

DO YOU KNOW WHO YOU ARE? BELONGING, IDENTITY, AND GENEALOGY WITHIN THE
BLACK CHURCH

by
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CHAPTER 1

Introduction

Though genetic genealogy is not often linked to theology, my ministry experience allowed me to see how significant these two items were linked together. Genetics is a scientific field of study that primarily focuses on the genes in our body and how those genes we inherited from our ancestors are passed to future generations.¹ For example, when I asked my primary health care provider the rationale for providing a history of family illness during my annual appointment, she informed me that they were trying to determine if there was a history of a specific type of illness that may have been inherited from my parents and or their ancestors. This assessment of my personal health history provided me with a preventive type of health metric designed to prevent disease instead of treating it. However, this project focuses on genealogy as it pertains to ancestors rather than specific disease inheritance. The Hebrew word used for genealogy is *toledot*, and it means to bear, which suggests the order in which people are born.² I had four key questions about genetic genealogy that I was wrestling with before I initiated this project, and these questions centered around identity, belonging, and most significantly for me and the congregation at Bethany Missionary Baptist Church (BMBC), racial identity. The questions are as follows:

- How significant are the subjects of DNA testing and genealogy research in general?
- How significant is DNA testing and genealogy research for members of BMBC?

¹ Sheldon Krinsky, *Understanding DNA Ancestry* (Massachusetts: Cambridge University Press, 2022), 4.

² David Noel Freedman, *The Anchor Bible Dictionary: Volume 2cD-G* (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 930.

- What questions does this testing and research raise about ethnicity, difference, and belonging within Black faith traditions in general and the Black church in particular?
- How can the study of genetic genealogy initiate deeper conversations about racial identity?

Genetic genealogical research is important to me because there were historically inaccurate stories about the ancestral roots of African Americans that needed to be corrected or at the very least explained. For example, the curse of Ham theory was one of these stories that purportedly explained the rationale for skin color of Black Americans.³ This misreading of Scripture is based on a post-flood event about Noah becoming intoxicated after consuming too much wine from his garden. It asserts that Ham, one of Noah's sons, was cursed with Black skin because he looked at his father's naked body and went and told his brothers instead of placing a covering over him to protect and honor him as his two brothers Shem and Japhet had done (Gen. 9:18-27[New Revised Standard Version with the Apocrypha]). This misinterpretation of the story and similar ones like it created inaccurate narratives about ethnicity and race, which still have negative residual effects today of how some Blacks view themselves and the continent of Africa.⁴ Black history was not taught in the schools that I attended during my formative grade school, junior, and high school years. When my teachers mentioned any reference to Black American history, their enslavement tended to dominate these conversations instead of their overall contributions to American society.

³ Henry Louis Gates, Jr., and Andrew S. Curran, *Who's Black and Why: A Hidden Chapter from the Eighteenth-Century Invention of Race* (Massachusetts: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2022), 29. Also, see F.S. Rhodes. *People of Color in Every Book of the Bible: A Study Guide* (Tennessee: Townsend Press, 2003), 44-46.

⁴ Steven J. Micheletti, Kasia Bryc, Samantha G. Ancona Esselmann, William A. Freyman, Meghan E. Moreno, G. David Posnik, Anjali J. Shastri, 23andMe Research Team, Sandra Beleza, and Joanna L. Mountain, "Genetic Consequences of the Transatlantic Slave Trade in the Americas." *The American Journal of Human Genetics* 107, 265-277 (August 6, 2020): 265.

I realized during my research that most African Americans run into a brick wall trying to trace their ancestral roots beyond the 1870 United States Census Report. Most of their ancestors were enslaved and treated as property and because of this reality, there were likely few or no records of birth, death, or marriages. Therefore, I saw an urgent need to provide a more historically accurate view of their history by using the scientific tools of genetic ancestry testing and traditional genealogical research, which includes oral stories, census and military records, marriage and death certificates, and perhaps some visits to local and family cemeteries. These methods could or would assist us in filling in the missing pieces of our identity puzzle.

In this chapter, I will initiate this theological reflection by providing a historical perspective of genetic genealogy and explaining its relevance to theology, which also includes the subject of theological anthropology. Theological anthropology focuses on our humanity, especially as it relates to the biblical account of the creation of human beings. (Gen. 1:27). This subject prompts us to think deeply about what it means to be human. This inquiry about our humanness drives anthropologists to study human societies, their cultures, their development, and the study of human biological and physiological characteristics and their evolution. Theological anthropology also impacts the theologies that we have developed in our spiritual journey. We must be prepared to make some theological adjustments by thinking about genetics theologically, as with any subject that may deviate from our embedded theologies. Furthermore, theological anthropology intersects with genetic genealogy because it helps us understand those nagging questions about identity: Who am I? What am I? Where did I come from? Who are my relatives? And finally, what role should I play in the world? Since the central goal

of theological anthropology consists of understanding the human person, genetic genealogy broadens this understanding by looking at ourselves genetically as it relates to our physical body and those ancestors with whom we share genetic information through the analysis of genetic ancestry testing (GAT).

One of the purposes of genetic genealogy consists of providing Black Americans with a scientific way of substantiating their specific African ethnic identity that merges with both their American and Christian identity, and this genetic identity is shared historically with those that resided in areas of West Africa or the Angola region where most enslaved Africans were taken from.⁵ If we are going to thoroughly understand the intersection of race and genetics, we must initiate this conversation by critically looking at the field of science and its role in supporting racial concepts or refuting them. There was a genetic project launched in June 2008 that brought together academics and social justice advocates. This project began with a series of research papers that addressed the effects of expanded forensic DNA databases on racial disparities within the criminal justice system, and it was funded by the Ford foundation. The Council for Responsible Genetics (CRG) was tasked with examining the concept of human races within science and its negative impact regarding disparities among people with diverse geographical ancestries. The conclusion of the CRG project brought public awareness to the long held scientific myths about race and its

⁵ Albert J. Raboteau, *Slave Religion: The Invisible Institution in the Antebellum South* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004),7.

impact on social equality regardless of skin color, ethnic identity, geographical origin, and phenotypes within the genetic testing industry.⁶

Sheldon Krimsky and Kathleen Sloan argue, “Historically, the concept of ‘race’ has been steeped in paradox, embraced by ideology, adopted, and rejected by science, but nevertheless remains an indisputable part of public discourse. The term ‘race’ is merely a shadow of what it once represented in science. Simply put, race is a scientific myth and a social reality.”⁷ Our roles in historically understanding the concept of race are like what firemen do when investigating the cause of a fire. They look critically at every piece of evidence because they are aware that it had a beginning somewhere within that structure.

Furthermore, several scientists and founding fathers held strongly racist views including: Fleeming Jenkin, Francis Galton, Charles Davenport, James Madison, Thomas Jefferson, and Carl Von Linnaeus just to name a few. They ignited the flames of white supremacy by racially categorizing specific ethnicities as ‘other than’ with long term consequences.⁸ Joy DeGruy argues, “This then is racism. It is the belief that people differ along biological and genetic lines and that one’s own group is superior to another group. This belief is coupled with the power to negatively affect the lives of those perceived to be inferior. America’s history is inextricably bound to this racist ideology.”⁹ Also, the belief that people

⁶ Sheldon Krimsky and Kathleen Sloan, *Race and The Genetic Revolution: Science, Myth, and Culture* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011), 2.

⁷ Krimsky and Sloan, 2.

⁸ For historical and scientific views of race see: Steve Jones & Borin Van Loon, *Genetics: A Graphic Guide* (Berkeley: Publishers Group West, 1993) and James D. Watson, *DNA: The Story of the Genetic Revolution* (New York: Penguin House, 2017).

⁹ Joy DeGruy, *Post Traumatic Slave Syndrome: America’s Legacy of Enduring Injury and Healing* (Oregon: Joy DeGruy Publications, 2005), 23.

are genetically different became part of America's ideology of manifest destiny.¹⁰ This project forced me to retrieve some of the previous books that I had purchased regarding issues of racial injustice and oppression, and all of them took me back to the field of science.

Genetic genealogy research can provide answers to some of our deepest questions about identity and belonging. These two subjects can help the Black church shape its theology of belonging and identity as they research their genealogies individually and collectively. A thorough study of genetic genealogy can also have a positive impact on their sense of dignity and wellbeing while simultaneously leading to deeper and more effective conversations about racial identity. When other ethnic groups came to this country, it is likely that they came with most or all of the previously mentioned legal documents since most of them were not enslaved, though some may have been indentured servants.¹¹ However, Black American ancestors were stolen from their native land of Africa and stripped of their names, core values, religious and cultural norms, and most significantly their ethnic and personal identities.¹² Therefore, a key question for them to consider before embarking upon this journey is: how does one recover some of this lost identity? My answers to this question are compared to how we resolve other issues in our lives. Whenever we encounter a specific problem, we go to a specialist to resolve the issue. For example, if I am having a problem with my heart, I would seek the advice of a cardiologist or if I am having problems with my car, I would

¹⁰ Kelly Brown Douglas, *Stand Your Ground: Black Bodies and the Justice of God* (New York: Orbis Books, 2015), 93.

¹¹ Sandra K. Yocum and Frances Presley Rice, *Black History 1619-2019: An Illustrated and Documented-American History*, (St. Paul, Minnesota: Paragon House, 2021), 1-2.

¹² L.H. Wheelchel, Jr. *The History and Heritage of African-American Churches: A Way Out of No Way* (St. Paul, Mn: Paragon House, 2011), xx.

seek the advice of an automobile mechanic. Likewise, if I am experiencing a problem with identity, I would seek advice from someone who specializes in that field.

My ancestral journey led me to Dr. Rick Kittles, founder of Africanancestry.com and Dr. Gina Paige, president, and co-founder. They specialize in helping Black people recover the missing pieces of their identity puzzle through the technology of genetic ancestry testing (GAT), also known as direct-to-consumer ancestry testing or (DCT). Africanancestry.com assists their customers by connecting them to the specific present day African country and ethnic group that they share ancestry with. Their mission, according to its website is as follows: "To help Black people around the world transform the way we view ourselves and the way we view Africa."¹³ They are the pioneers for tracing the ancestry of Black Americans by linking them to a specific country in Africa and to a specific ethnic group. However, there is a caveat: due to the rape of enslaved Black women by their male enslavers, they do not guarantee DNA results that leads to an African country. White European males were and still are the primary reference population in most DNA testing companies' databases according to a PBS documentary on DNA testing.¹⁴ Africanancestry.com research includes over forty African countries, thirty thousand DNA samples of African People, and over four-hundred ethnic groups.¹⁵

It becomes critical to be aware of these biases that exist within the databases of DNA testing companies to ascertain the reality of how one's specific ethnicity may be represented in the referenced population sampled. If one's ethnicity is not adequately represented by one of these companies, then the purported ethnicity charts that these companies provide are skewed at best and inaccurate at worst. I do believe that identity

¹³ This was a quote by Dr. Gina Paige, co-founder and president of Africanancestry.com <https://africanancestry.com/pages/our-story>

¹⁴ See YouTube PBS Nova documentary entitled: (Secrets in Our DNA)

¹⁵ See YouTube Ted Talk video entitled (Recovering the pieces of the Identity Puzzle by Dr. Gina Paige).

is a God-given right for everyone, and it is a core value that we should control instead of someone else. All the past identities given to African Americans were given by someone else and some of these identities are Negro, Colored, and African American, just to name a few. Because of African Ancestry's unique work in GAT testing, I can now make claims to a specific identity that did not previously exist. For example, I am a Black American, who shares an ethnic origin with the Tsogo, Ateke, and Mbundu people in Angola and Gabon. Members of Bethany Missionary Baptist Church (BMBC) can also benefit from these types of ethnic specificities when they initiate their genetic genealogical journey. Throughout this project, I tend to use the term Black American rather than African American for various reasons. For example, a white European from Africa who became a naturalized U.S. citizen can also claim an African American status without their skin color being black or having any Black African ethnic heritage.

