions are valid. It is the example of women and men in the Bible that Mitchell leans upon in forming a personal sense of worth, leading her to say, “One day I was considered human trash, and the next I was reclaimed and able to hold my head up anywhere. One day I was a tramp, and the next I was a woman respected by no less a person than Jesus. One day I was a little more than meat on a board, and the next I was a woman of dignity and worth. I had a whole new idea of who I was and what I could do.”

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203 Mitchell, “Reflections on Strength for Sisters.”

Mitchell draws upon an internalized biblical reference to express a personal sense of value. For Mitchell, this experience is demonstrated in the example of the story of the “Prodigal Son” recorded in Luke 15 in the Bible. As the son returns to his home and his father, Mitchell asserts that the father “respected his son’s personhood. He loved his son and he wasn’t about to be compromised or exchanged for the cheap ego trip of, ‘I told you so.’” Through this scripture, Mitchell discovers that “God receives us—we are never cast out—like the Prodigal we go out on our own…God’s love restores frustrated fractured souls.”

Mitchell’s acknowledgement demonstrates the presence of God’s love for all, even those who for some reason appear not to deserve this love due to mistakes, status, or some other impediment. For Mitchell, this is best noted in a sermon in which she expounded Acts 2:17 which says, “I will pour out of my spirit upon all flesh: and your sons and daughters shall prophesy.” This passage, often used in defense of female preachers due to its inclusion of “daughters” who will prophesy, was used by Mitchell for a broader purpose. In Mitchell’s interpretation, “all flesh” includes “rascals.” This seemingly quirky interpretation of the scripture denotes Mitchell’s abiding belief that God’s love is for everyone, regardless of social standing or accolades. This places her at the heart of liberation spirituality. Mitchell is “transformed, seeing [herself] not through the narrow lens of humanity, but understanding a greater purpose and power that stems directly from God.” Mitchell “no longer sees herself as one who is oppressed, but as one liberated by the presence of God. [She] overcomes the life

experiences, prejudices and circumstances that have caused feelings and labels of oppression and instead recognizes the beauty and potential inherent in a life with God.”

For Mitchell, this translates into a life view that is not only personal, but that fuels an understanding and acceptance of suffering. The willingness to embrace suffering places Mitchell in direct concert with the example of Jesus who became the ultimate suffering servant of humanity. For Mitchell, it means seeing hope and goodness in the midst of suffering. Mitchell notes, “The best of our past includes a repertoire of understandings or beliefs or insights which confer upon the greatest adversities, the most absurd and tragic horrors—the possibility of some ultimate meaning. In other words, we continue to live and in fact, even to celebrate life because oftimes when the goodness of that life is not apparent, we are never convinced that it does not exist at least potentially.”

These beliefs molded a woman who was free to embrace a purpose defined by God regardless of manmade limitations and to endure suffering with the recognition that, once again, the sense of purpose transcends human understanding. Despite discrimination, this purpose prevailed, leading Mitchell to acknowledge that she “faced many rebuffs as a woman,” but to assert that she “felt no pain, however, because the Holy Spirit so blessed the ministry.”


208 Mitchell, “Reflections on Strength for Sisters.”
For Mitchell, this sense of self which manifested itself through a personal liberation was rooted in her biblical history and African American culture. Mitchell notes, “If you don’t know your spiritual history, you don’t know your identity under God. Which is to say that you don’t know WHO you are as a believer, and can’t defend your faith in a hostile world.” Mitchell mirrors the philosophy of Sojourner Truth, Jarena Lee, and so many others who saw in the Bible a direct challenge to injustices of their culture saying, “We STOLE the Bible and read it OUR way.” When Truth proclaims, “Americans! We hear your boasts of liberty…your assertions that all men are created free and equal,” she is struck by the hypocrisy that “mingling with all these, and rising above them all, we also hear the clanking of chains!”

Though born after slavery had been abolished, Mitchell’s experience was greatly influenced by the legacy of slavery and ongoing discrimination during a time period that abounded with both racial progress and suffering. The slave auction block located a few blocks from her childhood home, ongoing reports of lynchings, efforts of the newly formed NAACP, and later protest movements were outward reminders of the culture in which Mitchell grew and infiltrated the meaning she assigned to her own “spiritual history.”

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209 Mitchell, “Faith of Our Ancestors (An Exodus of Our Own).”

210 Ibid.

211 Truth, Narrative of Sojourner Truth; A Bondswoman of Olden Time, with a History of Her Labors and Correspondence Drawn from Her “Book of Life,” 42-3.
If you don’t know your spiritual history, you don’t know your identity under God. Which is to say that you don’t know WHO you are as a believer, and can’t defend your faith in a hostile world…We STOLE the Bible and read it OUR way. It was illegal to teach us to read, but a few of us were taught, and a lot of us learned as catch can, and the rest of us memorized the Bible on a few hearings, with our African-culture, computer-head memories. The easiest proof lies in the words of the Spirituals. Can you imagine a White master teaching us about Moses, so that we could make up a song like, “Go Down Moses?” When smarty pseudo-intellectuals criticize us for having been too interested in heaven, they reveal amazing ignorance. It was a song of social PROTEST when we sang, “I Gotta Shoe...All God’s Chillun Got a Shoe, When I get to Heaven...” They were signifying at the master for not providing adequate shoes HERE and for not letting them shout down HERE. And guess whom they had in mind when they sang, “Everybody talking “bout heaven ain’t a’goin there...”

You see, above and beyond the important things I have already shared is the fact that I believe we are a chosen people. I believe that just as the Jews learned who they were by watching what God did for them in the Exodus, so we must learn who WE are by looking at what God has done for us. Listen to a Jewish hymn (a Psalm) which describes what God did: “Come see the works of God: God is terrible in God’s doing toward the children of men.” This is only one of MANY references to how God exercised awesome power on their behalf. God sent them Moses, sent the plagues, and topped it off by opening up the Red Sea. Thus the text says, God is terrible, awesome, amazing in the way God deals with the children of humanity.

Because this was the most amazing feat since the flood, the Hebrew children saw themselves in a totally different light. Prior to this, they hadn’t really known who God was.²¹²

For Mitchell, it is in God’s history that God’s nature is revealed. As God moves to free the oppressed, the oppressed gain a more clear understanding—a true understanding—of who God is. Without this move, God is for them an abstract concept. With it, God is the ultimate

²¹² Mitchell, “Faith of Our Ancestors (An Exodus of Our Own),”
liberator and trustworthy guide. Mitchell’s personal liberation was born in this context of racial liberation even as a theology of liberation was struggling to be articulated. For Mitchell, it is only as God is manifested in liberating power that she and others begin to truly understand God and, as such, develop a spirituality. Prior to this knowledge, the individual is constrained by a self-definition that has been imposed upon him or her by the world. As God’s liberating power (and desire) becomes known, the person is able to break away from this societal definition of self to hear and embrace God’s definition of self.

Mitchell is only able to be liberated by learning of God’s liberating power and desire as evidenced through others. Because God demonstrates a proclivity toward the oppressed and a desire to liberate through the biblical story of the exodus of the Israelites from Egypt and through the freeing of slaves in America, Mitchell understands that her sense of worth (and that of others) is not tied to social position. It is instead redeemed by God’s acts and God’s eternal promise to act on behalf of those who need liberating. The oppressed are equal heirs as children of God. For Mitchell, once this is understood, it redefines one’s self-concept and liberates him or her emotionally, psychologically, and spiritually, even while still seeking liberation socially, educationally, and economically. It is only through this transformed self-concept that liberation can be experienced and embodied. Mitchell notes, “We can never be who we were meant to be, under God, until we know who we were in the mind of God and the course of history. That is exactly what the Bible’s sixty-six books are telling about a
people as they walked with God. They wrote all this down so they could tell their ethnic
group and our faith descendants who we ought to be.”

Fully understanding and embracing who one is in God is what Galilea terms a
“conversion.” As this conversion occurs, the individual is emboldened to break free of the
labels offered by society. In doing so the person is inherently imbibed with a revolutionary
trait, one which is unafraid to stand against culture and to challenge its norms and
assumptions. It is this trait that empowers Mitchell and others who embody a spirituality of
liberation to advocate for the oppressed. It also leads Mitchell to challenge biblical
interpretation that fosters oppression. For Mitchell, the fact that the very book which liberates
her is also used to oppress her becomes problematic. With this even the Bible, or at least its
interpretation, is subject to Mitchell’s boldness as one converted and freed to see herself as
God does. Mitchell’s retort, then, to those who apply Paul’s statement for women to keep
silent in the church as justification for the prohibition of female preachers is to clarify that
this (mis)interpretation of the Bible would not only silence preachers and evangelists, it
would also eliminate the ranks of “Sunday School teachers, choir members, etc., not just
preachers—if taken literally,” all of which are positions in which women serve in such
great numbers that their exclusion would decimate the organization.

Mitchell’s conversion leads her to challenge injustice and to seek to liberate others. She
could not only recognize oppression (for this trait was not new and was evident in her


childhood reflections), but she also understood her own power to help eliminate oppression and she truly understood that the oppression in her life was wholly undeserved. Recognizing the injustice to which society subjected females, Mitchell recounts, “I shudder when I think that I was three years old before us females were allowed to vote.”

Beyond society, Mitchell is concerned with the injustice experienced in the church. “And I shudder even more when I realize that the few Black churches which have opened to women, with the exception of the AME Zions in 1898, all did it FOLLOWING the secular world’s political trends, instead of leading the way…[they] were doing with women exactly what they castigated white Christians for doing in relation to civil rights for Blacks. There is nothing I can say regarding Black denominations such as Baptists and Pentecostals who, for the most part, are still closed to women. It’s a pity the constitutional laws cannot prohibit gender discrimination in the churches.”

Mitchell’s spirituality does not limit itself to potential outward expression through the removal of oppressive policies and practices. It is a spirituality that transforms how everything in life is viewed and how all people in life are treated. Mitchell redefines who she is through the lens of God’s liberation. In doing so, Mitchell also redefines all of creation, particularly women and African Americans as they represent her unique context of oppression. Mitchell picks up on cues in history and in the Bible to do so. Her spirituality,


216 Ibid.
which fed and affirmed twentieth century movements in Black Feminist Theology, Liberation Theology, and Womanist Theology, affirms and validates women, female traits and tendencies, and urges women to embrace their totality as in line with God’s desire in creating them.

To illustrate, Mitchell picks up the biblical description of wisdom. That wisdom is described as a woman in scripture is significant to Mitchell for wisdom becomes the exemplar of feminine traits. Mitchell’s concept is so liberated that even wisdom becomes a positive personification of womanhood.

But the wisdom is not portrayed in classical garments. She is not the cold, objective, dispassionate scholar. She cries her message all over town. She has a strange conviction that she cannot repress, and her “scholarship” is so centered on human concerns that she exceeds the bounds of dignity. She will hardly be caught out of touch with human realities and existential concerns, because she is in dialogue with people at the market, the courts, the highways and the lofty walls of mass communication. Perhaps because she is a mother as well as a sage, she cannot view that which affects mothers’ children with the detachment of a professor. She demands that her insights be implemented, and she is the personification of passionate practicality, as opposed to the almost helpless female. Her feelings are deeply involved in the use of her wisdom…

Her understandings are constantly put to work in the marketplaces of the world. She cannot be content with smugness or arrogance in the mere fact that she knows. Her deep emotional involvement will not be satisfied with mere love of truth. She demands application. She insists on being a doer of truth, rather than a knower only. The fact that she must cry her message forth seems to suggest that she has not the power to apply her principles arbitrarily. But she does not hide behind her lack of

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217 Womanist theology is a late twentieth century concept that builds on black (liberation) theology and feminist theology to form a strain of thought that more adequately addresses the nuances of the experiences and perspectives of the African American woman. Womanist theology asserts that the oppression of African American women, while similar in ways to that of African American men and to that of white women, is substantively different due to the combined impact of racism, sexism, and often classism. For more information on this topic, see Jacquelyn Grant, *White Women’s Christ and Black Women’s Jesus: Feminist Christology and Womanist Response* (American Academy of Religion, 1989) or Delores Williams, *Sisters in the Wilderness: The Challenge of Womanist God-Talk* (Maryknoll, 1993).
dictatorial authority. She girds her loins and risks her image, choosing rather to have tried and lost than never to have tried at all. Wisdom in her early personification has not been permitted the luxury of truth for truth’s sake. She has been in the cultural tradition of Africans and others, who have quietly gone about the business of avoiding art for art’s sake or music for music’s sake, and persistently made all to be for the sake of all mankind. Wisdom is no distant dilettante—no pretty patron. She rolls up her sleeves and goes to work. She goes out into the marketplace.218

This depiction of wisdom affirms traits that are often associated with femininity. Womanhood is characterized positively and with pride. More so, the womanhood depicted through wisdom is action-oriented and driven by purpose. This is not a passive model, but a bold, confident, active one. Wisdom is motivated by a sense of purpose that ensures she remains relevant and practical. Mitchell embodies these traits and adopts them as part of her spirituality of liberation. Mitchell becomes a “doer” of truth and not solely a “knower” of truth.