In chapter two, I will show the significance of biblical genealogies. Genealogies played an important role in Israelite life and thought.¹⁶ While there are many genealogies throughout the Bible, my project focuses on the genealogy of Jesus in the gospels of Matthew and Luke. While Matthew shows that Jesus' genealogy belongs to the story of Israel, which includes both enslavement and liberation (Jer. 15:13-14), Luke shows that Jesus also belongs to the universal story of humanity, and like all of us He was made in the image of God (Col. 1:15-16). Given the significance of biblical genealogies, I believe genealogical research today coupled with DNA testing can play a significant role in the lives of the members of (BMBC) and can help shape their theology of belonging by connecting them to their past ancestors while simultaneously connecting them to living relatives. While perusing the Africanancestry.com website I noticed the following quote by psychologist, Cynthia E. Winston-Proctor, 'Knowing where you come from is a critical

¹⁶ Freedman, 930

component of knowing who you are.¹⁷ How can you know your ethnic heritage if there are no records to substantiate it? Hence, the rationale why GAT testing can become the most reliable means for Black Americans to recover some of what was stolen from them during both the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade and the Middle Passage. Since Black bodies have been historically demonized, this genealogical study helps affirm the ethnic, cultural, and personal identities of African Americans.

In chapter three, I will discuss the particularities of the BMBC focus group, the data discovered, and the relatedness of that data to the research question of identity, belonging, and racial identity within the Black church tradition. They are key components in helping us discover both our personal and most significantly our ethnic identities. I will also address the issue of ethics and genetic testing in this chapter. Alex Haley, best-selling author of *Roots*, created a thirst for many Americans to research their ancestral roots, which also proved to be beneficial to most white Americans because they did not run into brick walls experienced by Black Americans. White ancestors were listed as human beings on historical records like U.S. Census reports, birth, death, and marriage certificates while most enslaved Blacks were listed as property. However, the brutal realities of American slavery hampered the success of most Black Americans to trace their ancestral journey as previously stated, but the introduction of genetic ancestry testing (GAT) provided them with an additional tool to substantiate whatever oral and historical records they are privy to. Graham S. Holton argues, “There was a suspicion of DNA testing, in the early days at least, that it was somehow in competition with traditional research, but nothing could be further from the truth. The fact is that you cannot get the most out of DNA testing without traditional research, and now that we have the fantastic resource that DNA provides you cannot get the most out of traditional

¹⁷ Dr. Gina Paige is the source of this quote from the Africanancestry.com website.

research without also taking DNA evidence into account.”¹⁸ This is why this GAT testing can enhance traditional genealogical research methods; you cannot successfully do one without the other in today’s tech savvy environment.

DNA testing companies emerged shortly after United States President William Jefferson Clinton announced the results of the international human genome project that was initiated in 1990 and completed in 2003.¹⁹ This project showed that 99.9% of the genetic code is identical in every human being, a reality that substantiates the idea that race is indeed a social construct that has been historically used to oppress one group for the benefit of another group.²⁰ This scientific data directly provides an ideal segway into the final research question and shows how a study of genetic genealogy can initiate deeper and more effective conversations about racial identity.

In chapter four, I will discuss the themes revealed during the focus group sessions and the data it revealed regarding genetic genealogy research. After I gave a brief introduction to the focus group about the subject of genetic ancestry testing (GAT) and ways it can enhance traditional genealogical research, they all expressed their initial reasons why they took a GAT test and what they understood about traditional genealogical methods. However, before we delved into these discussions, I asked the group members to provide their comments on the videos they had viewed on GAT testing prior to the first session. Most of them immediately brought attention to the Kirk Franklin story and how it impacted them emotionally. There was one member that brought an additional video suggestion to the group that is available on the Tubi channel network, and the title of this movie is listed on page 55 along with other video

¹⁸ Graham S. Holton. *Tracing Your Ancestors Using DNA: A Guide for Family Historians* (South Yorkshire, S70 2AS: Pen & Sword Books LTD, 2022), 11.

¹⁹ James D. Watson. *DNA: The Story of The Genetic Revolution* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2017), 189.

²⁰ Frances Morgan. *A Nation of Descendants: Politics and the practice of genealogy in U.S. History* (North Carolina: The University of North Carolina Press, 2021), 183.

suggestions. Finally, I will discuss the overall impact this study had on the congregational life of the members of Bethany Missionary Baptist Church.

Defining the Situation: Historical Perspectives

The original title of this Doctor of Ministry project was: “Who Do You Think You Are?” It was based on a song I heard during the early seventies. The song, entitled “Mr. Big Stuff,” was released in 1971 by a Black American recording artist known as Jean Knight. It wasn’t the title of the song or album that caught my attention, but it was the rhetorical question in the beginning of the song’s lyrics: “who do you think you are?” We tend to make assumptions about our ethnic identity based on skin color, hair texture, eye color, and what others had said or inferred about us or who they thought we were along with many other factors. The question of genetic genealogy and its relatedness to theology is a question that I was often confronted with by those with whom I shared some of the details about my Doctor of Ministry Project. Although this question and several like it were asked during my genetic genealogical research journey, I will initiate my first response to this question by recalling a story about my maternal grandmother who was affectionately referred to as “Big Mamma” by most of her grandchildren not because of her physical size but her matriarchal position in the family. Some of us assume that the mental faculties of our parents, grandparents, and great grandparents decline with age, and in some cases this may be true. However, I remember an incident in my maternal family in which this assumption proved to be unequivocally false.

Some of my grandmother’s children had to make the daunting decision of relocating her from her warm and cozy climate in Bainbridge Georgia to the sometimes-unpredictable winter weather of Western New York, especially Buffalo and Niagara Falls. After she arrived in the Falls, as it is affectionally called by its surrounding communities,

she was greeted by one of my elder sisters. When my sister saw her, she assumed that my grandmother would not likely remember her. My sister looked sternly at her and asked, "Big Mamma, do you know who I am?" My grandmother looked up at her from her wheelchair and asked her a counter question: "Do you know who you are?" This response generated a humorous laugh from those who witnessed this encounter.

Although I had initially chosen another title for this paper, my grandmother's reply to my sister's inquiry inspired me to change to a title or question that would be more relevant to my research. I renamed it because it resonated with deeper questions of identity and belonging that many of us, especially African Americans, wrestle with. Historically, many of us were taught that our history began with the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade, the Middle Passage, and the arrival of the ship in 1619 in Jamestown Virginia when twenty or more indentured servants were brought to the early British Colonies.

However, our history did not begin with being enslaved but it began within the rich continent of Africa, which is the second largest continent in the universe where all of civilization began before the human population began spreading across Asia, Europe and other areas of the world. The brutal realities of enslaved Africans brought forcibly to America prevented most of them from knowing their historical roots. Whelchel argues, "In Comparison with Europeans who were free and able to retain their religion, history, culture, beliefs, and family names, the Africans were systematically denied their freedom, family names, history, culture, religion, and in essence their humanity."²¹ It becomes immensely critical for the Black church pastor to play a vital role in teaching their congregants their authentic history because of what their enslavers and most American historians kept from them. Although Black Americans are still experiencing the

²¹ Whelchel, xx.

residual effects of the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade, progress can be made to resolve this impact by exploring the benefit of genetic data.²²

There are many stories about one's genealogical origin, but I discovered five consistent stories that seem to resurface when participants share their genetic ancestry journey with me: the oral story, the legal story, the scientific story, the horror story, and the biblical story. Although I have no scientific basis for this five-tier schematic, my research led me to conclude that these stories not only seem to fit their genetic ancestry journey, but they certainly fit mine. I will argue that two of these stories seem to fit the biblical model of what constituted a typical family unit in early Israel societies. The oral story is where we learned of our ancestry from our parents or guardians and this story fit the first biblical family because both siblings shared the same parents. Freedman says that this description of a family unit was the most common genealogical form.²³ However, this biblical model does not necessarily fit the traditional African family model. Family was defined in broader terms that exceeded the nuclear family model, which included anyone that shared blood ties with the family: aunts, uncles, grandparents, nephews, and cousins. Occasionally it also included in-laws and borders that family members embraced as adopted kin.²⁴ Historically, the oral story was the primary way to determine kinship ties before the recording of live births in family Bibles, church records, and birth certificates and other documents were used to show kinship ties. My wife informed me that a nurse would inquire about the paternity of the child briefly following a live birth. This process of determining paternity kinship has ceased to be a practice in New York State.

²² Steven J. Micheletti, et al., 265.

²³ Freedman, *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*, 930.

²⁴ Tokunboh Adeyemo, *Africa Bible Commentary: A One Volume Commentary Written by 70 African Scholars*, Solomon Andria, Issiaka Coulibaly, Tewoldemedhin Habtn, Samuel Ngewa, ed. (Nairobi Kenya: WordAlive Publishers/Zondervan, 2006), 1178.

The legal story is the information listed on our government-issued documents such as our birth certificates, adoption papers, census reports, and marriage licenses. I argue that biblical genealogies are the closest representation that fit this family model because they were used to determine the legal right of male descendants of kings to inherit the throne.²⁵ Matthew implies in his genealogy of Jesus that though Joseph is his adopted father, he is legally the son of David.²⁶ This is a primary reason why Matthew's genealogy of Jesus places him with Israel's history by connecting him with David, one of the nation's greatest kings. These legal documents are a good start for those wishing to embark upon an ancestral journey, but we must be cognizant of the challenges they present, especially for Black Americans. People do lie about information contained in birth certificates and adoption papers, and genetic ancestry testing is exposing these family secrets. Historically, birth certificates were also used for employment discrimination against Black Americans.²⁷ For example, many employers required proof of name, age, and citizenship through birth certificates but when some applicants from Virginia applied for one, it would be delayed until 'pure' white ethnicity could be established.²⁸

The scientific story is based on the results of your genetic ancestry test or (GAT) test that you submit to these testing companies to obtain your individual results. Each of these testing companies utilize a variety of algorithms to determine your ethnicity make-up. Your individual GAT test is an estimated genetic make-up based on your saliva sample or an internal swab of your cheeks that you provided to the DNA testing

²⁵ Freedman, *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*, 931.

²⁶ David A. deSilva, *An Introduction to the New Testament: Contexts, Methods & Ministry Formation* (Illinois: IVP Academic, 2004), 249.

²⁷ Susan J. Pearson, *The Birth Certificate: An American History* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2021), 255.

²⁸ Pearson, 252-255.

company of your choice. Libby Copeland says that genetic ancestry testing provides us with two key pieces of information: a genetic pie chart that is based on an algorithm that purportedly shows regions around the world that we share ancestry with. She describes the second piece of information as robust because if a DNA test reveals that someone is your relative, it is scientific evidence that you are a genetic match to that person's ancestral relatives.²⁹ Genetic ancestry tests are beneficial because its results can substantiate or refute your oral story. For example, my ancestry test substantiated my oral story but it contradicted my legal story because it contained the name of my step father and not my biological father. I will provide the details of this story later in the chapter after the completion of the biblical story.