For Mitchell, conversion reflects a lengthy journey. At each stage, Mitchell becomes more aware of her stature in God until finally, she embraces womanhood as an ideal which God has set forth with traits that are a reflection of God’s goodness and purpose. Mitchell’s experience of this conversion led her to accept her calling to ordained ministry despite concerns about society’s opinions. As Mitchell embraced the unique gift of womanhood, she was emboldened to face oppressive forces again and to proclaim God’s purpose for her life. Of the day she stood to acknowledge the call to ordained ministry Mitchell says,

The pastor, God bless him, with tears in his eyes proclaimed things about my ministry that up to that time I had not the nerve to even think for myself. Our God moves in mysterious and unrestricted ways. God had said that He will pour out His Spirit on all

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218 Mitchell, untitled, delivered at Claremont College.
flesh and He has dumped the bucket on a whole lot of women a whole lot of times. He poured it out on me a lot of times before I rose up and came forward—made it known, that I was called of God as far back as my teen years—called to **preach** as well as to **teach**.219

In accepting this call Mitchell found a joy and contentment that was unparalleled. This represents a phase of her own conversion, as she discovered her full service to humanity. Until then, Mitchell had not fully responded to the oppressive factors in her experience. Mitchell had not confronted a key area of oppression and had not fully embraced her right to be liberated from it. Upon so doing Mitchell notes, “all of a sudden, somehow, what my hands have found to do has become more rewarding, been the source of more joy, than ever I could dream it might be. And now at this late date, I can enjoy the harvest.”220 She says of this, “I have been reading and studying the Bible all my life. My Papa was a preacher whom I adored, and there were oratorical skills buried in my bones.”221 In 1978, at the age of sixty, Mitchell once again pushed beyond the limits of society, responded to a sense of purpose that was stirring inside her, and became an ordained preacher in the Baptist Church. Of this Mitchell says it is “what I am all about…the responsibility with which I was endowed at birth; the very purpose for which I was born, and for which I was equipped by God…it is in me and it must be expressed and if I refuse…my life will be greatly impoverished.” Mitchell’s discussion of this topic has been highlighted for her application of the analogy of

219 Mitchell, untitled, delivered at Seventieth Annual Hampton Ministers’ Conference.

220 Mitchell, “What Your Hands Find to Do.”

221 Mitchell, “What Your Hands Find to Do.”
the cross. To deny it, she says, “is to breed deep depression and utter frustration—indeed it is as “spiritual” suicide—destruction of my soul.”

Mitchell’s liberation journey reflects the impact of oppression, as it caused her to question and to delay her pursuits. Mitchell ultimately breaks free of oppression in a way that does not belittle others, nor harbor bitterness toward the oppressor, and becomes a model for others “to remove the causes and conditions of poverty and oppression.” She breaks free in a way that exhibits the fraternal love that is evidence of true conversion in the words of Galilea, From visiting the sick as a child, to sitting on the segregated bus as a youth, to prompting a new major as a college student, to organizing a Bible study in the slums as a young adult, to teaching Christian education to diverse populations, to preaching with restrictions, to becoming a woman ordained in the Baptist tradition, Mitchell demonstrates stages of liberation that reflect an internal process which yields external results. Mitchell accepts that God’s love, purpose, and power, are provided to all of God’s children, including her, regardless of social status. She expresses this in a sermon entitled, “Consider the Children.”

The story in our lesson for today is recorded in the three Synoptic Gospels—in Matt. 19, in Mark 10, and in Luke 18. Dr. Luke seems to think it was babies or infants brought by their parents to have Jesus bless them—much like we Baptists do for the dedication of our young. Mark and Matthew use another word for children suggesting partly grown children in their account. However, in both cases they were brought by doting parents and in the three accounts we find the disciples fussing at these parents for trying to get Jesus to take some time with their children. After all, the disciples


223 Galilea, A los pobres se les anuncia el Evangelio?, 39.
seemed to contend, “Why should the great and popular teacher waste time on small children?”…

His kingdom was made up of just such little people plus the big folks who were spiritual enough to be like these little ones.224

Mitchell became as one of these “little ones” and lived a life modeled on the example of Jesus. Not only does Mitchell live this, she promotes it as a guide for others saying, “These conclusions suggest a third way we can use the New Testament as a guide for Christian living. It is to identify in the New Testament the principles that define the essence of Christianity and then to attempt to embody them in our lives and actions.”225 Mitchell’s thought is connected to that of Galilea through the emphasis on the model of love for humanity as embodied in the life of Jesus. Mitchell notes “three particular passages serve as guiding principles of this kind: 1) the love command in Mark 12:30-31 and parallel: ‘You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your mind and with all your strength.’ The second is this, ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’ There is no other commandment greater than these.”226 The love command is central to Mitchell’s belief and experience. Mitchell loved others regardless of position and embraced them as evidenced in her Bible studies in the Furnace Quarters slums and adoption of an Afro-Korean orphan. Further, Mitchell learned to love herself and her gifts despite her position, overcoming feelings of unattractiveness, opposition to female preachers, and racial discrimination.


226 Ibid.
Mitchell secondly notes “the early Christian baptismal formula quoted by Paul in Galatians 3:27-28: ‘For as many of you as were baptized into Christ…There is neither Jew nor Greek, There is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus’.”

Mitchell embraces the understanding that the cultural divisions that are relevant to society are not relevant to God and, as such, are not relevant to her. There is an equality and unity that are ascribed through God to everyone. Mitchell does not embrace the limits placed on her as a descendent of slavery and ultimately rejects the limitations of being female instead of male. Just as she rejects these limits based on race and gender, she encourages others to reject them. Mitchell, however, moves beyond the classifications which personally oppress and challenges oppression among the economically poor as well. An example of this liberation from oppression is evident both in Mitchell’s presence and her response on the following occasion.

It was an Easter Sunday and I was diligently teaching in a community of make shift living quarters my weekly Bible Class…This particular Sunday we were in full form eighteen women and full of the Easter spirit…Just as I got to the celebration in the Resurrection Story, two burly white policemen burst through the door of the cabin with their 45’s drawn. The women with their children ran from the room, and there I was above looking down the nozzles of two 45’s…Yet I could not seem to feel intimidated. I knew as well as my fleeing friends that Black life was very cheap in Alabama in 1938. But, I was determined not to give in to their brutish intrusion. I knew I had done nothing wrong—I knew I was in the right and I heard myself saying that before I’d back down—before I’d run off—I’d go on home to my Lord—my resurrected Lord and be Free!!

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Mitchell found the place of liberation that relieved all fear and compelled her to stand. Mitchell also emphasizes Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount in liberation spirituality. Using the version found in the New Testament book of Matthew 5:1-7, 27, “Blessed are the poor in spirit…blessed are the meek…blessed are the merciful…blessed are the pure in heart,” Mitchell expresses a liberation that is aligned with Galilea’s definition. This definition encompasses Jesus’ love for all and his call for his followers to embody this love and to value these virtues. In this definition, Mitchell internalizes the words of Jesus and considers herself “blessed.” It is this understanding that depicts Mitchell’s conversion and births within her the strength to embrace others with the fullness of love evidenced by Jesus.

_Biblical Examples_

Mitchell refers to the Bible as justification for her liberation and that of others through numerous examples of those liberated by Jesus. For Mitchell, it is these examples that provide courage in the face of oppression and evidence that God will provide love and aid. These examples are internalized, as they were for Truth, to embolden Mitchell and empower her to experience the conversion of which Galilea speaks. “Whether it be the stateswoman Abigail, or the businesswoman Lydia, or the humanitarian Dorcas, or the women of faith who went to the tomb…the woman-wisdom of the Hebrew-Christian tradition has not been

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hidden. Nor could it be, even by a culture dominated by men. Walking then in the footsteps of the women of the Bible have been the women of every age,” says Mitchell.  

Rahab is one such woman. Mitchell turns to the example of this unlikely heroine as evidence of God’s unconditional love and willingness to embrace all kinds of people, in this case even a prostitute. For Mitchell this Bible story is relevant to her personally and to so many women who have been violated and oppressed. Mitchell finds liberation in the story of Rahab for generations of women and, in particular, for the women in her family who have borne shame that was communicated and passed on to their descendents. As previously noted, Mitchell proclaims,

As I recall the awful lust of the slave masters and the mixed blood testimony to their sin, how I wish I could tell this Bible story to my female ancestors! From my very own mother all the way back, they were so ashamed of their life stories that they wouldn’t tell me anything about anything. How I wish I could comfort them with the truth of the love of God: “You who trusted as my folks did are acceptable with God! Indeed, Granmas, ye were spiritual giants. You managed to stay alive and loving (you never got bitter), only by faith. Your names, too, are inscribed in a Hall of Spiritual Fame somewhere in the Kingdom of God. Go find Rahab. I know she’ll tell you I’m right about it.”

Mitchell does not only look to the examples of women as evidence in her liberation journey, Mitchell’s liberation spirituality embraces all examples of God’s love and acceptance. She looks to the man who lived in a graveyard, shunned by society, and says, “Living among the dead was this man’s only option. That is, until Jesus came into his

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230 Mitchell, untitled, delivered at Claremont College.

life."

Jesus provides another option for someone who felt boxed in and limited by life’s circumstances, mistakes, labels, and stereotypes. As God did for Rahab, God frees this man from his past and from society and endorses a greater purpose for him coupled with unconditional love. “Picture this man rejected by family and community—a man who had chosen to be content in a graveyard…before he began to have these abnormal, destructive problems…tormented, pressured, frustrated and suffering perhaps from deep-seated anger we see Jesus coming to minister to him…Jesus calls: ‘Loose him and come out—know that I have come to seek and save those who are lost—I have come to redeem the wretched, embrace the outcasts, love the unloveables, touch the untouchables, and unshackle the shackled!’”

It is in this that Mitchell finds strength and justification for her conversion, for God loves everyone.

In conversion Mitchell draws upon the courage to also discover her purpose. Mitchell, like Galilea, believes that conversion through God is an internal discovery of God’s love and acceptance which results in an external manifestation of love and acceptance of others. Conversion bears a responsibility to act, to serve others in a way that demonstrates God’s love with the same intensity and sincerity of the love God has revealed. For Mitchell this meant reaching out to the poor and destitute of society, speaking out against oppression, and demonstrating God’s love unconditionally. Galilea speaks of these traits, indicating “the face of our neighbor, particularly the poor and oppressed one, is one of the indispensable sources


233 Ibid.
that nourishes Christian spirituality. In addition we have pointed out that the experience of God is inseparable from commitment to and love of our brothers and sisters, and that conversion to God is equally linked to conversion to the love of neighbor."

Mitchell brings to bear the boldness of the Old Testament queen Esther in her statement of responsibility to reach out to the oppressed. Leaning on Esther’s words, “If I perish, I perish!” (Esther 4:16), in the face of the possible extermination of the Jewish people, Mitchell establishes that Esther recognized her responsibility to the oppressed and her communion with the oppressed despite her position. Mitchell ascribes to Esther the thought, “Better to die in the cause of God and courage than simply to be tracked down in the degradation of a Nazi type purge—when all my people will perish.”235 Esther’s actions become a blueprint for social action, for activism that will fight injustice. For Mitchell, this example is key because it demonstrates an activism that is not merely rooted in action but in faith, it is not self-motivated but God-inspired. Social action is one of the responsibilities which grows out of personal conversion but there is a method which separates the social action of liberation spirituality from the social action of the world. Without this distinction, it loses its meaning and depth within the context of liberation spirituality.

Mitchell applies the example of Esther in a way that affirms external responsibility without losing the significance of the internal conversion. This justifies Esther’s response and


provides Mitchell with guidance for her consistent and often peaceful approach to her fight against oppression.

As we ponder what all of this might mean for us today, let me make three suggestions. First of all, Esther’s courage uses the tools of intelligence and faith rather than egotistic self assertion and violence. One prepares not by the routine of weight lifting or riding fierce choices on horses, laden with armour—rather one goes into days of fasting and prayer. One of the reasons we have missed the conflict all these years has been a rightful reluctance to address the issue of male tyranny in typical Western terms. The root metaphors of pre-Christian Europe still survive at the root of our being. We yet tend to solve all the problems by violence and vengeance.

This otherwise powerless female is under no illusion; without a moment’s hesitation, she knows the only preparation she has is Spiritual. When you have no political or military or economic power, you fast and pray for God’s grace and providence to prevail. You engage in discipline of the spirit and expect that God will not only bless your efforts with His own power, but will, in fact, enlighten you as to your part in this encounter of lambs with lions.

Thus Esther is inspired to use her feminine graces as a desirable female, not in the degraded way he [the king] required of Vashti, but in the most polite and dignified manner of a State banquet. Her wiles are impressively stunning in an impressively intellectual sort of way. And throughout it all, she is bold and confident because she is bent on doing the will of a just and righteous God...

There were no privileged positions, not even in the Palace. There was no place safe for a Jew, and likewise there is no privileged woman so long as any other woman is yet oppressed.236

For Mitchell, Esther reflects a boldness that is necessary if one is to be converted and if one is to live a life that evidences this conversion. It is a journey which is willing to risk all to become who God desires and to love as God loves. It is also a journey that removes selfish intent and compels action on behalf of others. The unnamed woman who anoints Jesus’ head with an expensive flask of oil (Matthew 26:6-10; Mark 14:3-8) is another example of the boldness required in liberation. Mitchell observes this “woman as she edges through the...