The horror story happens when we discover hidden family secrets that are revealed. It becomes all too easy to pass judgment on our family members who kept these secrets hidden from us. However, we may not be aware of the factual circumstances of our conception or rather or not it included some level of trauma. It requires immense sensitivity to avoid re-traumatizing someone because of the circumstances of their birth, especially for Black Americans. Many of our enslaved ancestors were likely raped by their enslavers, and the descendants of the enslavers may not be prepared to deal with these histories. If we discover that our birth story is a horror story, it may require professional guidance from a certified mental health care professional, and spiritual guidance to help us place our experiences in a spiritual light. For example, a DNA test taker may discover that their biological parent/parents were someone different than the parents that reared them, and this type of experience requires such services.

²⁹ Libby Copeland, *The Lost Family: How DNA Testing Is Upending Who We Are* (New York: Abrams Press, 2020), 55.

Finally, the biblical story shows that no matter how we fit into any of these stories, we all fit into the biblical story as the genealogy of Jesus reveals in the gospel narratives of Matthew and Luke. I already mentioned earlier that Matthew was writing primarily to a Jewish audience to convince them that Jesus is the Promised Jewish Messiah that the Hebrew authors wrote about, but Gentiles are also represented in his genealogy. Though Matthew's genealogy of Jesus is predominantly patriarchal, he includes four women. Three of these women are not Jews but Gentiles: Tamar, Rahab, and Ruth, and their personal lives are steeped with scandalous activity. Tamar stealthily commits incest with her father-in-law Judah, Rahab was a prostitute, and Ruth ancestors were enemies of Israel. This shows that the hand of God reaches into the depths of our sinful lives and transforms us into what we can be and should be. Luke confirms Matthew's story that Jesus is the promised Jewish messiah, but he goes a step further by showing that Jesus is also the son of humanity. Matthew's genealogy extends back to the two male patriarchs, Abraham, and David. However, Luke takes his genealogy all the way back to Adam. All five stories often match for most of us, but for others they may not because of the decisions that our ancestors made that resulted in our genetic origin. These decisions were beyond our control but may have perpetual consequences. I noted previously that although our legal documents are used to confirm our residence as citizens of the United States, the information contained in them may be biologically and ancestrally wrong. For example, my mom and stepdad were separated when I was born, and they did not get a divorce until I was a young adult. My stepdad is listed as my biological father on my birth certificate, and I inherited his last name due to my mom's marriage to him. However, he is not my biological father, and my DNA test from eight different testing companies confirms this reality. My stepdad was born in Kingston, Jamaica, but my biological father was born in Georgia. The legal story of my origin does not match with either the oral or scientific story. Two of my biological dad's children

showed up as half siblings in one of my DNA tests, which confirmed my scientific story and oral stories. The results from DNA tests can leave us excited about our ancestral origins, or it can leave us emotionally and psychologically distraught. Sometimes our parents or guardians were not transparent about our biological origins. Perhaps they were ashamed or embarrassed about their sexual partner/partners or may have been traumatized by a sexual event beyond their control. However, they could not foresee the invention of the DNA test years later. As noted previously, these tests tend to reveal secrets from the past that some may prefer to keep buried. Although different DNA testing companies may vary in their results regarding our genetic origin or makeup, their accuracy is estimated to be around seventy to eighty percent.³⁰ A question to consider is, where do I fit individually and collectively in the oral, legal, scientific, horror, and biblical story?

There is a deep yearning within all of us to know who and what we are regarding our ethnic identities. Identity has a great deal to do with how we feel about ourselves and how we approach the world. We can approach it with confidence and tenacity, or we can approach it with timidity. A study in genetic genealogy is significant because it points us in the right direction of self-discovery. It also answers the deeper question: what makes us who we are? Genetics is about our physical body and the many ways we interact with this body and the ways it interacts with us as previously mentioned. The body is a central part of our genetic, genealogical, and spiritual identity and is treated as such during several phases of our lives. For example, for many of us our body was presented to God shortly after we were born at our church altar in a ceremony known as christening or baby dedication. When we united in holy matrimony with someone that we loved, these two bodies were presented to God at the altar as one body. Finally, when

³⁰ See Jackson/Hinds Library System YouTube Presentation: A Virtual Event: The Cultural Phenomenon of Home DNA Testing featuring Libby Copeland.

we have completed our earthly journey, this same body is laid at the altar and entrusted back to earth from whence it came. One cannot embark on a study of genetic genealogy without understanding its significance to the human body, for our bodies are a reflection of our genetic make-up. However, I must establish a clear distinction between genealogical ancestry and genetic ancestry. Joshua Swamidass argues, “Genealogical ancestry is not genetic ancestry. Genealogical ancestry traces the reproductive origins of individuals, while genetic ancestry traces the origin of stretches of DNA. A question about ‘descent’ can be a question about genealogies, and genealogical questions should be answered with genealogical science.”³¹ We will discover the irony of this quote later in this chapter when we look at the work of a little-known German Austrian monk, who would later become known as the father of modern genetics.³²

In addition to pointing us in the right direction for self-discovery, genetic genealogy is also significant because it can link many of us to both an ancestral family and a spiritual family as shown in the genealogy of Jesus in the first chapter of the Gospel of Matthew and the third chapter in the Gospel of Luke. Though genetics is about the body, genealogy is about the origin of diverse ethnic bodies and ways we are connected to these bodies. Genetics and genealogy have this synergistic relationship as one complements the other. We need both tools to complete a successful genealogical journey. We will discover that genetic genealogy provides us with two types of family trees: a genealogical family tree, which contains your ancestors and all those who bore children, and a genetic family tree, which contains only those ancestors that contributed to our DNA.³³ There are many subject matters to explore that are directly related to

³¹ S. Joshua Swamidass, *The Overlooked Science of Genealogical Ancestry*, (Perspectives on Science and Christian Faith: Volume 70, Number 1, March 2018)19.

³² Siddhartha Mukherjee, *The Gene: An Intimate History* (New York: Scribner, 2016) 61-62.

³³ Blaine T. Bettinger. *The Family Guide to DNA Testing and Genetic Genealogy*, second edition (Family Tree Books, 2019),16-17.

theology, such as missions, evangelism, church growth, youth ministry, and social justice ministries, just to name a few. I initially thought my subject matter for my Doctor of Ministry project would be some area of social justice since I was employed as a community organizer for a local social justice agency. However, I recall in a book that I had read years ago that says sometimes an author chooses a topic to write about and sometimes a topic chooses them.

Genetic genealogical research is a subject matter that chose me, and it is directly related to the African American religious experience when it comes to matters of belonging and identity, especially racial identity. I learned from a therapist, who is part of my walking group here in Niagara Falls that several psychologists agree that knowing where you come from is a critical component of knowing who you are within a plethora of identities, be it gender, group, or individual identity. I am often asked what does genetic genealogical research have to do with theology? Although there are several ways to answer this question, the most adequate answer that I can provide is identity. For example, Moses, the biblical leader that challenged both the leader and the system of Egyptian enslavement was not aware of his ethnic nor religious or spiritual identity. He was reared in Egyptian privilege as an adopted son of Pharaoh's daughter, but was biologically a member of the oppressed and enslaved Hebrew people. He became a fugitive when he murdered an Egyptian taskmaster and found himself homeless until he became a member of the Midianite community, and from this experience he received a revelation from God to return to Egypt and eventually became a liberator for his people. I recall watching a recent Netflix documentary that specifically addressed Moses' identity crisis.³⁴

³⁴ See *Testament: The Story of Moses, A Netflix Documentary Series*.

Furthermore, Matthew's genealogy solidified Jesus' Jewish identity and his legal kingship rights as the promised Jewish messiah by tracing Jesus' genealogy all the way back to David and Abraham, who are two of Israel's most revered patriarchs. Luke agrees with Matthew's assessment of Jesus' identity as a son of Israel but goes a step further by showing that he is also the son of humanity, and he shows this by tracing Jesus' genealogy all the way back to Adam. Therefore, many of us, especially Black Americans are not aware of our ethnic identity due to the brutal realities of American enslavement. Genetic genealogy provides us with the tools we need to not only narrow down our own individual ethnic identity, but this research project also provides us with additional information that includes our spiritual identity to the universal body of Christ. There is an additional quote by Dr. Gina Paige from Africanancestry.com that merits our attention regarding the ethnic identity of Black Americans. Paige says, "Black people are the original victims of identity theft, and over fifty million Africans were stolen from their homeland during the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade and fewer than ten million survived the Middle Passage during their journey to the Americas and Caribbean."³⁵ These captured Africans from Central and West Africa were brought to America and robbed of their country, history, family names, culture, religion, and ultimately their humanity.³⁶ Stolen identity became a central theme in our final follow-up focus group session.

This reality resonated with me based on three recent murders of Black Americans in recent history. Nine Black American church congregants including the senior pastor were murdered on June 17, 2015, by a white supremacist while attending Bible study at Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church in Charleston, South Carolina. The world witnessed the brutal murder of George Floyd, a Black male, by a

³⁵ Africanancestry.com recently launched a new digital course entitled Ancestry Tracing 101, and this quote immediately caught my attention.

³⁶ L.H. Welchel, Jr. *The History and Heritage of African American Churches: A Way Out of No Way*. (St. Paul, MN: Paragon House, 2011), xx.

white police officer during the height of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020, and ten Black Americans were murdered by a white supremacist in Buffalo, New York on May 14, 2022. These murders reignited the age-old subject of race in America, and the consistent struggle for belonging and identity for Black Americans. I had nagging questions about social justice issues in America, and genetic genealogical research provided some answers to those questions. Genetics is about the body, and genealogy is about the ethnic origin of where these bodies came from, as noted above.

Defining the Situation: Contemporary Perspective

This project explores a new phenomenon that arrived in the United States between 2000-2003 that assisted individuals who were interested in tracing their ancestral roots beyond traditional research methods. This new phenomenon is known by the following names and abbreviations: Genetic Ancestry Testing (GAT), Direct to Consumer Ancestry Testing (DTC), and Recreational DNA (RDNA) tests. These tests enhance traditional genealogical research by providing scientific evidence that substantiates or refutes information contained in our legal documents. Though genetic ancestry remains a valuable tool for Black Americans to trace their ancestral roots, this process does have its challenges. Previously, Black Americans ran into brick walls trying to trace their ancestral roots beyond the 1870 U.S. Census reports. Enslaved Black Americans were treated as property to be purchased, traded, sold, or used as sexual partners at the wishes of their enslavers, and when or if their enslavers kept records of their enslaved ancestors, they were logged on an enslaver's inventory sheet by age and gender or simply a tick mark instead of human beings created in the image of God (Gen. 1:27). Enslaved Blacks bear the image of God though their white enslavers did not view them that way.

Also, because of the scientific nature of genetic ancestry testing, many African Americans did not trust the scientific community due to its checkered past. For example,

the Syphilis Project (1932-1972) conducted at Tuskegee Institute on poor Black males, and the misuse of Henrietta Lacks's genetic cells. Mrs. Lacks was a cancer patient at John Hopkins Hospital when her cells were used without her authorization, and without compensation to her surviving family members when her cells became successful in treating specific types of cancer.³⁷ However, the value of genetic ancestry testing to Black Americans, exceeds the challenges they encounter utilizing these methods. Before I lay out a path of providing answers to my research questions that will be answered within the four chapters of this project, it is my sincere prayer that those who read this project will gain a deeper understanding of themselves genetically, their bodies, their ethnic heritage, and how they fit within the body of their local church tradition and the larger body of Christ. I will take an ethnographic approach to this project by critically looking at the five-tier stories of our lives mentioned earlier, and how the data collected either shape these stories or refute them.