236 Ibid.
crowd and approaches Jesus. She kneels before him. She is pouring a whole alabaster flask of very expensive spikenard perfume over Jesus’ head.” Significant to this example is that “here is an unattached woman out in public, counter to all customs. She enters…where there is a gathering of men, and she is unescorted, uninvited, and unannounced…She just shows up,”\(^{237}\) with boldness.

Beyond the boldness demonstrated by this woman, a woman who had been converted, liberated from the customs, norms, and limits society had placed on her about acceptable behavior and her social status, the response of Jesus is significant to Mitchell in this liberation story. Jesus’ response is contrary to that of the others present including his disciples. It is a response that meets her in her oppression and frees her from it. The disciples are noted for complaining that the money this woman wasted on the perfume she carelessly pours out on Jesus and spills onto the floor could have been used to aid the poor of society. For Mitchell, however, “this woman is probably from somewhere among the oppressed, and she also needs to be ministered to. If Jesus joins in criticizing her, she will be crushed. It would be a cruel rejection of what she feels is the very best she has to offer her Lord.”\(^{238}\) For Mitchell, Jesus’ response is central to her liberation. He understands her motives and sees her heart when no one else does. Jesus accepts her when all others reject her. Jesus sees her best and embraces it while others shun and demean her.


This is what Jesus did for Mitchell and what he does for others who are in need of liberation. It is this ultimate love which makes the conversion complete but it is the boldness of the individual to begin the journey which makes it possible.

So she has the courage to trespass against a few major traditions or laws and suffer the consequences if need be. She apparently takes no inventory of who is in the house. She doesn’t ask anyone who is in charge, or with whom she should speak to get clearance. The woman just acts according to her deep intuition, and that’s that. This takes courage! Great courage!

Here is this woman, a nobody in the patriarchal society of the first century. She is not wealthy enough to be recognized... she isn’t content to just show up and sit in the background, unnoticed... This woman’s determination arouses yet another question. What kind of person ever dreams up such a demonstration? If you have never tried such a departure from tradition, you ought to give it serious consideration some time. I can see this unnamed woman looking at a horrified audience and feeling really good about what she has done. She doesn’t smirk or act disrespectful of the crowd, but down deep she is saying, “I did it. I did it. I did just what I said I was going to do.”

For Mitchell, God demonstrates a preference toward those who are low in social status.

This “preferential option for the poor” is espoused by Gustavo Gutiérrez and other liberation theologians and by Galilea as central to liberation spirituality. Mitchell notes God’s selection of Mary to bear Jesus (Luke 1:26-47) saying, “Here is a young peasant maiden from the bottom of the social order. From the country, as we would say, and without distinction of any kind. But wait—she represented that strength best grown in the country—solid faith.”

Mitchell reverses the characteristics that are normally looked upon negatively and demonstrates God’s ability to achieve positive results through them.

239 Ibid.

Mitchell speaks to those who are socially dispossessed not solely because of their womanhood but because of other social circumstance. It is evident in this that God’s liberation is for those who are oppressed for a myriad of reasons. Mitchell also focuses on those who are oppressed because of their gender. In them, Mitchell does not only address the circumstances that are prevalent among women due to their social status, she addresses the circumstances that are common to all women due to the social condition assigned to womanhood. Using these examples, Mitchell justifies all women and liberates those who will remove the limits of society from their thoughts. Certainly, these examples contributed to her liberation:

The two most literal and obvious biblical affirmations of women in ministry are from the mouth of Peter and the pen of Paul…Peter at Pentecost quoted the prophet Joel (2:28-29)…he only incidentally but very clearly addressed the issue of women preachers, with these words (Acts 2:17a, 18)…“That I will pour out my spirit on all flesh; Your sons and your daughters shall prophesy…And on my menservants and on my maidservants I will pour out My Spirit in those days; And they shall prophesy” (NKJV). It doesn’t take a rocket scientist to see that Peter, with all his conservative inclinations, was ready to go on record with the radical, prophetic word of Joel on the matter of women as spokespersons for God. All Flesh is quite inclusive…Paul is on record as living in the house with the four preaching daughters of Philip without comment.241

Mitchell adds, “God has so fixed it that there is unmistakable evidence of the brilliance of female minds and the depth of female spirits in both the Old and the New Testaments. Yes, it shines through despite a strong cultural bias against women…two examples of women’s intellectual and spiritual gifts. One is Huldah found in II Chron. 34:22-33 and II Kings 22:13-

241 Mitchell, Women: To Preach or Not to Preach: 21 Outstanding Black Preachers Say Yes, 6-7.
20), and the other is Prisca of Priscilla and Aquila, found in Acts 18.242 For Mitchell, these examples provide the ammunition for a rejection of societal limitations and discrimination which hinders female preachers. Mitchell notes, “The New Testament example of a brilliant woman is Priscilla…Prisca becomes a highly privileged and prepared theological student…[and] a marvelous team of tutors, led by Prisca, had great results. Acts 18:28 reports that Apollos was later able ‘to refute the Jews vigorously, showing from the Scriptures that Jesus is the Christ,’243 because of the instruction he received from Prisca. Mitchell contends that women in ministry were so effective that they helped train at least one of the most respected leaders in the early church. For further evidence, Mitchell turns to examples from the Old Testament, noting:

This Huldah is a fascinating figure. Because she is a woman, no data is given concerning her as a person. It is only recorded that she is the wife of Shallum, whose ancestors are listed…It is also stated that she lives in the second quarter, like a second ward. Yet with her own background and gifts completely ignored, she turns out to be the awesome final authority on the archeological finds at the site of the old temple. Both King Josiah and the High Priest Hilkiah will not accept the scrolls found there unless she approves, and they want to know from her the very word of the Lord concerning their future.244

Mitchell is clear in her understanding that women are central to biblical leadership and are central to the spread of the message of God. Further, they are respected among religious leaders of their times despite societal limitations which largely constricted the roles of

242 Ibid., 7-8.
243 Ibid., 9-10.
244 Ibid., 8-9.
women. For Mitchell, if these women could achieve this level of influence and respect in the midst of the limits of their time and culture, certainly current women can be inspired, empowered, and justified by their example.

Mitchell is confronted by scores of leaders, philosophers, and theologians who have drawn upon examples in history and culture to justify the state of women. Michael Kaufman has pointed to many of the injustices societies have caused in the lives of women through time. These include the Greek custom to leave female infants on hilltops to die of “exposure” and Aristotle calling women a “deformity” necessary only for the continuance of the human race. Paul’s statements as recorded in the New Testament, for women to be silent in the church, have already been noted. Augustine, another early Christian leader, indicated that women represented sin and the philosopher Tertullian said women were dirty.245

Within Judaism, Mishnaic law indicates that if both a man and woman are dying, the man’s life should be saved because, explains the Jewish mystic Maimonides, he is obligated to observe more mitzvoth than she is required to observe. The Jewish Tosafot excludes women from Godly covenant and Torah because they have not been circumcised.246 Countless other passages have been used to question women’s intelligence, trustworthiness and education. While some of these quotes have been traditionally misunderstood and applied out of context, many do reflect an overarching tendency toward disdain of women.

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These stand in contrast to Old Testament examples of Samson’s mother who received a message from an angel, Esther who saved the Jewish people in the book named after her, and Hannah whose prayer has served as a model for a series of widely used liturgical benedictions.

Throughout biblical history, examples of women are presented as leaders for religion and community. Female leaders include the prophetesses Miriam and Deborah, who appear in the Bible during the pre-monarchy period. In addition, Huldah has been noted as a biblical prophet during the seventh century BCE and Noadiah from the fifth century BCE. Apart from these women, few women are listed as actual prophets in biblical text but they are present. Other women are referenced with some isolated prophetic ability or experience, though not as prophets. In addition, Isaiah’s prophetess/wife (Isaiah 8:3) and the anonymous women who belonged to prophetic bands, like those who appeared in the Elijah and Elisha cycle of narratives, are companions to the prophets.247

Women are also depicted as military leaders through the images of Deborah, Jael and the woman of Thebez in Judges 4:6-22; 5:1-27; 9:50-57, respectively. Deborah also has religious (cultic) functions and is identified as a prophet (Judges 4:4). Jael is contended to be a “religious functionary” and Jephthah’s daughter leads the music to celebrate her father’s

victory (Judges 5:1; 11:29-40). In the cases of Delilah (Judges 16:4-22) and Micah’s mother (Judges 17:1-5), women are portrayed as keen fiscal managers. Athalaya Brenner places Deborah into the category of the stereotypical “multi-talented Great Leader.”

These women affirm that female leadership was accepted and acknowledged on some level as early as Genesis in the biblical tradition. The presence of these public examples of female leadership also affirms the probability of female influence in private spheres of society. Abigail (1 Samuel 25:2-42) demonstrates this through her decision to appease David after her husband Nabal’s mistreatment of him and in her ability to follow through with this choice. The servants trusted and respected her enough to inform her of her husband’s decision and to organize themselves according to her instructions without any intervention by Nabal. She was able to “take initiative without her husband’s consent.”

Women also arose as religious leaders during periods of mourning. Phyllis Bird associates this role with that of motherhood, as the maternal bond intensifies the pain and suffering experienced in death. This role is demonstrated in the ritual wailing of women at funerals and in the specialized female profession of keener, performer, and composer of


249 Ibid.

250 Brenner, The Israelite Woman: Social Role and Literary Type in Biblical Narrative, 62.

251 Ibid., 39.
dirges (Jeremiah 9:16, 19). Professional mourning women are also found in Ezekiel 32:16 (twice) and 2 Chronicles 35:25.

Religious practice arose surrounding childbirth and the days following, designed to protect the child and mother from evil spirits. Sayings and proverbs were repeated to assist women through childbirth. Childbirth was a difficult and dangerous endeavor for early Israelite women, yet they desired it, prayed for it, and sought it unceasingly. This is attested by the traditions, rituals, and prayers that arose surrounding this event, giving women a place in religious practice. In Genesis 35:16-18, Rachel died giving birth to Benjamin. Rebekah experienced an irregularity in pregnancy and prayed to the Lord about it (Genesis 25:22-23). The religious functions performed by midwives and other women in childbirth and subsequent purification rites provide a springboard for the exploration of other religious obligations performed by women in biblical history.

All of these examples lead to the affirmation of which Mitchell is so sure: that women have a place in the leadership of the church and society. The aforementioned examples are strengthened by that of Jesus, whom Mitchell models in liberation spirituality. Mitchell explains,

Let us begin by describing Jesus’ relationships with women as they are presented to us in the gospels. The first thing we note is that Jesus had women disciples (Luke 7:37-38; 8:1-3; John 4:39; 11:1-44), a practice contrary to that of other first century Palestinian rabbis. If we recall the Martha and Mary story, he apparently regarded the


253 Brenner, *The Israelite Woman: Social Role and Literary Type in Biblical Narrative*, 37.
discipleship of women as even more important than their household chores (Luke 10:38-42). Jesus’ women disciples supported him during his public ministry, remained loyal to him during his crucifixion and received the first revelation of his resurrection. The gospel stories about the Samaritan woman (John 4) and the woman at Simon’s house (Luke 7:36-50) provide vivid examples of Jesus’ respect and concern for women which attracted them to become his disciules. He also worked miracles either for or at the request of women (Mark 1:29-31; Mark 5:21-43; Mark 7:24-30; Luke 7:11-17; 13:10-17). And in his preaching Jesus used women and their concerns for his subject matter, such as the parable of the women and her lost coin and the story of the widow and her mite (Luke 15:8-10; Mark 12:41-44).

...Reasons, other than Jesus’ rejection of women in leadership roles, may explain [why they are not among the twelve disciples]. Perhaps women in first century Palestine were less free than men to adopt the itinerant lifestyle of Jesus...Still other scholars suggest that women had a much more important role in Jesus’ ministry than the writers of the gospels have indicated.\(^\text{254}\)

Mitchell further notes the significance of women to the early church saying,

> Whatever role women actually played in Jesus’ ministry when he was alive, it is clear that they actively worked in the church after his death. Acts 1:4 mentions that “the women and Mary” were gathered in the upper room in Jerusalem with the male apostles and disciples...Lydia, a dealer in purple dye; Priscilla who with her husband Aquilla was a Christian teacher; Tabitha or Dorcas...also called a disciple; and the four daughters of Philip who were prophetesses...From the testimony of Paul’s letters after his conversion it also appears impossible to avoid the conclusion that women were active and important in the ministry of the early Christian community. Paul frequently mentions women in his congregations.
>
> In Romans 16, he [Paul] even refers to a woman named Junias as “a person of note among the apostles” (16:7). If you were not aware that Junias was a woman, it may be because Christian tradition after the Middle Ages determined that Junias must be a man, since only men were apostles. But before that Christianity recognized Junias for what she was, a female apostle.\(^\text{255}\)

Mitchell is clear that the Bible affirms the role and value of women. Through this, Mitchell gains the boldness to stand in the midst of society’s nay-sayers and to be freed from


\(^\text{255}\) Ibid., 8.
their opinions and limitations. She uplifts the examples of these women as a moniker to other women who need to be converted as well. In doing so, Mitchell joins their ranks as a woman whose example cuts against societal discrimination and empowers women to embrace their purpose in God. Mitchell is bold enough to be like those noted women who followed Jesus in a male dominated society and to follow him in a male dominated church.

_African American Women_

Mitchell’s context springs from her experience as an African American woman in the twentieth century. As such, Mitchell places a significant emphasis on the liberation of African American women, drawing from the example of trailblazers within this culture and speaking to the nuances of experience as both a woman and an African American, two groups which were simultaneously and separately oppressed. Mitchell speaks to the challenge of African American women as they seek to affirm oppressed African American men. Mitchell acknowledges that “for generations we have thought that the best way to help the endangered male was to ‘take low’—feed his ego, and avoid threatening him in any way! This has meant that whole generations of Black women by the thousands (even millions) have stayed mousey and never developed their skills and personalities...We have not allowed them to assert their selfhood.”


For Mitchell, this reflects a substantive challenge for African American women. She repeatedly returns to the need to lead with humility and to seek to follow God. Further, Mitchell emphasizes a selfless quality that ensures women do not begin jockeying for control or seeking to dominate. Instead, the emphasis is on applying one’s gifts with freedom and integrity. It is in this that Mitchell directly reflects and purports the model of Jesus, which seeks to live in communion and in love.

But now are we women/daughters of God, and we don’t know what we will be, but we must not wait to start finding out. We must be willing to analyze our roles as whole persons instead of justifying our positions or protecting ourselves from risks or responding to the myths or stereotypes—we must free our potential and become what God intends for us—we must enjoy the promises of God—we must feel free to witness in whatever way—free from fear because we are all systems go with God and working on all cylinders. Stir up the Gift!\footnote{258 Mitchell, “On All Cylinders—Woman of God: Yes!”}

Just as Mitchell draws upon the examples of biblical women as justification in the liberation journey, she draws upon that of African American women for strength in this journey. It is these women, who lived during recent time periods and in the similar context of American slavery and its aftermath, who inspire Mitchell and provide evidence that liberation is possible within her social context. Mitchell draws upon them, seeing in them her mother and grandmother and other ancestors and is determined to continue to progress in their footsteps. It is through them that the significance of biblical examples is manifest. In a manuscript entitled, “Faith of Our Ancestors,” Mitchell notes:

But the most important insight we had was that history was in the hands of God. We embraced the Moses story in very literal terms, and looked in hope to God, in the sure knowledge that in God’s own time, we would be set free. It is important to note that

\footnote{258 Mitchell, “On All Cylinders—Woman of God: Yes!”}
underneath all the “tommimg” they did to fool the enemy, there is the fact that not ONE spiritual approves the enslavement of persons. And all we said and sang among ourselves looked forward to the terrible day of God in which we would be set free. So we were awed but not surprised when our freedom came. We said with solemn certainty: “Marse Lincum sign de paper, but Gawd de one what sot us free.” …I can see tall, slender Abe Lincoln…“In reference to you, colored people, let me say God has made you free.” He goes on to say that we should let no man tell us otherwise, and goes even further as to advise us to shoot anybody that doesn’t recognize our liberty, which is just as good as his. He really means it; he adds, “For God created all men free, giving to each the same rights of life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness.”

Mitchell further acknowledges the significance of the voices and example of African American women, quoting a sermon included in Women, to Preach or Not to Preach, by Martha Simmons, co-editor of Preaching with Sacred Fire: An Anthology of African American Sermons from 1750 to the Present (2010).

God hasn’t stopped calling women to stand up after Esther. (As I scan our history here, I see that) one day a cancer called slavery came to our land. God peered from the balcony of heaven and said, “Come here, Sojourner Truth. I need you to stand up and speak out in such a time as this.” Then things got worse and God said, “Harriet Tubman, I need you to organize an Underground Railroad, for such a time as this.” God kept moving, and one day, God said, “Rosa, I don’t want you to give up your seat on the bus. I need you to set off a movement in such a time as this.” And God is still calling women to stand up. If God has given you (a gift such as preaching) in such a time as this, use it—no matter what the risk—and leave the outcome up to God.

Mitchell holds the African American community to a stringent standard, noting that the discrimination which the community as a whole has fought together is the same

259 Mitchell, “Faith of Our Ancestors (An Exodus of Our Own).”

260 Martha Simmons and Frank Thomas, Preaching with Sacred Fire: An Anthology of African American Sermons from 1750 to the Present (New York: W.W. Norton, 2010).

261 Mitchell, Women, to Preach or Not to Preach, 10-11.
discrimination which divides the community as it relates to women. She likens the justification for excluding women from ministry to that of excluding African Americans from organized sports. In the face of this dual oppression Mitchell asks, “To which of my identities must I be loyal, Black or female? It is an interesting and challenging predicament.” Mitchell notes, “in the land where…African American MALES can now be priests,” that she has “mixed feelings because what has apparently been achieved in the racial climate has yet to be accomplished in the concerns of gender among most churches.” Mitchell adds, “I am reminded of the meeting with women’s suffragists, where Frederick Douglass was in a bit of the same bind. It was clear that the Fifteenth Amendment could pass and give to Black males the right to vote. But this amendment ignored the fact that women of NO race were permitted to vote. Douglass was noted for having broken ranks with the male political front by advocating women’s suffrage all along. Now he had to make a bitter choice.” Mitchell contends that Douglass should have stood for women’s equality as he had before, not sacrificing one for the other, but being justified by God.

In the face of these realities, Mitchell asserts that it is the role of the church to promote liberation and freedom from oppression of all sorts. Mitchell gleans from the example of Jesus’ love and God’s role in the liberation of the Israelites from Egypt to challenge the church to a higher standard. Of Douglass in the choice he made Mitchell says, “It is ALWAYS best to take the HIGH option and trust the rest to God, in whose hands all of

262 Ibid., 1.

263 Ibid., 1-2.
Mitchell expresses disappointment with the church, saying, “There
remains only the amazing failure of the churches and the culture at large…We seem to want
to wait until history, in the sure and certain hands of God, FORCES males to relinquish their
unfair advantage.”

Mitchell’s challenge extends beyond the church and her male counterparts, and embraces
women as well. Mitchell reflects Galilea’s view that liberation must be experienced
internally, indeed, that the oppressed must recognize his or her humanity, a step which is at
least as difficult as recognition by the oppressor. Mitchell pushes the women to whom she
speaks to embrace themselves as God does and to live as whole human beings who have been
loved and anointed by God. She is bold enough to challenge these women to be converted
and to partner in the liberation of all.

Sisters, would you believe there are some women as recent as this morning dedicated
to opposing the Equal Rights Amendment? Surprisingly, there are women who
believe that there are differences in the very basic equality of human beings! It’s like
that miniscule minority of Blacks over a century ago who opposed the abolition of
slavery. Like that appalling handful who thought they were better off as slaves these
more numerous sisters seem to prefer their pretty prisons. This is bad news, real bad
news. You see, the slaves feared the unknown and dreaded the prospect of dying in
the uncharted wilderness of freedom, when they could die with their stomachs full in
the Egypt of slavery. Praise God, the vast majority sought freedom, regardless of their
keen awareness of the grave dangers involved. By faith, they knew they were
destined to be free—Free at last…

Until you claim it by faith, you are still under the old yoke and your burden
will be heavy! By faith we women are no longer different and discriminated against.

264 Ibid., 2.

265 Mitchell, Women, to Preach or Not to Preach, 3.
Indeed, no longer trapped in the narrow confines so carefully assigned us by an inhuman and unholy cultural bias.⁶⁶

Continuing to cast her net wider, Mitchell affirms the struggle against all oppression, not just that of African American women. Mitchell refers to the oppression of women as “the most universal of all oppressions— that of the female majority,” saying “All races, cultures, and communities of our nation and the world are guilty of denying equality of opportunity and self-determination to women.”⁶⁷ Mitchell says,

My motive for even mentioning it has to do with the fact that it could never happen without our consent. My suspicion is that our consent is conceded only because it takes too much courage to resist.

Regardless of the results of our struggle, as seen in our time, the engagement in the encounter is achievement enough in itself. Not only will we fail to be persons until we join the struggle, the fact is that our ultimate health as spiritual beings demands the courage to be women in the fullest sense of the term. This poetic sounding declaration is perhaps unnecessary in the minds of some—but Western culture’s civilization’s patterns of violence usually demand a strategic advantage to back up the courage. The undeniably wise condition imposed by the tradition is: “Don’t start any fights you can’t win.”…

Indeed, I go not to slay my beloved enemies, but to help men to become human and spiritual and to live the abundant life. I want them to be able to retire and know there is something better than just being the omni-competent economic factor. If they lose their jobs, I want them to know that being at home all day can have great spiritual value and abundant joy. I want somehow to help transcend the heroic, outdoor macho image that sells cigarettes by the millions. I want to overcome the brainwashing heaped upon our companions and to give them the deep sensitivities and levels of trust which make life worth the living.

I move, I strive, I press, I pray, I serve, I live knowing that it is worth everything I put into my efforts to bring love and peace and joy in abundance to the distraught and confused world.

Indeed, one goes to a cross knowing that they who take up their crosses, hourly, daily, weekly, monthly, yearly, will surely save their lives as can none other.

⁶⁶ Ella Mitchell, untitled (sermon, Delta Sigma Theta Sorority event, Aug. 14, 1979), Private Collection.

⁶⁷ Mitchell, “Esther.”
And so the words of Esther ring through the ages and in our hearts this night—It causes our courage to the ultimate as we bear the imperative—Pray, pray, fast, fast, along with me, then I will go—I will serve, I will venture, I will press, I will live, I will act knowing I am in the Kingdom for such a time as this—and if I perish, I perish!²⁶⁸

*Jesus as Model*

In all that Mitchell discusses, the example of Jesus is central: it is central to her liberation, to the biblical examples provided, and to African American women in history. Jesus’ life and example are the motivation for Mitchell as they are for Galilea—they are central to liberation spirituality. As Jesus modeled and lived a spirituality of liberation, his influence freed those around him from social and institutional bondage.

Jesus’ unconditional and consistent acceptance of women is the ultimate validation of women’s place in society. Despite societal discrimination, Jesus embraced women and provided opportunities for them to be a part of his ministry and to be liberated through his power and love. In doing so, Jesus’ ministry does not solely provide examples of women who served his ministry in conventional contexts, as hostesses, housekeepers, and caregivers. The ministry of Jesus does validate these roles as women performed them and it adds to them those of businesswoman, evangelist, and so on. Mitchell notes,

Jesus’ ministry as reported in the Gospels transcended the male-dominated society in which he lived. The old taboo had no place in his thinking. Jesus…accepted and appreciated women as people in full equality with men. He addressed women in public; he taught women the Torah which was forbidden; his first appearance after his resurrection was to a woman whom he commissioned to bear witness to the others; he told a parable in which a woman represented the nature of God. Women and men

²⁶⁸ Ibid.
were at Pentecost and the Holy Spirit came to all of them—In the early church, women were full participants.\footnote{269}

Jesus does for these women the same thing he does for the twelve disciples who moved beyond the limitations of being fishermen, a tax collector, and other questionable characters to being leaders of a new movement. Jesus’ acceptance of women is not to be dismissed lightly: it affirmed that a group which had been systematically oppressed through the history of his society was being publicly affirmed by a new leader. Mitchell affirms God’s value for “all those who are outside the circles of power, whatever group or whatever culture, whatever social status—the bottom of earth’s junk pile, the unsophisticated, the powerless.”\footnote{270} Mitchell’s examples demonstrate that this did not occur in isolated circumstances, but repeatedly and publicly. It is the consistent nature of Jesus’ interaction with these women that affirms the liberation of all women who follow if they will receive him. According to Mitchell,

For Mary, Joanna, Susanna and all the other women healed by Jesus, this was an empowering experience. Their healing was the manner in which He set them free to begin to take their lives as women seriously…Transformed by Jesus, the Christ, empowered by the Son of God, these women began to see new possibilities for life and living. Transformed by Christ, they accepted his call upon their lives to use their talents, their gifts to engage in service for the Kingdom-life and ministry with and for Him.\footnote{271}

\footnote{269} Mitchell, “Church Women, Myth or Reality,” 1.

\footnote{270} Mitchell and Mitchell, Fire in the Well: Sermons by Ella and Henry Mitchell, 39.

Women were significant to Jesus’ ministry both for what they received and for what they gave. Their value to Jesus’ ministry was not solely as evidence of God’s healing power but likewise as instruments for God’s healing power. They were healed that they may become healers—they were liberated that they may liberate others. Hence, the cycle of liberation spirituality is manifest in them—they are converted and as the converted must help others. Mitchell draws on the words of Luke to illustrate this saying,

And Luke says they used their own resources to help others. These women of Jesus’ day were not like the women of Paul’s letter; typical women of their time performing typical tasks for women. The text makes it clear that women had a public and prominent place in the life and ministry of Jesus. You see, Jesus wasn’t typical of his time, either. Into a world where women were property and not persons, whose feelings and rights were of little concern; into a world where the called and chosen were of the male gender; into a world where a woman’s place was in the home as wife and mother, came Jesus.272

Mitchell’s embrace of the nontraditional roles of women does not result in a rejection of the roles which are traditional. This occurs not by limiting their personhood but by completely freeing it. Women are affirmed in all areas of their womanhood; they are recognized for their many gifts and talents. Jesus affirms them at the core of their being. This is demonstrated in Mitchell’s statement,

Jesus loved His Mother…He exalted Motherhood but He did not view women as being only capable of Motherhood. You see, Jesus treated women as persons, as equals. He respected their intelligence, their spirituality and assertiveness. He resonated to their courage and faith. He was impressed with the Syro-Phoenician woman’s faith and he healed her daughter. He was honored by the woman with the issue of blood who boldly and courageously pressed through the crowd to touch the hem and be healed. Jesus responded to, accepted, affirmed and encouraged women.