Since the study of genetics is about the human body and genealogy is about tracing our ancestral roots, this chapter will explore the historical roots of genetics as a science, and the myriad of ways that genetic ancestry testing can provide us with additional tools for researching our own ancestral roots. Gregor Johann Mendel (1822-1884), a German-Czech biologist, meteorologist, mathematician, Augustinian Friar, and Abbot of St. Thomas' Abbey seemingly didn't make the cut for his scientific team during the years of his study and he became known as the father of genetics many years after his death. It is from his study of pea plants that human genetics became a science for studying the human body.³⁸ After laying the historical foundation of genetics, I will introduce the three types of tests consumers use to assist them in tracing their ancestral

³⁷ This issue was recently resolved due to the work of famed attorney and author Ben Crump, who specializes in high profile cases of racial discrimination.

³⁸ Christine Kenneally. *The Invisible History of The Human Race: How DNA and History Shape Our Identities and Our Futures* (New York: Penguin Books, 2015), 52-53.

roots and the significance of biblical genealogies, which will be explored in detail in chapter three when I discuss the details of the focus group..

Why Study Genetic Genealogy as a Biblical Concept?

I have already mentioned several times that most Black Americans encounter a brick wall when they try to trace their ancestral roots prior to the U.S. 1870 Census Report because of the residual results of being enslaved.³⁹ There are several reasons for this brick wall: genetic genealogy requires an enormous amount of time and financial resources which some may not have due to their jobs and current financial position, and others may have missed the opportunity to speak with older family members before they passed away. These older family members could have substantiated or refuted the accuracy of the legal documents of our ancestral origins. Therefore, some enslaved persons were listed as tick marks on an inventory sheet.⁴⁰ However, genealogy and DNA testing can assist African Americans by reconnecting them to their ancestral roots and showing that they are part of a larger story: the specific story of their country of origin and the broader story of humanity. This provides them with a sense of dignity by showing that their history is remembered, their contributions are noted, and their struggles are described.⁴¹ As Sheldon Krinsky and Kathleen Sloan observe, “For many African Americans, the quest to find a link to regions and peoples of sub-Saharan Africa can take on a spiritual or even messianic quest, [which is] at least partially explained by the fact that the Middle Passage across the Atlantic during the slave trade explicitly and

³⁹ See Alondra Nelson’s YouTube video entitled (INSIGHT: The Need for a New Bioethics) and The NOVA YouTube PBS Documentary entitled (Secrets in Our DNA), and Libby Copeland’s YouTube Video entitled (The Lost Family: How DNA Testing Is Upending Who We Are). see appendix.

⁴⁰ Several DNA testing companies like Ancestry, My Heritage, and Family Tree provide their customers access to historical records like U.S. Census reports, military records, slave schedules, marriage, and death certificates to assist them with their ancestral research.

⁴¹ Walter A. McCray. *The Black Presence in the Bible: Discovering the Black and African Identity of Biblical Persons and Nations* (Chicago: Black Light Fellowship, 1990), I.

purposefully obliterated linguistic, cultural, religious, political, and kinship ties.”⁴² It is my hope that this project will serve as a spiritual quest for the members of BMBC to help them restore some of the cultural values that were lost during slavery. Genealogical research and DNA testing can assist them with achieving this goal by connecting them to a specific region that their ancestors may have come from, and assist them with creating an additional identity. This project explores DNA testing and traditional genealogy that utilizes the U.S. Census data, which includes birth, death, and marriage certificates, military records, newspaper articles, and adoption papers. These tools are considered traditional methods for researching ancestral roots. The added benefit of these tests provides the reader with some scientific evidence to help substantiate the information discovered in these traditional methods. However, the consumer of these tests must also be aware of some ethical issues surrounding them. Since science, government, and the medical community have a checkered past with the Black community and other communities of color, there are several ethical issues surrounding DNA testing companies and matters of privacy, and the following questions need to be explored: Are DNA companies regulated by a set of professional standards? What happens to my DNA sample if or when one of these companies goes out of business? What happens to my DNA if some of these companies' data information is hacked? Will DNA companies share my information with law enforcement and third-party companies like Gedmatch.com? These questions will be presented to the focus group for discussion.

Another way we will approach this need for belonging is by looking at the genealogies of Matthew and Luke. As Matthew's genealogy shows, Jesus' genealogical history includes enslavement (the captivity in Babylon) but goes beyond that to show the

⁴² Sheldon Krinsky and Kathleen Sloan. *Race and the Genetic Revolution* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011), 99.

richness of his ethnic heritage. Matthew's genealogy shows us that Jesus was deeply rooted in his Jewish heritage, emphasizing that he is the son of Abraham and the son of David. Luke's genealogy reveals that Jesus' lineage embraces an all-inclusive humanity that dates back to Adam and shows us a broader universal application that presents him as the savior of all humanity regardless of one's socio-economic status, gender, or ethnic background. Like Adam in Luke's genealogy, African Americans are a representation of God in the sense that all of humanity was created in his image.⁴³ This *imago Dei* concept should dispel the white superiority versus black inferiority narrative. The subject of genetic genealogy is intertwined with the subject of belonging and dignity within Black church traditions. Exploring these theological questions mentioned at the beginning of this chapter can help create a new narrative about Black bodies, which have been historically demonized, by showing how African Americans fit into the Kingdom of God and represent the *Imago Dei*. This concept restores their deeper need for belonging and places them within the family of God, which is inclusive, not exclusive as it has historically been. There is an intense need to restore dignity to Black bodies because of the historical demonization of these bodies. This can be accomplished by tracing these bodies back to their countries of origin, connecting these bodies to the richness of their spiritual roots, and creating a new narrative of how these bodies fit into the plan of God, thereby creating a psychological rebirth of the imagined Black body. Since this project focuses primarily on the genealogy of Jesus in Matthew and Luke's gospel narratives, his ethnic and spiritual identities are particularized historically.

Amy-Jill Levine argues, "the insistence on Jesus' Jewish identity reinforces the belief that he was fully human, anchored in historical time and place. This connection is known as the 'scandal of particularity': ...Christianity follows Jesus of Nazareth, not

⁴³ Freedman, *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*, (Volume III) 389.

Jesus of Cleveland or Jesus of Mexico; the incarnation dates to the first century, not the twenty-first.”⁴⁴ Likewise, genealogical research and genetic ancestry places African American ethnic origin beyond their enslaved condition in America to a particular time and place in their ancestral roots of Africa. Rick Kittles, founder of African Ancestry tries to place Blacks that do their DNA test with his company to a particular place in their homeland of Africa and to a specific ethnic group as previously mentioned. Many other ethnicities, including Jews, Irish, Poland, and German Americans and other ethnic groups identify with their ancestral homelands. However, this has not been the case for most African Americans because of the unsettled issues of the past.⁴⁵ This is why it is significant that members of BMBC and other Black congregations combine traditional genealogical research with the added benefit of DNA testing. This will give them an informed understanding and appreciation of their own human bodies and assist them in crafting a new narrative contrary to the historical demonizing narrative. It is my prayer that after this study, Black church members can boldly express the sentiments of King David when he says, “I praise you, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made” (Ps. 139:14).

Ministry Context

Since Henry Louis Gates Jr. did some significant work on both the Black church and genetic genealogy, I thought it would be fitting to begin this section with a quote from his most recent book about the significance of this subject to and for African Americans. Gates says, “Few questions are as universal as ‘where did I come from?’ We ask out of native curiosity about our forebears, to understand how their choices, journeys, opportunities, and misfortunes set the stage on which we act. We ask because

⁴⁴ Amy-Jill Levine. *The Misunderstood Jew: The Church And The Scandal Of The Jewish Jesus* (New York: Harper One, 2006) 20.

⁴⁵ Keith Wailoo, Alondra Nelson, and Catherine Lee. *Genetics and the Unsettled Past: The Collision of DNA, Race, and History* (New Jersey, and London: Rutgers University Press, 2012) 2. These authors mention the national debate regarding belonging, self-definition, and political power and how genetic ancestry testing impacts these issues.

we want to know ourselves and to learn from clues found in the culture, ancestry, and traditions of our past. We ask because ancestors are family, even if we didn't have the chance to know them."⁴⁶ There may be some reluctance by African Americans to explore the benefits of genetic ancestry testing because it may reveal family secrets that some family members may not be able to handle psychologically, emotionally, and spiritually. Also, others may have some reluctance to have such personal information placed in a large database where others can have access to it. However, traditional genealogy coupled with genetic ancestry testing offers them a new type of specification of racial identity that did not previously exist prior to the popularity of genetic ancestry testing. This new phenomenon not only provides additional research tools to connect us with our past, but it also offers us a unique way of viewing and caring for our own physical body, which is the temple of God (I Cor. 6:19).

Bethany Missionary Baptist Church (BMBC) is an African American Congregation that understands the significance of knowing their ancestral history, and the various ways this knowledge helps form and establish their racial identity. I have had several conversations about their ancestral histories during my seventeen-year pastoral journey, and they often speak highly and proudly of their ancestral roots. I shared many of these stories in my ethnographic project when I began my journey at Pittsburgh Theological Seminary in 2019. Before I became their pastor in 2006, I recall several stories they shared with me about their ancestor's struggle with their racial identity in American society. Some of these stories will be shared in the final project. I remember our church secretary of forty-two years sharing a story with the congregation about her cousin Congressman John Lewis. She humorously told us how she remembered him preaching to the chickens and other animals on their family farm. I watched a special presentation

⁴⁶ Gates, IX.

about him by Cable News Network (CNN) shortly before he passed away, and I recall him taking the reporters to the family burial site to show them his ancestors. He proudly showed them where most of his relatives were buried and revealed how they were related to him. Cemetery visits and their significance to genealogical research will be included in the focus group conversation about genetic genealogy.

BMBC was organized in the north end of Niagara Falls, New York during late June in 1981. The original members were composed of an eclectic group of people whose elders were mostly southern born, and a diversity of age groups made up the original congregation. After the youth became adults, most of them relocated to another area or joined other congregations outside of the city. BMBC started in a home setting like most ancient Christian faith communities before they were able to purchase a building. Most of its founding members were not educated beyond the eighth grade, but were able to work hard, become entrepreneurs, save their money from meager salaries or paychecks, and build or purchase their own homes in upscale neighborhoods. They put their funds together to purchase a building previously owned by another African American Baptist church that had stayed there for over twenty years until they purchased land next to the church and built a new facility. After securing a mortgage, Bethany remained in that building from 1981-2011. The seating capacity of the building was limited to fifty to eighty people.

After serving as senior pastor for five years, I shared with them my vision of the need to purchase a larger building with a seating capacity of at least two hundred. The deacons and trustees initiated a plan to look for a larger facility to accommodate its numerical growth, and in 2011 they purchased a building from another African American congregation. The church experienced both financial and numerical growth in its new facility, and organized a male chorus, youth choir, combined choir, praise team, dance ensemble, youth ministry, and initiated a vacation Bible school for the summer months.

The church suspended its worship services in March 2020 due to the COVID-19 Pandemic and remained closed until 2021. This closure impacted our attendance and financial contributions significantly when we resumed our weekly worship services. Most African American churches, unlike many of their white counterparts, are not the recipients of huge financial endowments, but are able to maintain their congregations with innovative fundraising ideas from its core members.