272 Ibid., 5-6.
He defended their rights by word and deed. He took issue with concepts and ideas that viewed or treated them as second class citizens.\footnote{Ibid., 6-7.}

The women who encounter Jesus are subject to a transforming power that leaves them forever changed. “This is no typical story of Jesus’ healing some women and sending them back to business as usual. You see, no one who is confronted with our Jesus can go back to business as usual. The scripture records God’s calling women to responsible piety…of service and ministry in the Kingdom—transforming them and empowering them by His supportive Spirit for each and every task.” Once women embrace this as Mitchell did, they will say as she did, “Who are we? We are women transformed by Christ and filled with power—powerful—in control. We can serve. We can help. We can handle anything. Yes We Can!”\footnote{Ibid., 8-9.}

It is significant that Jesus does not limit this unconditional acceptance and empowerment to women. Jesus offers it to all who are oppressed including those who are oppressed in spirit. More so, Jesus identifies with the oppressed, thereby modeling for all who will follow him the need to not only have sympathy for the less fortunate but to identify with them. Jesus is not only for them, Jesus is like them.

It is significant that in speaking of the Lord comparatively he is likened to the least: the Lily of the Valley. Lilies are simple, yet beautiful flowers. The Lord in attempting to show how God takes care of the least, tells us that, “They neither toil nor spin, yet Solomon in all his glory was not arrayed or clothed like one of these,” the significance in the sight of God of the least. We liken our Lord to a bright and morning star. When we with the naked eye look upon a star it appears to be the least.
Yet, the bright and morning star is significant because it is closer to us than the other planets—at that hour...he was the child of a poor home, son of a carpenter...Carpentry was an honorable profession, but it would not elevate one to the level of aristocracy of that day. From a humble or poor home; a carpenter. Then there was the whole question of the “Nazareth Syndrome.” The stigmatism of growing up in Nazareth—that insignificant little town—that called one, Nathaniel, to ask, “Can any good thing come out of Nazareth?”

Yes, in his life time the Lord was either seen among the least or identified with the least. In his ministry our Lord spent and dedicated his lifetime doing good to those who were considered least attractive, of lesser importance, the downcast, disregarded, disenfranchised. Jesus dwelt among those. Healing the sick, the troubled, using for others the power he would not invoke for himself...It is clear early on that he felt the greatest opportunity for service was seen in the least.

Who are the “least of these,” this phrase lends itself to a level of ambiguity. All of us at one time or another have felt like the least: the least because we are black, the least because we are women, the least because we are poor, or the least because we are all of the above. However, for this occasion...the least in the strata of life are the poorest of the poor, those who are despised, rejected for no other reason than for who they are...They like our Lord make the claim of not having a place to lay their heads...So much of a concern were they to our Lord, that he spent the whole of his life among them. One can sense within this whole piece a conviction of deep personal concern. They come from within his very being, his soul. There appears to be an affinity, empathy, or an identification. Perhaps the first part of this parable points to Christ’s own personal testimony. In his day to day dealing with people who saw those who were hungry, thirsty, naked, he went to the sick and sat with the strangers. He sought to restore a sense of dignity and decency to their otherwise broken and fragmented lives. Jesus’ declaration, “when you’ve done it to the least of mine, you have done it unto me;” points to the least.275

This portrayal of Jesus’ life and priorities speaks directly to the liberation spirituality defined by Galilea, who indicates that “Because he is love, he is justice and liberation for the poor, hope and refuge for sinners...and he identifies himself with the most disgraceful of us (Matt. 25:40).” For both Mitchell and Galilea, Jesus’ identification and solidarity with the poor are key, “The originality and authenticity of Christian spirituality consists in this: that

275 Mitchell, “Through the Least to the Lord,” 3.
we follow a God who took upon himself our human condition, One who had a history like ours, who lived our experiences, who made choices, who devoted himself to a cause for which he suffered, who had successes, joys, and failures, for which he gave his life. That man, Jesus of Nazareth, like us in everything but sin, and in whom lived the fullness of God, is the only model for our discipleship.” For Galilea, this means “Our spirituality has to recover the historical Christ. This [Latin American] tradition has a tendency to ‘dehumanize’ Jesus Christ, to emphasize his divinity without giving enough emphasis to his humanity, with all its consequences.”

Mitchell draws constantly on this “historical Christ,” as is prevalent in her tradition. In the face of conditions that birthed spirituals which sung, “Lord, how come me here? Lord, how come me here? Lord, how come me here? I wish I never was born. They treat me so mean, Lord. Treat me so mean, Lord. They treat me so mean, Lord, I wish I never was born. They sold my children away, Lord. Sold my children away, Lord. They sold my children away, Lord. I wish I never was born,” and led Truth to describe “the most cruel whipping…till the flesh was deeply lacerated” and caused permanent scarring, during which “She did not forget the instructions of her mother, to go to God in all her trials, and every affliction…and begging him to protect and shield her from her persecutors,” a tangible God was needed.


Mitchell notes that “Jesus’ attitude of quiescence was understood better by our slave ancestors than by anybody else because they knew what it was to endure heartless abuse and keep one’s dignity, while not saying a mumbling word.”\textsuperscript{278} The historical Jesus provides this for the African American women upon which Mitchell draws and for the circumstances which she faces. For Mitchell, Jesus understood what she felt in oppression because he was oppressed; Jesus felt what she did in rejection because he was rejected. Consequently, Mitchell can love in the midst of hatred because Jesus loved; Mitchell can be free in the midst of oppression because Jesus was free. Jesus’ life and ministry equip and guide Mitchell, Galilea, and others who follow, to live a spirituality of liberation.

ii. Action Oriented—Toward Helping and Motivating Others

For Mitchell, the internal conversion that occurs must yield external results. Those who have been liberated by the power of God are responsible for helping others both through service that relieves the pain and needs of others and through activism that seeks to eliminate the systems that create the pain and needs that stem from oppression. Mitchell is clear that liberation from oppression is not for personal edification but for service to humanity.

It is in this that Mitchell’s words echo a resounding cry for the oppressed not only to recognize their value and be liberated from the bonds of oppression but to apply their gifts, talents, and resources to aiding all who are oppressed. This is evident through many of her sermons and is apparent in the way Mitchell lived her life. She gave of her substance to those in need, she connected with the poor, she protested segregation, she spoke on behalf of the

\textsuperscript{278} Mitchell, “Not a Mumblin’ Word.”
oppressed, and she challenged others to adopt a personal sense of responsibility for helping to rid the world of injustice. Mitchell’s message is consistently two-fold: recognize your own strength and worth, now use this to go help someone else. Mitchell says, “Among the disciples, there were several crude, cursing fishermen, a despised tax collector, and as questionable a character as Judas turned out to be. Some of the women who helped Jesus were certainly not in the top of the line.”

Mitchell recognizes that each person bears a personal responsibility for the other. This is evident in a story she tells during a sermon entitled “All One Family, Whether We Like it or Not:”

“Daddy,” Jane asked, “Why can’t our United States just live by itself and not bother with other countries?”

“Would you like that Jane?,” asked her father.

“I would, I would—we have everything we need right here in our country. We don’t need help from anyone.”

“It does appear that way—but come out to the kitchen with me—I’ll show you what other people in the world do for us…Where do you suppose the linoleum you’re standing on comes from?,” asked Daddy.

“Johnson’s Department Store,” said Jane.

“Hindus raised the jute. Argentineans grew the linseed for oil. Algerians harvested the cork. It took Asia, Africa and South America to put [illegible] on the kitchen floor.”

Just then the telephone rang. “Where does it come from?”

“A factory run by Western Electric.”

“It took Japanese silk, Indian mica, Molay rubber, Irish flax, Russian platinum, Egyptian cotton and South African gold to give us that little telephone.”

“We are an international family right here in our own home,” exclaimed Jane.

“Look at the electric light,” said Jane’s father. “It takes Greenland, Germany, China, India, Spain, East Indies, Brazil and Chile to furnish one bulb!...”

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“We are a part of the world family whether we like it or not…Right now the world market is suffering because of selfishness. Why can’t we live as a world family in whom God can be pleased—a living example of the family?”

Mitchell demonstrates the traits characterized by Galilea in liberation spirituality, noting the significance of personal conversion and communal service. In life and sermons, Mitchell stands with the oppressed through identification and through responsibility. She challenges others to do the same, focusing on three specific aspects of action on behalf of the oppressed: love, service, and activism. Mitchell believes that, in line with the example of Jesus, each must be expressed toward the poor. Beginning with love, which connects one to the poor in solidarity rather than pity; service, which seeks to help those in need and refuses to ignore their suffering; and activism, which recognizes the systemic nature of oppression and challenges the power structures which support it, Mitchell adopts a spirituality which is required to serve others. It recognizes “that God is all-powerful; God is just; and God works inside history, to save the oppressed,” and that following God means following justice.

Love

Mitchell asserts that true solidarity with the oppressed must stem from a love for them. God’s creation must love one another and, in loving, must help one another. For example,

Love was feeding the sheep…Love was and is the fruit of the spirit…So in the context of helping persons who have fallen spiritually, we ought to reach out—bear one another’s burdens; help each other in weakness….For us women today, Paul is

280 Ella Mitchell, “All One Family, Whether We Like it or Not—Romans 14:7” (unpublished manuscript, n.d.), Private Collection.

281 Mitchell, “Faith of Our Ancestors (An Exodus of Our Own).”
saying that the rhetoric, the speeches about touching people, the speeches about love and kindness have to be given concrete application. Reach out and touch somebody, in other words, is not a matter of shaking hands—press the flesh—reach out and make some difference in their lives…Christ calls us to love but that love must be concrete…Again Christ puts a pin in the balloon of our common attitudes which say, “I love the whole world, it’s just people I can’t stand.”

This love must serve and it must be unconditional, not meted out only to those who appear worthy but to all people. It is in this that the oppressed are placed on equal standing with all of society—they are recipients of the same love that is shared with all. Mitchell again looks to the Bible for examples, stating:

If we were to look at Paul’s letter, I Corinthians 13, we see this epistle raising a hauntingly recurrent, but hardly popular theme: unconditional acceptance of all God’s children, family, friends, women: Love with no strings attached. The very mention of the love of enemies seems such a far-fetched ideal among most Christians. But the apostle Paul, himself, the author of this epistle, shows serious signs of sticking in this department…“You have heard love your friends, hate your enemies. But now I tell you: love your enemies and pray for those who mistreat you…” As far out as this may sound, the Gospel accounts are loaded with examples of unconditional love in the ministry of Jesus. Witness his story of the father of a son who wanted his share of the inheritance…He was received back home…Look at the tarnished woman at the well in John 4…Behold how Jesus treated the hated tax collector in Luke 19. He paid him the high honor of eating at his table…Even the woman taken in adultery in John 8 is loved and accepted unconditionally—treated with deep concern and sensitivity.

In each example Mitchell demonstrates the humanizing quality of Jesus’ life—in becoming human and oppressed, Jesus helps those who have been dehumanized to feel more human. In these examples one witnesses “the privileged ‘place’ in which spirituality is incarnated and becomes practice [that] is in love toward our brothers and sisters and in


\[283\] Mitchell, “The Tie that Binds—No Strings Attached.”
preferential love for the poor and suffering.”284 For Mitchell, this challenge is both individual and communal. Each person must choose this way for himself or herself. In addition, the church community is responsible for the oppressed of society. Mitchell notes the inherent challenge in this, turning to the Bible story of Jesus feeding the multitudes, saying, “Our hearts cry out, ‘And, Lord, you want us to feed them? Look how many there are and how great is their hunger!’…The calm, firm reply comes back, ‘Yes, you feed them.’…O, yes, God does hear, and does understand our deep concerns…Yet, our Lord does not yield to our pitiful pleas…saying, ‘Surely you don’t think I have not seen what you will face. Did I not weep over Jerusalem?’”285

Mitchell recognizes the special quality of this challenge among African American inner city churches. In many cases, these are churches that have survived the demise of their communities while the educated and upwardly mobile fled to the suburbs, leaving an increasingly impoverished community, to which they return on Sundays for worship. This divide is recognized by Mitchell as an overarching hindrance in establishing solidarity with the communities in which these churches stand. In these cases, the church’s role according to Mitchell is to help the poor of the community to feel the love of the church, “to be used in the Holy Spirit in our own tongue and culture so that our neighbors will know they have found a home,”286 a place of love and acceptance. In support of this, Mitchell explains, “God does not


call pastors to lead congregations to perfection; only to love and serve them where they are, and lead them as far as possible in the time allotted, or alternately, “we are not called to do the impossible, just called to heal the brokenhearted.” In essence, they are to help them as they “are learning to be Christians,” as were Peter and later the monks.

Mitchell confirms that living the life of Jesus is not an immediate, complete, one-time transformation—it is a process. In this statement, Mitchell is once again affirming and strengthening the oppressed, as she helps to ensure that people do not think less of themselves or of others due to their imperfections. For Mitchell, the initial step of conversion was a process, as she reflects an ability to be liberated in certain aspects of her life and self-concept while still struggling to be liberated in others. Mitchell explains, “Don’t waste your time hurting others! Accentuate the positive—find some good in each of God’s children. Do you want them ruined or redeemed? Build a habit of wishing them saved! And don’t be impatient—love is patient.” Further, “Love praises God for your blessing. Love believes the best things about you, wants you to succeed—if you fall down, love rushes to pick you up.”

289 Galilea, The Way of Living Faith, 34.
Mitchell demonstrates the selfless character of God’s love. It is this love that, when displayed, is evidence of one’s liberation and when received, becomes a source of liberation. Once the love is truly felt from God, conversion occurs, and the individual must demonstrate it to others. Mitchell explains this with urgency, noting, “With heartless, bloodthirsty conflicts and massacres flourishing in at least five countries on planet Earth, and with starving, homeless hordes roaming over much of urban America, a new heart among those with the power to help has to be far more important than a new Easter outfit.”

For Mitchell, love for others is evidence of conversion. Without this outward display of love, it is not possible to truly follow the example of Jesus. This love for others is what motivates the next display of liberation spirituality: service.

**Service**

For Mitchell, love for others compels her to attempt to help them. As one who has suffered and been oppressed, she has been the recipient of acts of love and she has felt the sting when love is denied. Mitchell connects with the oppressed so deeply that she acts to serve them throughout her life, sacrificing self, safety, and substance in the process. As a child who visited the sick, a young adult who started a Bible study and outreach program in the slums, an adult who led her family in giving to others for Christmas and who adopted an orphaned child, Mitchell consistently demonstrates love for others through service. In the sermon, “The Welcome Table,” Mitchell notes that “the badge of distinction at this feast is

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not high status but self-sacrificial service. It is what the host, Jesus himself, honors and respects, and even He is not above living up to this lowly yet lofty requirement.\(^{293}\)

Mitchell’s objective is to serve and to inspire others to serve also. This is not for recognition of any sort but because of a sense of duty and because of unconditional love. Mitchell hones this point by saying,

Jesus puts on this dramatic demonstration of greatness as compassionate service. “If you have ambitions for greatness, serve”…In our history where our foreparents were involuntary slaves, this still has amazing relevance. Jesus is recorded as using two words here: servant or waiter (*diakonos*) and outright slave (*doulos*). In effect, he is saying that the person who serves the needs of other persons is far greater than the person whose station simply allows her or him to sit and soak it up. Imagine that! The person who plays big shot and shows off with a retinue of servants is a bum in God’s sight, and the person who meets needs is the greatest person of all.

She or he who would be great must seek not honor but service. And those who occupy the very lowest posts in an unjust society may well be the very glue that holds it together, manifesting the truest of greatness all the while…For you see, it is still true that they who would be great can only be so because of self-forgetful service.\(^{294}\)

Mitchell explores the responsibility to serve not only through the lens of righteousness, but also through practicality. Mitchell acknowledges the premise that she earlier credits to Esther, that oppression of some threatens the freedom of all—there is no safe place as long as oppression exists. In the aftermath of a mass shooting at a public high school, Mitchell discovers evidence of this need and says,

The thing that crowds in on the consciousness of all of us has to be the tragic shootings at the Colombine High School…It was not the first such calamity, and I fear it will not be the last. You see, it was part of a trend—the fruit of a growing tendency in our society…we have decades of decay to overcome before we can once

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\(^{294}\) Ibid.
again feel safe in our own homes and in our schools and even on our streets. Some of us may be tempted to say that this was just in the North, but it has already happened in Arkansas. Some have been known to say it was a problem to the urban poor, but this happened in an affluent suburb. Some of us may say it was White folks; our folks don’t shoot up our schools. But what about the way we shoot up the streets of our “hoods?” The poison of random, utterly unreasonable violence is everywhere and among all races.295

Mitchell establishes that the concerns that seem isolated to certain groups of oppressed people spill over into the lives of all people. For Mitchell’s community, this specifically translates into a concern for those who are economically poor, incarcerated, abused, and systematically discriminated against due to race or gender. Mitchell highlights this as it relates to the prison population. Of the prison population Mitchell notes, “We as a Black Church and community shall never be whole without those whom Christ calls us to reclaim. Our Lord Himself was deep into it.” The need is substantial as “there is much work to be done, not only by additional workers, but by those who care.”296 Mitchell adds, “there is still the need for additional board and care homes, hospices, and homes for the severely handicapped” and “there remains the need for more laborers—with and without the clerical collar…it is a shared ministry.”297

Mitchell affirms that the role of the Black Church as “a haven and support network for the poor, oppressed, and struggling,” saying “we have hovered together in mutual assistance and encouragement, in city or country, North or South, permitted or prohibited and driven


underground.” She adds, “The Church of Jesus Christ, the extended family, indeed the Black Church has always been a helping network—even before it was an organized body. Before Blacks even heard about Jesus, before we even learned how to read the Bible, we knew that we were made to live in loving, touching families where people love and help each other. Even now, after all the inroads and atrocities of so-called Western civilization into the African psyche and culture, we constantly seek to recover the closeness of that extended family network.” Mitchell speaks from a concern that this role is being thwarted.

Mitchell’s desire is that the newly evolved “church of the privileged might so well remain related to its poverty-stricken roots that the family of God might once again be inclusive of all.” “What does it take to arrive at a role of redemptive service,” Mitchell asks. “We need only a prayerful determination, with disciplined intentionality, and a willingness to recover and use to the full our cultural and religious heritage.” Of the church, Mitchell prays, “Our Buppies have come back to the old home church, with their athletic medals, their marvelous minds, their professional skills, and their model Christian lives and homes. May we be moved to see to it that their return shall be used to the healing and liberation of the poor, to the glory of God, and the credit of those large old churches which are all we have to look to for the salvation of God’s children at the bottom. Amen.”

Mitchell’s message is one that recalls a shared experience of oppression. Though the specific nature of the oppression may vary by circumstance, it is still a shared experience to

298 Mitchell, “Love, the Only Proper Motive for Service.”

which Mitchell connects to further justify the responsibility to serve. In recognition of this shared reality, Mitchell’s starting point is affirmation: “One day I was considered human trash, and the next I was reclaimed and able to hold my head up anywhere…I had a whole new idea of who I was and what I could do.” Mitchell strengthens this statement through biblical examples saying,

Esther was a serious mistake according to the system that chose her. Nobody in the system knew how Deborah got to be a judge and a general. They gave Huldah’s credentials through her husband, but not as a competent person in her own right…We won’t even mention how the disciples were called!

Apparently, God does not pay any attention to the way we determine whom should be called to preach or serve, and God never has. Socially speaking, there was very little status to the people Jesus called to service.

Mitchell clarifies that service alone is not the answer—for service can be empty. The service of which Mitchell speaks is rooted in love for and service to God. Without this launching point, the service does not carry the same meaning or weight. It would be what Paolo Freire calls “false charity,” a service which is rooted in the need for the oppressed to remain oppressed so that the giver, who is often one with the oppressor, can feel good.

Instead Mitchell asserts,

In this new follower’s world, the spiritual is more important than the material. Even where there are hungry poor folks, one must avoid using that to mask a market mentality. It is more important to concentrate on service to Christ, and let all other service flow out from that devotion. To deal with the poor directly and apart from devotion to Christ can easily become a materialistic means of quieting one’s


conscience. It can be the fruit of a mind which thinks money can solve anything and can control anybody.303

Mitchell turns to the words of Jesus as full justification of the importance of service, saying:

Matthew’s Sermon on the Mount represents an early Christian summary of the principal teachings of Jesus. These teachings may be summarized under three basic points. First, Christians share a set of values that distinguish them from other people. Their values are based on God’s notions of perfection rather than on individual and societal values. Some of these Christian values are given in the beatitudes: poverty of spirit, meekness, righteousness, mercy, purity of heart, peacemaking, trust in God’s providence…A second basic point in the Sermon on the Mount is that Christians must show their values in their actions, even if they are made to suffer by their witnessing…A third basic point is that Christians who live according to God’s will and who suffer for so doing can expect God’s ultimate reward and vindication.304

Like Mitchell, Galilea credits the Beatitudes with being “the summary of the Gospels’ spirit and the Word of God as the way of human perfection.” Further, “Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount (or the group of discourses so named) is a summary of gospel spirituality…We can consider the Beatitudes to be a synthesis of the Sermon on the Mount and of the spiritual values that Christ taught us.”305 Mitchell articulates the centrality of service more clearly in an unnamed sermon as follows,

The righteous didn’t feel they were doing anything particularly right or wrong. They saw a need and responded by doing the natural thing without hope of reward or punishment. They are motivated by character to move and the responsibility becomes the participation in the alleviation of human suffering and want. Responsibility as it relates to participation becomes important. As a community of faith, by our mere profession that Jesus Christ is Lord, it calls us to a life of commitment and dedication.

305 Galilea, The Way of Living Faith, 49.
The focus goes beyond ourselves and our immediate environment. Responsibility calls us to launch out into the deep. Being responsible means sometimes that the comforts of life are of lesser value.

Because whether we want to realize it or not we are called into a life of service. Service always indicates that we are about helping others. Life’s most persistent and urgent question is, “What are you doing for others?” God has so structured the universe that nothing works in and of itself. And so it is with us as followers. The emphasis is on “Thou” rather than “I.” The “I” cannot reach fulfillment without the “Thou.” All of humanity is interrelated and interdependent.

The whole idea of responsibility is that we do for others what others cannot do for themselves. We ask the question that Cain asked of God, “AM I MY BROTHER’S KEEPER?”…Yes, because in our brother or sister we would see Jesus.

I am reminded of how I had to deal with that question (am I my brother’s keeper)…at an internship at St. Elizabeth’s Psychiatric Hospital…a place where we truly see the least…most of its patients are poor or black, there is an atmosphere of hopelessness…I began to get disillusioned, discouraged and I felt rejected…It no longer became a question for me of, “AM I MY BROTHER’S OR SISTER’S KEEPER.?” It no longer became a choice as to choosing that day whom I would serve. For I could clearly say, “as for me and my house, we will serve the Lord.” Yes, responsibility to the least involves giving of service, being available to those who find themselves in need, responding with compassion and caring in the way that our Lord would have us…. As long as there is hunger, I can never be full. As long as there are sick among us, then I can never be well. As long as there are those who are imprisoned because of an unjust system of laws then I am not completely free. Complacency and indifference in themselves become sinful.306

Mitchell adds the words of Martin Luther King, Jr. to her testament for service. In his last sermon, Mitchell records King as saying, “at my funeral, tell them not to mention the Nobel Peace Prize, it’s not important. Tell them not to mention three or four hundred other awards. They’re not important. Tell them not to mention where I went to school…Tell them that MLK tried to give his life for serving others. I’d like for somebody to say that day, MLK tried to love somebody…feed the hungry…I want you to say that I tried to love and serve

humanity.”

To this argument Mitchell adds a mantra against laziness. Mitchell asserts that every person was born with a purpose and that work is a natural part of it. For Freire humanization is the vocation of all people though it is “thwarted by injustice, exploitation, oppression and the violence of the oppressors.” Mitchell articulates it thusly, “Work is the very will of God—it is the purpose for which we were born...This has tremendous significance!”

Mitchell further interprets this to challenge the liberated person to move beyond the euphoria of conversion to the task at hand. Work is necessary for a life to bear significance and for liberation to be complete. Mitchell asserts, “There is a sense in which I’d rather say, I ushered for fifty years or even for a day than to say as some of us do—I ‘talked’ with God and He told me I was a somebody. To be sure, God tells us we are somebody’s and we must always be aware that our worth, our life, is the very will of God,” but this is not the resting place for Mitchell and it cannot be for those who will follow the example of Jesus.

Mitchell takes her argument one step further, insisting that all people do choose to serve something. With this addition, it becomes more than an argument against sloth, but an argument about choices. Either the choice is made to serve God or to serve something or someone else. For Mitchell, “EVERYbody has a yoke; NObody lives without service or

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308 Freire, Pedagogy of the Oppressed, 28.


310 Ibid.
commitment or involvement in SOMEthing. Jesus invites us to take HIS yoke, because it is fashioned for us and custom fitted…This helps me understand how to reconcile self denial with loving your neighbor AS you love yourself. I affirm the me that wants to be and do what I was made by God to be and do, and I deny the self-centered self.”

The responsibility to work and serve is not hindered by age or hardship. For Mitchell, “One day I’m gonna shake this mortal coil off—and I won’t cry a tear because by that time it surely would have done what it was supposed to do. I’ve been here just under seventy-seven years—that’s long enough if the Lord says so—but if it ain’t long enough I’m still prepared to hang in there and work a while longer—because God gave me the time to do it. I’ll still be around here taking stands for Jesus—working hard.” Further, of a female minister who was preaching when a tornado tore through the church and killed most of her members and her four year old daughter, the minister says, “Don’t be standing around talking about why. Work, help the people that are hurt—work. Work—that’s what it’s all about.”