Given the prominence of genealogies in the Bible and especially the importance of Jesus' genealogies in Matthew and Luke, I believe that the members of BMBC were spiritually enriched by their participation in this project. We have reported in this chapter that genetic ancestry testing is a valuable tool to use for tracing one's ancestral roots. It enhances traditional genealogical research by providing the DNA test taker with scientific evidence to substantiate or refute our oral and legal story. For example, there was a rumor that two of my biological father's children from a previous marriage were fathered by another man. However, when I sent them a genetic ancestry test (GAT), it refuted this rumor because they showed up as half siblings in my DNA test results. This example shows how GAT testing coupled with traditional genealogical methods can either refute or substantiate legal and oral stories. Since DNA surprises are a common occurrence for those who take the GAT test, participants of the focus group were provided access to professional resources if an unexpected family secret was revealed through DNA testing, which became a horror story for them. Finally, regardless of which of the five stories fit our ancestral journey, we can rest in the promises of God extended to all humanity to accept the invitation to become part of the universal family of God (John 3:16; 6:37). What does GAT testing have to do with theology? This will be discussed in chapter two.

CHAPTER 2

The Intersection of Genetic Genealogy and Theology

What does genetic ancestry have to do with the Bible or theology? This is a question that I am consistently asked as I share with others some of the specifics of my final Doctor of Ministry project, and I have several replies to this inquiry as I already noted in chapter one. The brutal realities of slavery prevented the enslaved from preserving and maintaining family ties to pass on to future generations, but African religious thought, practices, and forms of worship created a new type of community in which some of these family ties could be maintained. Religion played a huge role in the lives of the enslaved and the contemporary Black church continues to provide strength and sustainability during challenging times. Raboteau argues, “One of the most durable and adaptable constituents of the slave’s culture, linking African past with American present, was his religion.”⁴⁷ The creation of the Black church, historically known as the invisible institution, is a befitting place to engage in conversations about genetic genealogy and its significance to this institution. Although the enslavers introduced Western Christianity to the enslaved, which became an oppressive religion to subdue them and make them docile, the enslaved transformed it into a means of survival and ultimately freedom.

I had an unquenchable thirst to research some deeper issues of racial oppression in America and its relatedness to Christianity, specifically Western Christianity, and the subject of genetic genealogy led me to explore deeper reasons why society’s treatment of Black bodies is problematic in America. The Rev. Dr. Kelley Brown Douglas argues, “If we are to understand the threat to Black life in this country we must appreciate the profound and pervasive impact of an anti-Black narrative that is

⁴⁷ Albert J. Raboteau. *Slave Religion: The ‘Invisible Institution’ in the Antebellum South* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), 4.

inseparable from the nation's white supremacist foundation ... this anti-Blackness is embedded in the very theological fabric of Christianity."⁴⁸ Since the study of genetics is about the body and genetic genealogy comprises a substantial portion of this project, it is worth noting that Douglas is arguing that racism is entrenched in Western Christianity's view and treatment of Black bodies and was instrumental in creating a negative theology of those bodies. It is also this warped theological way of thinking that justified the enslavement of Black bodies. Willie James Jennings likens this treatment to a crucifying and the slave identity that labels these bodies perpetually slated for devaluation and bad treatment.⁴⁹ He argues, "Like Jesus, these people of distant lands are brought to a place where a crucifying identity, slave identity, will be forever fastened like a cross to their bodies."⁵⁰ Jennings's quote reminded me of a song by Black American blues singer Billie Holiday entitled *Strange Fruit*, in which she was referencing the lynching of Black bodies.

It is my hope that a study of genetic genealogy will offer a narrative of hope and liberation that counters this anti-Blackness narrative against Black bodies. This project can offer hope to African American congregations by assisting them with establishing ties with ancestral homelands, and these ties provide them with a point or country of origin, a point previously substantiated by Dr. Gina Paige.⁵¹ Just as Jews can take pride in their identity with the nation of Israel, African Americans can take pride by identifying with various and specific parts of their African homeland. Genetic ancestry testing presents a new type of specificity to African Americans that did not exist prior to these

⁴⁸ Kelly Brown Douglas. *Resurrection Hope: A Future Where Black Lives Matter* (New York: Orbis Books, 2021), xiii.

⁴⁹ William James Jennings. *The Christian Imagination: Theology and The Origin of Race* (New Haven & London: Yale University Press, 2010), 20.

⁵⁰ Jennings, 20

⁵¹ Alondra Nelson. *The Social Life of DNA: Race, Reparations, And Reconciliation After The Genome* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2016), XII.

tests. This new type of identity can liberate them from previously held narratives of blackness as bad or less than other types of bodied selves and ethnic identities.

Furthermore, we cannot travel too far in the Bible without encountering a passage about genealogies. We are introduced to this subject matter in the book of Genesis, which contains the first ancestral list (Genesis 4:1-2). These genealogies show records of a person's or a group's descent from an ancestor or ancestors, and the Hebrew Scriptures contain about twenty-five of these types in various complexities.⁵² While at first glance this project may seem to be more of a sociological subject matter than a theological one due to the emphasis of genetic ancestry testing, biblical genealogies in general and the genealogies in the gospels of Matthew and Luke in particular show the theological significance of this subject matter.

Matthew solidifies Jesus' genealogical narrative by showing that Jesus belongs to the story of Israel. This is a story that includes Egyptian enslavement, Babylonian captivity, and consistent oppression and enslavement by foreign governments including Rome, their oppressor in 1st century AD.⁵³ This is why Matthew begins his genealogy with a description of Jesus as the son of David and the son of Abraham. He is writing primarily to a Jewish audience, as previously mentioned, to show them that Jesus has a legitimate legal right to be the promised Jewish Messiah and is associated with two prominent figures in the Hebrew scriptures: David and Abraham. David was one of Israel's greatest kings and Abraham is the spiritual father of the Hebrew nation, and he is also acknowledged as a spiritual forefather among the three major mono-theistic religions: Judaism, Islam, and Christianity. Matthew could argue genealogically that Jesus had a legal right to be called the Messiah, but he also emphasizes the experience

⁵² Freedman, *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*, 929-930.

⁵³ Mitri Raheb. *Faith in the Face of Empire: The Bible Through Palestinian Eyes* (New York: Orbis Books, 2014), 4.

of Babylonian captivity.⁵⁴ Although Jesus' ancestors' enslaved state and years of oppression by several foreign governments described their condition during that specific time, it did not define their humanity, identity, and the role they would play in the larger society.

Likewise, African Americans are not defined solely by their enslaved past, but by their contributions to the world in general and to American society in particular. Sometimes African Americans are viewed as different from their white American counterparts and defined or described based on skin color, race, socio-economic status, or their previous enslaved condition. Throughout history, some have claimed that people of African descent are genetically inferior to their white counterparts; however, genetic scientists have demonstrated that the DNA of all humans is 99% similar.⁵⁵ Instead, African Americans should be defined by the contributions they made to make America the nation that it is today. Genealogical research today coupled with DNA testing can play a significant role in the lives of the members of BMBC and other black church traditions and can help shape their theology of belonging by connecting them to their past ancestors while simultaneously redefining their identity beyond an enslaved group. Matthew substantiates the legitimacy of Jesus' kingship as the promised Jewish Messiah, and without his fulfillment of prophecy, Christianity collapses. Furthermore, Matthew makes it clear to his readers that Jesus' family history contains the ongoing influence of the past on the present, and he shows that Jesus is who He is because of who His ancestors were.⁵⁶ It is the personification of the African Zulu word ubuntu; "I am what I am because of who we all are."

⁵⁴ The Hebrew Prophet Nathan assures David that after his death, a biological descendant will ascend to the throne, II Samuel 7:12-16.

⁵⁵ Keith Wailoo, Alondra Nelson, and Catherine Lee, *Genetics and the Unsettled Past: The Collision of DNA, Race, and History* (New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 2012), 3.

⁵⁶ Brian K. Blount, *True to Our Native Land: An African American New Testament Commentary* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2007), 86.

Luke's genealogy is also important. While Matthew's genealogy focuses on the particularities of Jesus' ancestry, placing him within the story of Israel, Luke places emphasis on the universality of Jesus as it relates to humanity as a whole. He initiates his gospel by tracing the lineage of Jesus all the way back to the first human being, Adam (Gen.5:1). Luke strategically links Jesus to a common ancestor that identifies him with the rest of humanity, and ends his genealogy at verse twenty-eight. This verse shows Jesus as the son of Adam and Son of God and represents a new Adam that is representative of our new creation in Christ, (II Cor. 5:17; Col.1:15.) He shows us that by linking Jesus with Adam, Jesus and, by extension, all of humanity are made in the image of God. Marc Cortez argues that the *Imago Dei* is, "The most distinctive feature of the biblical understanding of man."⁵⁷ This image of God concept not only shows what it means to be human, but as Cortez argues it also places human persons in a particular theological and narrative framework.⁵⁸ This *Imago Dei* concept is significant to African Americans because it deconstructs the anti-Blackness narrative that justified American slavery and supports systemic racism.⁵⁹

The Greco-Roman world of Luke viewed humanity within a duality of Jew or Gentile, but his genealogy synchronizes all humanity in one group in need of a universal savior because of the consequences of sin. The Apostle Paul corroborates Luke's sentiment in his letter to the Galatian church. The Apostle argues, "There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus" (Gal. 3:28). As far as Luke is concerned there is no soul left out. The salvation message of Christ unites all of us regardless of political affiliation, ethnicity, gender, religious denomination, or socio-economic status. Luke's genealogy

⁵⁷ Marc Cortez, *Theological Anthropology: A Guide for the Perplexed* (London & New York: T&T Clark International, 2010), 15.

⁵⁸ Cortez, 37.

⁵⁹ On the anti-Blackness narrative, see Douglas above.

substantiates the claim that Jesus is the universal savior of humanity. While Luke's genealogy shows him to be the son of humanity, we must continue to hold it in conversation with Matthew's genealogy, which stresses his ethnic particularity.⁶⁰ Here, I must employ caution regarding Luke's universal view of Jesus being the son of humanity. He was not suggesting the colloquial "I don't see race" terminology, but he was suggesting that Jesus can identify with the struggles and challenges of oppressed members of society. Although Luke's universality of Jesus is significant, Matthew makes sure that we don't ignore his ethnic particularity. As Jennings observes, "strategies that 'renounce race' often are unwittingly socially and culturally counterproductive and may lead to economically imperialist practices."⁶¹ African American bodies have historically been denied this sense of humanity by what Douglas defines as America's corrupted moral imaginary.⁶² One of the goals of this research project consisted of addressing the historical rationale behind this issue, and offered a narrative of hope by connecting others to their ancestral roots.

We discovered in chapter one that Gregory Mendel, the father of modern genetics, taught us, through his study of pea plants, how traits are passed on from parent to child.⁶³ While biblical genealogies show us how particular biblical families are related to each other, modern genealogical research coupled with genetic ancestry testing (GAT) shows us how we can trace our own roots to discover both our ancestral and individual identity. Thinking about genetics theologically also invites us to consider some of life's deeper questions about

⁶⁰ Blount, *True to Our Native Land*, 163.

⁶¹ Jennings, *The Christian Imagination*, 63.

⁶² Douglas, *Resurrection Hope*, 3.