Mitchell’s understanding of liberation spirituality is one of doing. There is too much to be done to simply reflect on God’s goodness, instead one must reflect God’s goodness through action. Mitchell clarifies the type of action that qualifies. It is not simply serving the church, it is serving those in need. “Sometimes we women of the Church are inclined to honor one another…on the basis of our loyalty to the church—how we participate on the various committees…Strangely enough, as Jesus tells the story of how it will be in the last end—He


doesn’t ask how many times we went to Sunday service or even prayer meeting—how often or well we served on that Committee…He doesn’t ask how much we gave for Women’s Day…it’s if you helped the least of these—if you reached out and touched someone who was hungry.”

Mitchell continues to expand the concept of service and to challenge others to serve consistently regardless of hindrance or circumstance. This sermon, which Mitchell preached repeatedly for varied audiences of women, lay persons, pastors, confirmation candidates, and others, sheds light into a message which she found to be central, “The peace within can be and must be expressed as we live with those whose lives we touch. God accepts our efforts and our works, even if people do not…Whatever you do, do it now—but do it with all of your strength, with full commitment, and knowledge that one of the very greatest joys you can possibly have is in doing what your hands find to do.”

Activism

Mitchell operates from the understanding that love yields service and service yields activism. Oppression can only fully be alleviated through activism which addresses its root causes. For Mitchell, activism stems from the core of love for self and others. Mitchell offers a blueprint for activism, using the Black Church as a model,

First, there is INDEPENDENCE. I am convinced that each of us has to have her own space, her own place to stand, her own means of maintenance. We are dependent, of course, on the God who gave us our very life and all our talents. But let us never be

313 Mitchell, “Love, the Only Proper Motive for Service.”
314 Mitchell, “What Your Hands Find to Do.”
dependent on any man OR woman for the necessities that undergird life and ministry…Priscilla sewed tents so she could VOLUNTEER to teach theology to the fledgling Apollos. In the Black Church it has never been a disgrace to be bivocational. My pastor/Daddy, even in the early twentieth century and with seminary training, taught school and mended shoes, and helped me get my training for ministry. As long as it was necessary, I was GLAD to be used of God the same way he was.

Then there is INSIGHT: using your head to operate strategically…avoid getting angry and acting hostile…if you have the power to change something, there is no need for anger. And if you don’t have the power, don’t advertise your predicament with tantrums which only indicate that the enemy is in control.

This leads to the second rule of INSIGHT: don’t USE your influence until you GET it…I have won more battles peacefully sitting away from the pulpit than were ever won by frontal assault…

INVINCIBLE FAITH…If we are to hold our peace in places where we have no power or authority, and if we are not to burst with frustration, it has to be based on more than psycho-logical insight and sound strategy. It has to be because we KNOW that the battle belongs to God.315

Faith is central to successful activism. Mitchell observes that “Because the end of oppression is nowhere near in sight, our bridge into the future survival and development of our people requires continuation of the ways ‘How we got over’ and didn’t go crazy or commit suicide, while others have been all but wiped out by the same bondage and oppression.”316 This faith equips Mitchell with the boldness to speak out against oppression. She says,

I think we drag our feet now because of the fact that the feminine stereotype with which we are equipped does not provide for women to have the guts that it takes to address the issue. Unfortunately, within the structure of the church, women can be our worst enemies—especially when there is need for change. We have been conditioned to play with dolls and to be soft and fluffy properties of our masculine masters, preferably attractive and demure. Many of us have invested so much in this strange

315 Mitchell, “Reflections on Strength for Sisters.”

game that we oppose the liberation often more than men. Indeed, we fear each other.317

Mitchell is unapologetic in her rebuff of those who refuse to stand for justice, believing it is evidence of a lack of conversion and a deeper need to be free. Mitchell grasps this freedom and attempts to share it with the oppressed and the oppressor alike. In this, Mitchell presents examples of activists, first through the exemplar Esther, as previously presented:

Regardless of the results of our struggle, as seen in our time, the engagement in the encounter is achievement enough in itself. Not only will we fail to be persons until we join the struggle, the fact is that our ultimate health as spiritual beings demands the courage to be women in the fullest sense of the term…

Indeed, I go not to slay my beloved enemies, but to help men to become human and spiritual and to live the abundant life… I want to overcome the brainwashing heaped upon our companions and to give them the deep sensitivities and levels of trust which make life worth the living…

Indeed, one goes to a cross knowing that they who take up their crosses… will surely save their lives as can none other. And so the words of Esther ring through the ages and in our hearts this night…I will serve, I will venture, I will press, I will live, I will act knowing I am in the Kingdom for such a time as this—and if I perish, I perish.318

In light of this example, Mitchell notes “there were no privileged positions, not even in the Palace. There was no place safe for a Jew, and likewise there is no privileged woman so long as any other woman is yet oppressed… we who are women must ourselves be constantly aware that none of us will be free until all of us are free—and until the cruel cultural bias and systemic injustice have been crushed to the earth!”319 Mitchell’s challenge is for all women,

317 Mitchell, “Esther.”

318 Ibid.

319 Ibid.
regardless of social standing or class, to recognize the universal injustice against women and to join in solidarity against their discrimination.

Mitchell affirms God’s concern for the poor, noting “the concern of God has always been for persons and for justice. That His concern at the time of slavery was not for the masters, but for slaves.”

Mitchell expresses a bold understanding of the threat women in ministry place to existing power structures. She notes,

It is manifest, that if women were permitted to be ministers of the gospel, as they unquestionably were in the primitive ages of the Christian church, it would interfere materially with the present organized system of spiritual power and ecclesiastical authority, which is now vested solely in the hands of men. It would either show that all the paraphernalia of theological seminaries, etc. to prepare men to become evangelists, is wholly unnecessary, or it would create a necessity for similar institutions in order to prepare women for the same office...I do not ask anyone to believe my statement or adopt my conclusions...but I do earnestly entreat my sisters to lay aside their prejudices, and examine these subjects for themselves, regardless of the “traditions of men,” because they are intimately connected with their duty and their usefulness in the present important crisis.

iii. Faith-Based—The Courage to Stand on Belief in God

The third critical aspect of Mitchell’s lived liberation spirituality is a deeply-rooted faith in God. All love for others and action on behalf of the oppressed is founded upon and enabled by an abiding faith. This faith, for Mitchell, grows from the faith of her ancestors and is justified by the example of Jesus.

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Mitchell purports that this faith is the source of motivation and strength which allowed African Americans to survive. Without it, they would have given up. She says,

Black history is dominated whether in or out of formal religion by just such affirmations which keep us alive and well even today. I say keep us alive because without such affirmations, we would have no alternative to suicide. If we decide that God is not good and life is not good, we have no excuse whatever for staying here.

Like Martin Luther King, Jr. some of us may get killed, but we will not be, as we say, wasted. For our whole existence will be redemptive and this after all is the heart of the Christian faith.\textsuperscript{322}

To establish this, Mitchell provides exemplars of faith, those whose faith serves as a model and inspiration for others. Mitchell’s first example speaks to youth. About David as he fights the giant Goliath, Mitchell says, “Imagine! That was a teenager talking, and he wasn’t just a hot dog soldier with glory on his mind. He had a plan and a skilled arm. It looked suicidal, but the conquest of Goliath is still the most exciting story in the Old Testament. However, it never could have happened without lived out faith. David shows us that you don’t have to be old to trust God.”\textsuperscript{323} In Abraham, Mitchell establishes the historicity of God’s preference for the oppressed. Of Abraham, Mitchell notes, “Abraham had an inkling, but a Black priest named Jethro, Moses’ father-in-law had to teach even Moses a great deal. And NOTHING was put in writing until after the Exodus. It was in 20/20 hindsight that it


\textsuperscript{323} Mitchell, Bible study on the book of Hebrews.
was revealed to them that God is all-powerful; God is just; and God works inside history, to save the oppressed.”

The faith noted in these and others, for Mitchell, is an irrefutable source of strength. Mitchell says, “If we approach God with an unshakable faith, a tenacious trust, we will have no lack of wisdom or strength.” This faith leads Mitchell back to unconditional love and service, for “the life of faith is lived above the flux and flakiness of fear. There is something better…In the house and presence of the Lord…We can even help our enemies…we can afford to be gracious and magnanimous. We can treat everybody the same…We can keep a calm and pleasant spirit.”

Mitchell expresses the power of this faith to motivate against all odds. In the midst of oppressive forces which seem so great, this is significant.

Just as our foreparents did not have to worry about whether the masters would respond to break through revelations against the system—so women, too, can trust the eschatological fulfillment of God’s will. Joel was a certified prophet and he prophesied what God was going to do. He said in those last days, God was going to have it His way—He would pour out His spirit on all flesh! God has never been a respecter of persons. We are God’s children created in His image and God’s will has not changed!...Prophecy has always been for right and righteousness. Prophecy has always suggested the ultimate triumph of God.

Our foreparents always rejoiced in this and engaged in something we theologians call “realized eschatology.” They sang about judgment day—“In that great gettin’ up morning, fare you well.” Oh how they celebrated judgment day, “right now!” And they enjoyed it because they knew God was going to set them free—And didn’t He do it!

324 Mitchell, “Faith of Our Ancestors (An Exodus of Our Own).”


Today, we of that oppressed body known as women, the female of the species, still believe that God has prophesied our liberation; God has declared what He will do in us and with us, and we know that it will come to pass.327

Mitchell establishes that it is God’s movement in history that forms the basis for present faith. Her ancestors held to a faith that was justified by God’s work on behalf of the Israelites during the exodus from Egypt. Because God has been faithful, she can be assured that God will be faithful. Mitchell stands on faith that is grounded in God’s work on behalf of her ancestors. This is illustrated through the example of her ancestors and through the example of Jesus praying for Peter.

There is a lot more to be said about our ancestors when there is time, but I must hasten to my text. You see, above and beyond the important things I have already shared is the fact that I believe we are a chosen people. I believe that just as the Jews learned who they were by watching what God did for them in the Exodus, so we must learn who WE are by looking at what God has done for us…

But the most important insight we had was that history was in the hands of God. We embraced the Moses story in very literal terms, and looked in hope to God, in the sure knowledge that in God’s own time, we would be set free…And all we said and sang among ourselves looked forward to the terrible day of God in which we would be set free. So we were awed but not surprised when our freedom came. We said with solemn certainty: “Marse Lincum sign de paper, but Gawd de one what sot us free.”328

Mitchell further establishes the premise that faith is central to liberation spirituality. In the example of Peter, Mitchell shows one who benefitted not from his own faith but from that of Jesus. Of Peter, Mitchell says,

Peter…did count on not being missed or recognized….therein lies the rub. Peter failed to take seriously the faith fact that Jesus was already praying for him…and

327 Mitchell, untitled sermon, delivered at Seventieth Annual Hampton Ministers’ Conference.

328 Mitchell, “Faith of Our Ancestors (An Exodus of Our Own).”
those prayers of our Lord must have meant much in Heaven and here on earth. On the day of Pentecost, Peter for whom Jesus prayed was an instant success as a preacher, a witness with power, because his faith had made a “come back.”

I dare to believe that Jesus is interceding for us here and now. And that if our faithfulness fail not—God may yet reverse the trend of death and bring a third Great Awakening to our land.329

In this Mitchell reveals that when an individual’s faith is weak, God will intervene. This intervention is akin to God’s intervention to liberate the oppressed. God, for Mitchell, is an ever-present God who surely provides all needs. If that need is conversion, liberation, or faith, God will fulfill it. In doing so, God equips the person with the strength needed to stand and be free. Of those who trust God and choose to serve others Mitchell says, “we move to give them what we have, little as it may seem. In that same instant the hosts of heaven swing into awesome action. Innumerable resources pour forth from the pantries of the Spirit…And our hands are suddenly filled with that which feeds the souls of them that look to us.”330

It is this faith that guides Mitchell along a liberation journey and empowers Mitchell to stand against oppression. Mitchell finds that this faith strengthened those in generations before her and confidently proclaims that it will provide the strength she needs also. Without this faith, all efforts would fail.


Chapter Five

Conclusion

Ella Mitchell’s life appears as an authentic example of liberation spirituality as lived in the life of one woman.

Mitchell was born into a situation that caused her to experience oppression. As a woman and as an African American in the early twentieth century, Mitchell’s life brought her into direct contact with discrimination and mistreatment. Beyond this, Mitchell readily accepted oppression, choosing conditions and situations that placed her in solidarity with the oppressed. This occurred as Mitchell ministered to others and as she sacrificed personal gain for ministry.

Beyond the personal experience of oppression, Mitchell connected to suffering through both oppression and loss. Mitchell identified with suffering and loss on a deep level through the murder of her sister-in-law and death of her young adult son. Mitchell found growth and development in the suffering she experienced, which drew her nearer to God. The words of Catherine of Siena, for whom suffering was central, yield further insight into the full meaning of suffering within a Christological context. In Catherine’s thought, the willingness to suffer provides evidence of love for God. The degree of love for God increases with the degree of suffering.
For Catherine, as well as for Weems and Taylor, suffering and pain, when accepted, lead to a deeper relationship with God. They draw the person nearer to God and for Taylor help the person redefine their understanding of God as it removes the “idols” from their lives. This deepened relationship is defined by discovery of God and self and is what Galilea would term conversion. Mitchell believed that those who experienced God’s liberating power through the freedom from Egyptian or American slavery began to understand God in a new context, as liberator. Drawing on this definition and the plethora of evidence that God is caring and powerful, Mitchell finds the strength to endure suffering and to believe that it holds meaning. Conversely, Mitchell says, “we would have no alternative to suicide. If we decide that God is not good and life is not good…”¹ For Mitchell, there is evidence that God is good and this gives her the strength to love, stand, and fight on behalf of others.