⁶³ Kostas Kampourakis, *Making Sense of Genes* (New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 2017), 11.

human existence. Bruce R. Reichenbach suggests that some of the following questions may lead us in that direction: what does it mean to be human? What do we do with our genetic information, ethically? What ways does thinking about genetics theologically influence how I treat others that I share a genetic heritage with? And finally, what ways can genetic theological thinking help me understand others not necessarily by their genetic make-up but how it influences our interactions and relationships to others.⁶⁴ Since genetic genealogy tests tend to reveal secrets, some European ancestors don't know how to deal with the realities of what their past relatives have done regarding their sexual exploitation of enslaved Black Americans and ways it can disrupt their white normativity. We will discover that the answer to some of Reichenbach's questions regarding how we think about genetics theologically will bring us back to the subtitle of this research project: "identity, belonging, and racial identity," which makes genetic genealogy an adequate subject matter as it pertains to theological anthropology. Reichenbach argues, "That humans possess a particular DNA structure and that they are genetically both like and unlike other organisms suggest that being human is in part reflected in and by our genetic heritage."⁶⁵ Reichenbach is implying that genetics can reveal information about our specific identity. Reichenbach further suggests that exploring the question of what it means to be human surpasses genetic relationships. It also entails discovering our own identity, personality, self-awareness, self-understanding, and our agency.⁶⁶ One

⁶⁴ Bruce R. Reichenbach, "Finding a Locus for Dialogue between Genetics and Theology," *Theology and Science* 9, no. 2 (2011): 193.

⁶⁵ Reichenbach, 193.

⁶⁶ Reichenbach, 194.

of the primary questions of this project is: do you know who you are? Thinking about genetics theologically drives us towards self-discovery.

Theological Anthropology

Since theology is the study of God, engaging in a conversation about theological anthropology presupposes engaging in a conversation about God. God is the essence of how all living things came into being (Gen. 1:1). I believe that all of humanity is born with an internal God-shaped vacuum that remains unsatisfied until we reconnect our lives to God. The authors of the Hebrew and the Christian Scriptures made reference to this thirst in their writings as a thirst of the soul, and Jesus promises living water to those that seek him to quench this thirst (John 4:14; Ps. 42:2; Is. 55:1). St. Augustine of Hippo says, “The thought of you stirs [humanity] so deeply that [they] cannot be content unless he [or she] praises you, because you made us for yourself and our hearts find no peace until they rest in you.”⁶⁷ It is this thirst that leads many of us on a journey about those identities we are seeking to discover, be it ethnic, gender, religious, or racial. For example, I went away to college at the State University of New York in Albany after graduating from Niagara Falls High School in 1978, and I was determined to get as far away from church as I possibly could. However, the spiritual lessons from both my maternal grandmother, her mother, and my Sunday school teachers at Pilgrim Rest Missionary Church in my hometown of Bainbridge Georgia kept coming back to my mind. I knew internally that I was headed in the wrong direction, and I surrendered my life to God in December 1979.

⁶⁷ Saint Augustine, *Confessions* (London: Penguin Books, 1961), 21.

Therefore, theological anthropology leads us to a journey of self-reflection about what it means to be human beings created in the image and likeness of God. All humanity is a reflection of divine creation and represents Genesis' account of our spiritual beginning in the world. To get a comprehensive understanding of what it means to be human, we must approach the questions of identity from a theological perspective. Also, since we are critically looking at the genealogy of Jesus in the gospel writings of Matthew and Luke, we must see how a Christological perspective intersects with the subject of theological anthropology. Cortez argues, "As the one who is both fully human and fully divine, the true image of God, the redeemer of humanity, and the teleological focus of all creation, the mystery of humanity finds its most complete manifestation in Jesus."⁶⁸ A thorough understanding of humanity is strengthened by observing the humanness of Jesus, and his manifestation of that humanness in a broken world.⁶⁹ The writer of the book of Hebrews reminds us that Jesus completely understands all of the challenges of life that we experience on a regular basis. Jesus knows what it's like to be divine as it is apparent in His miracle and feeding stories, but He also understands the depths of human suffering and the brokenness it causes in the world (Hebrews 4:15).

Theological Anthropology and the imago Dei

A conversation about theological anthropology and its relatedness to genetic genealogy must conclude with a clear understanding of our humanness as a reflection of divine creation. The Psalmist writes, "What are human beings

⁶⁸ Cortez, 5.

⁶⁹ Cortez, *Theological Anthropology*, 6.

that you are mindful of them, mortals that you care for them? Yet you have made them a little lower than God and crowned them with glory and honor” (Ps. 8:4-5). Humanity is the unique creation of God, and all of us, the Psalmist argues, are crowned with God’s glory and his honor. The Psalmist substantiates Genesis’s account of creation by emphasizing that human beings are a blessed creation of God, which lifts them to a royal status that represents God’s glory and honor. God’s special creation of humanity includes human diversity, and it is this diversity that creates challenges for others who refuse to embrace this inclusive account of God’s creation thereby treating all humanity with dignity and respect. Matthew T. Seddon argues, “Human diversity has posed challenges for theologians working on questions such as the *Imago Dei* and the nature of the human condition or what constitutes humanness itself. In addition, humans have significant difficulties working with each other to bring about the Reign of God given our cultural diversity.”⁷⁰ Additionally, Seddon suggests that embracing a science-engaged theology or an anthropologically engaged theology is one way to eradicate this type of xenophobic behavior.⁷¹

Jesus’ model prayer and his sayings in the beatitudes suggest that one of the goals of His followers should include initiating God’s will on earth by the way we treat one another (Mt. 6:10; Mt. 7:12). Furthermore, the Prophet Isaiah challenges us to lift our voice like a trumpet and speak loudly against injustices towards others (Is. 58:1). We should not as representatives of God embrace a

⁷⁰ Matthew T. Seddon, “Toward an Anthropologically Engaged Theology: Implications from Human Evolution for Theological Anthropology”, *Anglican Theological Review* 105, No.4 (2023): 409.

⁷¹ Seddon, 409.

type of theological escapism which avoids or ignores human suffering by refusing to challenge oppressive systems. I believe it was a famous saying falsely attributed to the British Statesman Edmund Burke who said that the only thing necessary for evil to triumph is for good people to do nothing.⁷² The *Imago Dei* concept introduces us to an inclusive theology that works towards uniting humanity by embracing diversity. The Genesis account of humanity implies that God manifested himself by breathing life into the lifeless body of Adam (Gen. 1:27-28). Although all humanity is flawed with sin, God chose to express himself through sinful human beings. This *Imago Dei* concept is expressed throughout the Hebrew scriptures and confirmed in the Christian scriptures, which also makes this a Christological concept (I Cor. 11:7). According to Marc Cortez, Pope John Paul II referenced the *Imago Dei* concept as the immutable basis of all Christian Anthropology.⁷³ As a result, Cortez himself suggests that the *imago Dei* concept is the starting point of theological anthropology.⁷⁴ Historically, Black Americans have not been treated as human beings created in God's image, and this treatment still has residual effects perpetrated by systemic racism and myths of white superiority and Black inferiority. Rev. Dr. Tony Evans says that this treatment has been one of the failures of white Christianity, which has historically

⁷² Reuters Fact Check, August 9, 2021.

<https://www.reuters.com/article/idUSL1N2PG1EY/>

⁷³ Marc Cortez, *Resourcing Theological Anthropology: A Constructive Account of Humanity in the Light of Christ*, (Michigan: HarperCollins Publishers, 2017), 99.

⁷⁴ Cortez, *Theological Anthropology*, 17.

embraced these ideals in several of its theological seminaries and Bible colleges.⁷⁵

Sometimes our excitement about a subject like genetic genealogy can cause us to overlook the historical realities it brings to our attention. Genealogy has been an interest of mine since my formative years. I recall having several conversations with my maternal grandmother, her mother, uncles and other relatives about the history of their ancestral journeys and ways it has impacted their lives. I conclude this section with an analogy that I have observed about sin and its negative impact on our lives. Sin will take you further than you ever wanted to go and it will keep you longer than you ever wanted to stay. My passion with genetic genealogy took me further than I wanted to go and kept me longer than I wanted to stay. However, it opened my eyes to the significance of knowing who we are ancestrally and genetically. I did not anticipate that I would be entrenched in genetic genealogy more than any other subject that I have explored during my theological journey. Finally, I discovered that genetic genealogy can inform and help shape four types of theologies: theology of body, theology of belonging, theology of identity, and most significantly for members of (BMBC), a theology of racial identity.

Theology of the Body

The Genesis account of the creation of humanity should serve as a constant reminder of the significance of the body, and it is by far one of God's most precious creations (Gen. 1:26-27). The Psalmist confirms the uniqueness of

⁷⁵ Tony Evans, *A Survey of the Black Church in America: Exploring Its History, Ministry, and Unique Strengths* (Chicago: Moody Publishers, 2023), 44.

the human body by concluding that all of humanity is 'fearfully and wonderfully made' (Ps. 139;14). This passage from the Psalms was my introductory text during the lecture part of my first focus group session. I found it ironic that when you break down the word genealogy into syllables we get the word gene. This amazing creation by God of the human body led the United States Government to launch the International Human Genome Project (HGP), which sequences the entire genome.⁷⁶ I mentioned in chapter one that after this project was completed in 2000, scientists discovered that all human beings have a 99.99% genetic similarity, which means that humans' only distinction from one another is less than one percent. Our body, which is made up of three billion base pairs of cells identified as (ATCG), and these cells impact how we interact with the world and others. James Watson, winner of the Nobel Prize and author of *The Double Helix* referred to these cells as the secrets of life.⁷⁷ God began humanity with Adam's body and made him a part of Godself, and the Genesis account is the first introduction to the *Imago Dei* concept.

God lived among humanity and sacrificed himself for humanity through the body of Jesus (John 1:14). We worship God with our body, we sin against God with our body and when we die, our bodies are returned back to the earth from whence it came. Therefore, a study in genetic genealogy should lead us into developing a theology of the body by acknowledging and being conscientious that our physical bodies are the temple of God, and we should treat it as such. The body is symbolic in both human and Christian culture because it is how the

⁷⁶ Kostas Kampourakis, *Understanding Genes*, 73.

⁷⁷ James D. Watson, *DNA*, XI

Christian community expresses itself.⁷⁸ The centrality of Christianity is embedded in the body of Jesus and expresses itself in his birth, life, death, and resurrection. Isherwood and Stuart argue, “Christian theology has always been an embodied theology in creation, incarnation, and resurrection, and sacrament.”⁷⁹ The significance of the body is expressed in baptism, the Eucharist, and the local and universal body of Christ. Therefore, body theology is Christian theology.

However, there is a disconnect with Christianity when it comes to reverence and respect for Black bodies. Gay Byron, a womanist Black theologian and former professor of New Testament and early Christianity at Howard University School of Divinity in Washington, D.C. defines this disconnect as Ethno-political rhetoric. She argues, “These people and places, south of the Mediterranean, served as symbolic tropes that generated and reflected an ideology of difference within ancient Christian writings.”⁸⁰ This theological view of Egyptians/Egypt, Ethiopians/Ethiopia, and Blacks/blackness were dominant in the Greco-Roman world and influenced both early Christian writings and Western Christianity. This view also found a life in the American version of Christianity.⁸¹ This study in genetic genealogy presents a historical view of how these bodies have been treated with a hope and awareness that some level of dignity and respect can be restored by not only creating a theology of the body in general but also creating a theology of the Black body specifically.

⁷⁸ Lisa Isherwood and Elizabeth Stuart, *Introducing Body Theology* (England, Sheffield Academic Press, 1998), 10.

⁷⁹ Isherwood and Stuart, 11.

⁸⁰ Gay L. Byron, *Symbolic Blackness and Ethnic Difference in Early Christian Literature* (New York: Routledge, 2002), 1.

⁸¹ Byron, 1.

Although finding relatives may be one of the benefits of genetic genealogy, the primary focus of this project is bringing awareness to Black bodies. This awareness is made by connecting them to a particular place and ethnic group in Africa. Also, awareness of the Black body is accomplished by connecting these bodies to a particular cultural identity with both past and present ancestors. Finally, it is done by tracing their journeys and finding or discovering some points of connectivity. Embracing and developing a healthy theology of the body leads us into developing a theology of belonging.