Mitchell demonstrates evidence of conversion through a process of awakening to God’s love, acceptance, and responsibility. Galilea presents this as a significant stage in developing a spirituality of liberation. Mitchell was converted by the love of God, which helped her overcome the low self-esteem caused by her family’s comments regarding her physical appearance and the childhood sting of discrimination. Upon truly understanding and accepting the unconditional love of God, Mitchell was emboldened to change her position in life.

Mitchell evidences this awakening process through a growing willingness to stand up for herself. As Mitchell discovered and accepted that she deserved more than the oppressive

society afforded her, she became more fearless in her fight against oppression. Mitchell did not merely seek to fight oppression in her life, she fought it on behalf of everyone. Mitchell understood that her conversion made her responsible for serving God and others. She served in her personal life and through her ministry.

Mitchell believed it was her responsibility to serve, for “to be Christian, conversion must also be social.” 


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This line of thought ensured that Mitchell’s life was defined by service. Consistent with the thought of Jon Sobrino that “the spiritual life must be efficacious for the transformation of the secular reality around us,” and the speech of Martin Luther King, Jr., “at my funeral…I want you to say I tried to love and serve humanity,” Mitchell knew that her belief must positively impact the lives of others. She believed this so richly that she also challenged others to serve—to work—on behalf of God. For Mitchell, conversion without action is meaningless. It is not enough to simply realize the love of God, the person must act upon this love by serving humanity. Galilea states, “Jesus’ humanity lived through the Spirit was and is the single radical source of Christian spirituality.”

Mitchell reflects a commitment to loving others, serving others, and engaging in activism on behalf of the oppressed. Fraternal love, “love for our brothers and sisters—our neighbors,” and love of the “rascals” to whom Mitchell refers when explaining the scripture

2 Galilea, The Way of Living Faith, 90.

3 Sobrino, Spirituality of Liberation: Toward Political Holiness, 2.


5 Ibid., 26.
“I will pour out of my spirit upon all flesh: and your sons and daughters shall prophesy,” (Acts 2:17) is evident. Mitchell loves the child abandoned in the rice field in Korea, the families living in the dangers of the Furnace Quarters slums, the sick in need of mending and companionship in her father’s church, the women who do not embrace liberation, and the “rascals” included in “all flesh.” Mitchell demonstrates a love that is truly unconditional and extended to all people.

This is possible because Mitchell completely surrenders to God. This surrender is evidenced by her willingness to give and serve in all circumstances, despite hardship, and despite oppression. For Galilea, it is “in our surrender to Christ [that] his liberating life is given to us.”6 It is in this that Mitchell reflects the strength to help others, love them, and serve them.

Galilea asserts that, “If commitment to the poor places us on the path of salvation, its gospel motivations place us on the path of holiness.”7 Mitchell’s life, then, was on a clear trajectory toward holiness. Mitchell sacrifices her time, talent, and limited resources to give. Further, Mitchell teaches her children to give, guiding them in donations to people nearby and those across the world. Beyond this, Mitchell preaches to others about giving and implores the church to give to those in need. Mitchell indicates the “Black Church and

6 Ibid., 53-54.
7 Ibid., 130.
community shall never be whole without those whom Christ calls us to reclaim, as she
implores the church to accept responsibility for those in need.

Mitchell’s position indicates that true transformation in society will only occur through
activism and not by simple outreach alone. This activism will take the efforts of all people
working in tandem, particularly the oppressed. Mitchell draws upon the example and fervor
of similar African American women who lived a short time before her and their model of
faith as examples for her own efforts. The words of Sojourner Truth, Jarena Lee, Zilpha
Elaw, and others demonstrate a deep belief in God that empowered them to stand and fight
injustice. The theology and belief of these women shed light onto the tradition that fed
Mitchell’s theology.

These nineteenth century African American women, some born into slavery, others born
free, reflect the literality of tradition which Mitchell adopts. They embrace a human Jesus
who understands their suffering because he experienced suffering and they reapply the lesson
of the Exodus narrative, that God will free the oppressed, to themselves. These women’s
community becomes the new “chosen people” of biblical literature. They hear directly from
God and follow God with boldness, despite personal risk to life and possession. Mitchell
looks to them and to those in her family to be inspired by women who could not vote,
sometimes could not read, and in many cases were not free. From them, Mitchell learns how
to exist within the twentieth century’s context of racial and gender discrimination.

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Mitchell echoes the themes prevalent in their works. The first two have already been mentioned, that the oppressed African Americans are God’s chosen people, reminiscent of the biblical Israelites under the tyranny of Egyptian slavery. Secondly, they were converted—these women began to see themselves in a new light, a light that liberated them from the limits assigned by society. They accepted that God is trustworthy; a deep faith in God allowed them to know that God would always prevail. This belief provided boldness to Mitchell and her predecessors in the face of their enemies and confidence in the midst of suffering. These women proclaimed that God is awesome and that they must strive to be holy and worthy of God’s presence. They chose to journey nearer to God each day.

Further, God claimed those who were oppressed as his own. This belief that God was theirs meant they could call upon God and trust God to answer no matter the situation. It meant that God was with them through all of their trials and God would protect them when in danger. Further, this belief ensured that God would ultimately justify them, for it assigned value to those who were low in society. Mitchell states, “the person who meets needs is the greatest person of all…She or he who would be great must seek not honor but service. And those who occupy the very lowest posts in an unjust society may well be the very glue that holds it together.”

Beyond this, the nineteenth century examples establish that faith is lived in community. Galilea speaks of fraternity and Mitchell speaks of the Black Church. The experiences of the handful of African American women whose thoughts were recorded and published indicate

\[9 \text{Ibid.}\]
that their communities had significant influence on their faith formation. It is through this that they learned the word of God, experienced God, received God’s love, and learned to love themselves and others.

Mitchell notes the challenges of African American women who are converted to be the bold and transformational leaders they have been chosen to be while still affirming African American men who have also felt the sting of discrimination. In this, Mitchell demonstrates a spirituality that is fully affirming. The purpose given to her as a woman never diminishes the purpose given to another. Just as Jesus reaffirmed the woman with the expensive flask of oil, recognizing her need rather than demeaning her for her waste, Mitchell reaffirms the male presence in her community, recognizing their need for affirmation and encouragement.

Mitchell first demonstrates a commitment to God and to service that stems from her childhood. This is reflected in Mitchell’s volunteerism through sick visits, donations, and piano playing at numerous community churches. This commitment grew in purpose and meaning as Mitchell experienced conversion. Mitchell’s conversion was enabled by several key factors. The first was a direct internalization of the word of God for her life, a direct experience with God. Mitchell’s writings provide evidence of this experience and its impact on her life.

Mitchell experienced conversion by internalizing God’s message to her. She also experienced it through the application of biblical examples, female and male, to her life’s circumstances. Mitchell identifies exemplars of faith from the Bible and provides insight into how their actions and/or lives impacted their sense of self worth. These examples are empowering for Mitchell as they provide evidence not only of leading women but of God’s
sanctioning of women leaders in the church through time. These women demonstrate that women have achieved influential positions in society and church despite societal discrimination.

Mitchell draws upon biblical examples that include Esther and Abigail as models of strength. Esther’s willingness to risk everything in favor of liberation is key to Mitchell’s spirituality. In Esther, Mitchell finds a model of liberation and activism. Esther is a prototypical example for Mitchell as she recognizes the risk to self, engages the community in prayer and fasting because she understands the limitations of her place in society, and risks all to ensure that a systemic injustice is corrected. Mitchell’s examples also extend to biblical women like Rahab, who for Mitchell affirm that God sees beyond the limitations of the person and chooses him or her anyway. Rahab demonstrates that Mitchell’s liberation is not isolated to women, but to those who are oppressed for any reason and those who have made difficult and shameful personal choices. Mitchell internalizes this message and then offers it to others. Mitchell’s view of womanhood becomes so free that she offers the scripture in which wisdom is personified as a woman as further evidence of the value of women in the Bible and society.

Emboldened by the example of these women, Mitchell turns to African American women as further examples of Godly leadership. The women of Mitchell’s heritage provide insight into the specific challenges Mitchell faces and the cultural factors involved in overcoming racism, sexism, and classism, to name a few. Their context is specifically American and depicts the timeframe immediately preceding Mitchell’s birth. In these women, Mitchell sees God move in her community through history. They were freed from slavery, provided the
right to vote, offered equal access to public facilities, and so forth. Though Mitchell would clarify that discrimination was still not only present but prevalent, she leaned on their history to establish that God had demonstrated both a willingness and ability to help them be free. This history proved God’s power and trustworthiness.

Beyond this, Mitchell also discusses the example of Jesus as an impetus for liberation. Jesus’ ministry spoke to the oppressed, inviting them into the kingdom of God. Further, this ministry actively embraced the purpose and place of women in society, church, and leadership. Jesus accepts women unconditionally despite societal discrimination. This reality demonstrates for Mitchell that Jesus was willing to stand against oppression much as she would thousands of years later. Further, for Mitchell, Jesus not only achieves this for women but for all of the oppressed of society. The background of Jesus’ disciples, who were not from highly respected professions or positions, is evidence for Mitchell of Jesus’ commitment to the oppressed.

Jesus, in Mitchell’s view, valued women for both their traditional and nontraditional roles. This allowed Mitchell to be mother, wife, church leader, and activist. It allowed Mitchell to support all gifts in every person, regardless of how that gift was manifested. It ensured for Mitchell that God sincerely values everyone, regardless of shortcoming and mistake. This empowered Mitchell and gave her the confidence to empower others.

Through the description of actions taken during Jesus’ ministry, Mitchell provides a basis for understanding Jesus’ true commitment—to the poor, oppressed, and mistreated. This has personal implications as it provides a basis for Mitchell to internalize the message of God’s love and unconditional acceptance. The examples drawn from Jesus’ life give Mitchell the
ability to witness God’s unconditional love toward others as a means of reassuring her of God’s unconditional love toward her. If God loved and used a prostitute, peasant girl, tax collector, and others, then surely God could use Ella Mitchell.

It is through the example of each of these areas that Mitchell is converted. Once converted, Mitchell is clear to propound the responsibility of action. Those who are converted bear this responsibility. For Mitchell, the responsibility is to engage in love, service, and activism. Receiving God’s love means loving all of God’s creation. In turn, this means that it is impossible to love others and witness their suffering without being compelled to act to relieve their suffering. Mitchell, then, urges all persons to act on behalf of those in need and to make the sacrifices necessary to accomplish this. For Mitchell, this responsibility exists both with the oppressed and the oppressor. Mitchell believes that the oppressed have a responsibility to stand and claim their freedom and the oppressors have a responsibility to admit their wrong.

Mitchell is particularly disturbed by oppressed people who are satisfied with their oppression and by those who refuse to give of their substance to help others. Mitchell’s spirituality is a “doing” spirituality. Once converted, there is responsibility. Mitchell implores persons to work, for “NObody lives without service or commitment or involvement in SOMEthing.” This work must stem sincerely from a love for the oppressed and for God.

Mitchell turns to the Beatitudes as an example of Jesus’ view. Galilea calls them “the summary of the Gospels’ spirit and the Word of God as the way of human perfection.”\textsuperscript{11} Beyond service, activism is necessary for Mitchell because it is the only means for truly alleviating suffering and oppression. Without activism, service will continue to arrive at the same result, which will not ultimately reverse the harmful trends of oppression. For Mitchell, activism requires faith “because the end of oppression is nowhere near in sight,”\textsuperscript{12} and without faith persons would become discouraged and disoriented.

Each of these three elements is essential to the spirituality of Ella Mitchell. They embrace the personal and the communal aspects of action that grow out of conversion due to God’s unconditional love. Each step is considered essential and each is intended to be cycled and recycled through as part of an ongoing growth experience. The final aspect is that the liberation spirituality journey is faith-based. Mitchell acknowledges that faith has been central to generations of African American women and that faith is central to those in the Bible who are looked to as examples. This acknowledges God as the source of motivation and strength for all love and action that occurs in this process. Evidence of God’s mighty acts serves as an assurance that God will act on behalf of the oppressed.

Mitchell’s internalization of these factors reflects the experience that empowered Mitchell to be free and to free others through her actions and her preaching. Mitchell’s commitment to serving others is so profound and far-reaching that Mitchell’s value cannot be

\textsuperscript{11} Galilea, \textit{The Way of Living Faith}, 49.

\textsuperscript{12} Mitchell, “Reflections on Strength for Sisters.”
underestimated. Mitchell is a trailblazer in the church for contributions to Christian education and a host of “firsts.” She was equipped to accomplish these feats because of her liberation.

Mitchell, once liberated, loved freely and unconditionally. She manifested the fraternal love of which Galilea speaks and evidenced it throughout her life. Mitchell gave, loved, helped, advocated for, and stood in solidarity with the poor and oppressed. She was one of them and, in cases where she was not, she became one freely. In this, Mitchell demonstrates all key elements of liberation spirituality and stands as a model of liberation spirituality as it is lived and experienced in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries.
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