Theology of Belonging

Conversations in interpersonal relationships center around belonging. When I meet someone for the first time, the conversation quickly morphs into who they belong to, who I belong to, or who belongs to me or them. I pay close attention to the varied ways that others attach themselves to someone or something they belong to. Our conversations are centered around belonging to a country, faith community, denomination, political party, family, fraternity, or some other type of social group. Jennings argues, "At the heart of Christian community is creating belonging where there had been boundary, border, separation, and segregation. A Christian sense of belonging always cuts across every other kind of alignment and allegiance."⁸² Belonging is a central part of who we are as human beings, and this desire drives us to make connections with both places and people to satisfy this belonging. This desire to belong begins in our

⁸² Eric D. Barreto and Willing James Jennings, "Belonging," *The Presbyterian Outlook*, March 29, 2023. <https://pres-outlook.org>

formative years and follows us throughout our adult years, and it seems that we are in a perpetual state of belonging. When we get the results of our DNA test, we are looking at what ethnic group we belong to, what family member we belong to, what country we belong to other than the United States. We are also looking at who belongs to us.

When we look at Jesus' genealogy in Matthew and Luke, we are looking at who he belongs to. The brutal reality of enslaved Black American ancestors and our inherited surname from those who enslaved them is a constant reminder that they belonged to someone. When our marital status is mentioned in conversations, it centers around belonging and we see this expressed in the following terms: my wife, my husband, my children, my grandchildren, and sometimes we get religiously selfish by using terms like my Jesus or my savior even though He is the Jesus and savior of all humanity. Because of what was taken from enslaved Black Americans by the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade and the Middle Passage, there is a legitimate need to connect Black bodies to a country and ethnic group, which provides an ethnic belonging. Belonging was a consistent theme during our focus group discussions about genetic genealogy. One participant wanted to know about her European heritage while another one wanted to know about their Portuguese heritage. This desire to belong is solidified by embracing an awareness of our own body and developing a theology of body, belonging, and these two theologies lead us to take a closer look at identity theologies.

Theology of Identity

Identity plays a huge role in shaping our psychological, emotional, physical, and spiritual wellbeing. Identity helps shape who we are as human beings, and our parents or guardians play a significant role in giving us an identity in which we can feel confident in facing the challenges of life. The question of identity takes us back to Moses' conversation with God on Mt. Horeb/Mt. Sinai. He asked God about his identity so that he could provide an adequate report to his formerly enslaved relatives, and God gave him a simple reply: 'I am that I am' or 'I will be what I will be' (Ex. 3:13-14). Genetic genealogy not only centers around body theology and belonging, it also centers around identity. When you receive your ancestry test kit in the mail or as a gift, the first thing that the genetic company asks you to do is identify yourself by registering your kit and creating a personal profile of your choice. Since they receive hundreds or thousands of DNA kits daily, they want to make sure that your saliva sample belongs to you.

I mentioned in chapter one that genetic test results provide two key pieces of information: a list of your DNA relatives and an ethnicity chart that purportedly tells you where your ancestors may have come from. This information gives us a sense of who we are as individuals. For example, if my ethnicity chart reveals that I am eighty percent Nigerian, I can start doing some historical research about Nigeria to see what cultural norms I may share with Nigerians even though I may never visit the country, and the same principle applies to other ethnicities discovered by a genetic test. These ethnicity discoveries may shed some light on our love for certain activities. For example, one female participant equated her

love for drums with her Cameroon heritage, and another male participant equated his hand gestures with his Italian identity.

Theology of Racial Identity

Historically, the Black church has played a huge role in shaping our individual and collective identities within a hostile society that consistently opposed our racial identity through systemic policies. This is what makes this project about genetic genealogy so crucial to the Black church because the Black American pastor or those who pastor predominantly Black congregations has enormous weekly opportunities to pull down the strongholds of racial oppression by preaching prophetic messages that speak truth to power (II Cor. 10:4-6). Pastoral leadership for Black pastors provides weekly opportunities to correct truncated histories about Black Americans by revealing a historical view that is not focused on the deficits of enslavement. Liberation is at the heart of Luke's gospel, and it remains relevant in addressing demonic, spiritual, and politically oppressed systems. False teachings about one's history create enslavement narratives that impact the way we view our future. (Luke 4:18). A theologically informed congregation and institution is in a unique position to dismantle oppressive ideologies that make others feel like they don't belong because of their ethnic identity. For example, I recall attending my first social gathering away from the grounds of the theological institution that I was attending for my postgraduate education. One of my classmates was hosting the president of the seminary, and invited members of our cohort to attend a gathering at his home. I was excited about my new journey until a classmate introduced me to the president of the theological institution that I was attending. Several of my

classmates were members of a Christian faith tradition that was not Baptist. However, when she introduced me, she said, “Oh, He’s Baptist.” This introduction took the emotional wind out of my initial excitement, and it was immensely challenging for me to enjoy the rest of the evening’s festivities.

Jennings offers a thought-provoking question about belonging during his interview with Eric D. Barreto from *The Presbyterian Outlook*. Jennings asked the students that were attending Princeton Seminary a question that focused on what belonging felt like to them while being away from home. He asked, ‘what does Princeton Seminary feel like?’ His question suggests that new surroundings should include some level of ‘surprised familiarity’ rather than feelings of ‘fundamental alienation’ when entering spaces and places in which one does not feel welcomed.⁸³ I surmise that Jennings' question is a familiar one that Black Americans often find themselves asking along with other questions about identity and belonging: what does it feel like to be a Black American? Will we ever feel at home in a country that we have so much history with? Will success in government, education, corporate America, and religion ever be normal without the added subtitles such as when one hears subtitles like Black governor, Black mayor, or Black President, etc.? Historically, there have been over forty-six U.S. presidents that have served this country, and I don’t know of any that were known by their ethnic identity, except President Barack Obama. They were simply United States presidents, period! However, John F. Kennedy was identified as an Irish Catholic U.S. President.

⁸³ Barreto and Jennings, “Belonging.”

Furthermore, Barreto substantiates Jennings' theology of belonging by warning the Christian faith and theological community about avoiding the dangers of commercializing the ideology of belonging. Barreto suggests that we commercialize belonging by nurturing the status quo, refusing to offer a prophetic voice by embracing silence and acquiescence to the ways things are.⁸⁴ I recall an urge to speak out against an injustice when I served as a general manager for a parking company, and I was told by my immediate supervisor to 'stay under the radar and cash out every two weeks. It is this type of silence that perpetuates systems of injustice.

The Significance of Genealogy, Biblical Genealogies, and the Genealogy of Jesus in Matthew and Luke's Gospel Narratives

There are two watershed moments in American history in which genealogy was brought to the forefront: the release of *Roots*, Alex Haley's successful account of tracing his family's genealogy and the subsequent mini-series that followed, and the election of America's forty-fourth President Barack Obama, the nation's first Black President. Genealogy was not a significant part of the national conversation prior to the release of Haley's book, but his book created an immense interest for Americans to research the history of their family's ancestors. Francois Weil, author of *Family Trees*, provides several reasons why genealogy should be a significant subject matter, and I think that five of them are worth noting: (1) Genealogical knowledge may provide a powerful lens to understand personal and collective identities. (2) Genealogy is

⁸⁴ Barreto and Jennings, "Belonging."

an element of contemporary American culture that we know the least about. (3) Genealogy addresses one of the most difficult questions in American history: the identity of the genealogist and their ancestors. (4) Americans relied on genealogy to define and reinforce their individual and collective identities in addition to positioning themselves to include some and exclude others. (5) Genealogy connects us to our past ancestors, the land they came from, and the core values and norms that they shared.⁸⁵ Weil's five reasons for using genealogical research to build our own family trees also reinforces the need for all of us to embrace our collective identities.

Genealogical research along with genetic ancestry testing provides a new way of looking at genealogy as a science that reinforces self-discovery and the cohesiveness of the family as a moral, civic, and social unit.⁸⁶ Genealogies are defined as records of a person's or group's descent from an ancestor or ancestors, and they rarely appeared in ancient Near Eastern literature outside of Israel.⁸⁷ They were primarily used in Mesopotamian king lists that explained the political organization and history of the Amorites.⁸⁸ These earlier genealogies expressed kinship ties with the Hebrew society before becoming the nation of Israel. However, Israel's interest in genealogies significantly decreased after the creation of the monarchy and was only revisited after the exile period when family kinship ties became an important issue. The most common genealogical

⁸⁵ Francois Weil, *Family Trees: A History of Genealogy In America* (Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2013), 1-5.

⁸⁶ Weil, 6.

⁸⁷ Freedman, *Anchor Bible Dictionary*, 930.

⁸⁸ Freedman, 929-930.

forms were like the traditional American nuclear family, which included siblings that shared the same parents. These were known as segmented genealogies. Adam, Eve, and their two children Cain and Abel represented this type of genealogy. Branched genealogies is another type of genealogy that represented the growth of human families, which led to the initial creation of family trees.⁸⁹ Since genetic genealogy is about those ancestors that we share DNA with, we must distinguish an ancestor from a relative. The Ancestry.com website defines an ancestor as anyone you descend from. I descend from my parents, my parents descend from their parents, and so on.⁹⁰ When we encounter the first genealogy in the book of Genesis, we get our first view of direct ancestors. Cain begat Enoch, Enoch begat Irad, and Irad begat Mehujael, and so on (Gen. 4:17-18).

I can imagine the drum rolls and the anticipation when Matthew composed his gospel, which was between 80-85, C.E., roughly twenty or thirty years after Jesus began his ministry.⁹¹ Matthew, who was also Jewish collected taxes for a government that oppressed his own people! However, this tension is eased by his announcement that the Jewish Messiah promised in the Hebrew Scriptures has finally arrived. He wasted no time with his opening statement to his Jewish audience by immediately establishing the rationale for Jesus' authenticity to have this role. He links Him to the following biblical patriarchs: Abraham, David, the

⁸⁹ Freedman, 930.

⁹⁰ See article entitled "Family Relationship Terms," on ancestry.com. <https://support.ancestry.com/s/article/Understanding-Kinship-Terms>.

⁹¹ Bart D. Ehrman, *The New Testament: A Historical Introduction to the Early Christian Writings* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 102.

kings of Judah, and most significantly for this study, Zerubbabel, the Jewish leader during the Babylonian exile.⁹² Matthew catches the attention of his Jewish audience by strategically crafting Jesus' genealogy through Joseph, which can be substantiated by temple records during the time he composed his gospel.⁹³ Matthew emphasizes Jesus' Jewishness more than the other three gospel writers, and he makes it distinctively clear that his ancestral roots are Jewish. He connects him with two patriarchal covenants: the Abrahamic and the Davidic covenant (Gen. 12:1-3; 17:1-8; II Sam. 7:12-17).

Although Jesus descends from a royal line of kings and queens, intertwined within this history are the Egyptian enslavement and Babylonian captivity. Matthew's presentation of Jesus places him as an active member of an ethnic and oppressed Jewish community, as previously noted. The Jesus of story as expressed by Matthew identifies him with the story of Israel, and his initial disciples came to understand that story as the culmination of their history that would usher in a new era of God's continuing commitment with his unique human creation.⁹⁴ We find Jesus sharing the daily struggles of his people, and understanding what it means to be poor, homeless, oppressed, and Jewish (Mt. 8:20). Matthew's genealogy of Jesus includes insiders, outsiders, and persons of questionable character and practice: Rahab was a prostitute, Ruth descends from an incestual relationship between Lot and his two daughters, David was an

⁹² Brian K. Blount, *True To Our Native Land: An African American New Testament Commentary* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2007) 86.

⁹³ Max Andrews and Stuart K. Weber, *Holman New Testament Commentary* (Tennessee: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 2000) 3.

⁹⁴ J. Patout Burns & Joseph W. Trigg, *Theological Anthropology: Revised and Expanded Edition* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2023), VII.

adulterer and murderer, and Tamar committed incest with her father-in-law Judah.⁹⁵ Some of us may find that our genetic ancestral journey may also include relatives with questionable backgrounds; nevertheless, they're still family. After reading Matthew's account of Jesus' genealogy, I believe his Jewish counterparts could easily conclude with a popular Black American cliché that says, 'He is one of us!'

Luke, however, presents a traditional genealogical research method by using a familial approach to Jesus' genealogy, tracing his ancestral journey back to Adam. Like Alex Haley, author of *Roots*, who traced his ancestors all the way back to their homeland in Africa, many Black Americans initiate a genetic ancestral journey that also traces their roots back to their ancestral homeland in Africa to establish a specific cultural and ethnic identity with the people with whom they share DNA.⁹⁶ Luke's genealogy of Jesus shows that God's plan of salvation extends to all of humanity, not just to Jesus' genealogical relatives (John 6:37). Jesus' invitation into the Kingdom of God is not based on one's ethnic heritage, but a willingness to accept his finished work on the cross. Luke's genealogy presents more of a universal approach to the connectedness of humanity. Jesus' work as the son of humanity substantiates God's work among, within, and with those who dedicate their lives to help make the kingdom of God a living reality on earth.⁹⁷ I mentioned in chapter one that after genetic scientists sequenced the entire genome during the international human genome project

⁹⁵ Blount, 87.

⁹⁶ Blount, *True to Our Native Land*, 163.

⁹⁷ Blount, 163.

that was completed in 2003, they discovered that all human beings are 99% identical. An adequate way to view these two genealogies of Jesus is by focusing on the two distinct audiences they were addressing. Matthew was writing to a Jewish audience while Luke's audience was written for Gentiles, hence, the focus on the universality of Jesus' message.

Jesus' Jewish identity and the varied ways it transcends ethnicity, gender, and class is a key biblical issue that informs both our individual and collective identities, especially after a critical reading of his genealogy in the book of Luke. While Matthew's genealogy was specifically designed to fit his Jewish audience by showing that Jesus belongs to the story of Israel with all of the complexities of Egyptian slavery and Babylonian captivity, Luke's genealogy invites the reader to a universal Savior that makes himself accessible to those that find themselves living on the margins of life: women, ethnic minorities, those with intellectual and physical disabilities, and the economically disadvantaged. In addition to offering compassion and healing to the wounded he also challenges the evil of those responsible for doing the wounding.⁹⁸ This approach to challenging oppressive systems is reminiscent of the Hebrew prophet Isaiah that challenged the political and religious leaders to minister justice to those living on the margins of life (Is. 58:1-7). Jesus' liberation message in Luke's gospel is an often-quoted text within the Black church tradition, and those that embrace the principles of Black Liberation Theology (Lk. 4:18-19).

⁹⁸ Blount, *True to Our Native Land*, 158.

American identity and racial identity are two identities that are often held in tension by those in power, especially economic and political powers. The lack of embracing our American identity as equal citizens are held against us by those that hold positions of power, because of our racial and ethnic identity based on political policies that favors one but systematically disadvantages the other one. It is this identity struggle that has been and continues to be an unresolved issue for the Black American church. Sociologist W.E.B. Du Bois defined this issue as double consciousness in which most Black Americans are aware of their American identity, but their racial identity is consistently challenged by racial oppression in all facets of American life. Double consciousness is also the tendency of Black Americans to view themselves and their value through the eyes of white Americans.⁹⁹ Some of the participants of the focus group sessions tend to lean towards the idea of whiteness as the default identity, and this is revealed in some of their discussions in chapter three.

⁹⁹ W.E.B. Du Bois, *The Soul of Black Folks* (New York: Barnes & Noble Books, 2003) XVI.

CHAPTER 3

Part I: Project Overview

This project focuses on genetic genealogy and its relatedness to the Black church faith tradition, and it provides an opportunity for the members of Bethany Missionary Baptist Church (BMBC) to think theologically about the subject of genetic genealogy as they seek to trace their ancestral history and build their family trees. I was inspired to do this project because of my interest in social justice work and my previous employment as a community organizer for a local social justice agency. I wanted a deeper understanding of racial injustice, and genetic genealogy pointed me in the appropriate direction. Genetics revealed the history of race as a social construct, which implied that the physical body of Black Americans and other non-white ethnic bodies were less than or inferior to white bodies. A thorough study in genealogy revealed the historical path that Black bodies took which includes almost two-hundred fifty years of enslavement. My primary research questions are as follows: How significant are the combined subjects of DNA testing and genealogical research for the African American Church in general and the congregation of Bethany Missionary Baptist Church in particular? What questions does it raise about ethnicity, difference, and belonging in the church? How can the study of these two subject matters initiate deeper and more effective conversations about racial identity? The research questions were designed to take a theological approach to genetic genealogy.

It has been fifty years since Alex Haley's 1974 publication of his national bestseller and Pulitzer winning book, *Roots: The Saga of an American Family*

and the television miniseries that followed. Haley's book generated an intense interest among Black Americans to trace their family's ancestral roots. Weil argues, "Many African Americans who listened to him and read his writings in those years displayed a 'burgeoning interest in genealogy'--searching for genealogical material in family Bibles and legal records and interviewing elderly relatives."¹⁰⁰ This quote illustrates how theological texts, such as the Bible, became non-traditional locations where Black Americans recorded some aspects of their family's history, and other important events: marriage, deaths, the births of children, grandchildren, and other close relatives, ministry ordinations, and graduation events. Because of the length of time passed since Haley's publication, there was a need to reignite an interest in this subject matter by showing that genetic ancestry testing (GAT) can substantiate or refute traditional genealogical research methods. However, introducing it as a tool to enhance traditional genealogy methods has to be treated with extreme care and sensitivity because of the medical and scientific community's checkered past with the Black community as mentioned in Chapter 1. Historically, genetic ancestry testing (GAT) was done primarily to search for genetic variants that led to specific types of diseases, and this process has not fared well with the Black community due primarily to financial constraints and medical exploitation. These unfortunate experiences explain why many Black Americans are hesitant to include this tool in their ancestral journey, but the benefits of having access to one's entire genome and the ability to recover some significant genetic information that was

¹⁰⁰ Weil, *Family Trees*, 193.

lost during the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade and The Middle Passage far exceeds the exploitation that previously occurred.

Since Bethany Missionary Baptist Church is made up predominantly of the Silent and Baby Boomer Generation that began in 1925 and ended around 1965, I was acutely aware of these financial and medical sensitivities when I introduced this method to my congregation.¹⁰¹ These generations were very private about their personal lives and activities, and they also took great measures to conceal family secrets. Surprisingly, the congregants were more open to the idea of utilizing GAT testing in their ancestral journey than I had anticipated. Also, I thought it would be beneficial to revisit the significance of Haley's *Roots* book because most of the members of BMBC would likely remember this book and the television miniseries, and it may reignite interest in Black genealogy. Nancy L. Arnez argues, "The thematic flow of *Roots* was family and love. Thus, it provides Africans in the diaspora with a concrete connection with our homeland, Africa, and with our people, Africans. It has done this as much for all of us as it has done for the Haley family, for the paramount themes of the book and television versions are the love, respect, and on-going connections with our elders."¹⁰² This shows why annual family reunions became such significant events in the lives of Black Americans regarding maintaining family heritage and roots. These opportunities became a way to connect the elder generation to the younger

¹⁰¹ William Strauss and Neil Howe, *Generations: The History of America's Future, 1585-2069* (New York: William Morrow and Company, Inc. 1991), 8.

¹⁰² Nancy L. Arnez, "From His Story to Our Story: A Review of *Roots*" *The Journal of Negro Education*, 46, no. 3 (1977): 367-372.

generation so that they may have a thorough and accurate history of their family's struggles and successes.

I had been previously wrestling with the idea of doing my final research project on some aspects of social justice since I was employed as a community organizer for a local social justice agency as already noted. However, my historical interest in genealogy led me to explore the subject of DNA testing and its relatedness to racial identity. I knew it would be a challenge to write about a topic that is primarily social scientific in nature and making a case for it theologically, but my own experiences with genetic genealogy provided answers to my primary research questions I had about racial identity and the scientific creation of race as a social construct that supports systemic racism. Therefore, I shared with my congregation that I was organizing a focus group that would explore the significance of genetic genealogy and ways it can assist us in tracing our ancestors and pointing us towards a specific ethnic identity, a specific place in Africa, and may connect us to a specific ethnic group in Africa or some other region in which we share a genetic match. In addition to the focus groups, this project included individual interviews, and Bible study sessions. The next section will outline my specific implementation of this project.

Part II: Project Implementation

Summary of Weekly Activities

Week 1: After the project proposal was approved in October 2023, I did several Facebook live Bible study series on the biblical significance of genealogy focusing primarily on Jesus' genealogies in the Gospels of Matthew and Luke.

The purpose of this Bible study series consisted of preparing the focus group to start thinking theologically about genetic genealogy before the initial in-person sessions. Since Matthew initiates his gospel narrative with a genealogy of Jesus, I began with his gospel to show the group that he was addressing primarily a Jewish audience. Matthew sought to prove that Jesus is the promised Jewish Messiah who was mentioned by the Jewish prophets in the Hebrew scriptures, and this reality is why he traces Jesus' genealogy back to Abraham.

Week 2: After the completion of Matthew's genealogy of Jesus, I did the next session on the Gospel of Luke. Unlike Matthew, Luke did not begin his genealogy of Jesus until the third chapter. He traces his genealogy all the way back to Adam to show that Jesus is not only the promised Jewish messiah, but he is also the Messiah of all humanity. While Matthew's genealogy of Jesus is exclusively Jewish, Luke's genealogy is all inclusive. Luke's genealogy shows that Jesus is the universal savior.

Week 3: Since traditional genealogical research includes the use of legal documents to substantiate one's ethnic heritage, I introduced the subject of genetic ancestry testing (GAT) as a contemporary tool to substantiate or refute our traditional methods of family research. I gave a brief history of each GAT company and introduced the different types of genetic ancestry test used by consumers: autosomal, mitochondrial, and Y chromosome genetic testing. The latter test is primarily for males since females don't have a Y chromosome, and I also informed the participants that I had DNA test kits available for sale just in case someone wanted to explore this new method of genealogical research.

Week 4: We held our first focus group session prior to the Thanksgiving holiday, and I gave a brief introduction to genetic genealogy and the significance of this subject matter to Black congregations regarding researching their family roots. I also had additional resources available: books, DNA test kits, and a list of professional and mental health resources just in case someone experienced an unexpected DNA discovery. The focus group decided that Saturday mornings at 11:00am was a good time to meet, and they also preferred consecutive Saturdays since the advent season was quickly approaching.

Week 5: Each focus group member was given an opportunity to discuss their experiences with both traditional genealogical research methods and genetic ancestry testing. I informed them that there will be an audio recording of each of these sessions, and that our final session would include a Zoom video recording. Also, I informed them that these recordings would be destroyed after the project is complete.

Week 6: I gave a PowerPoint presentation on what an ethnicity chart looks like from one of the DNA companies I tested with and showed them how to locate relative matches. There was a humorous moment in the presentation because one of the participant's names was the same name as one of my half siblings, but I assured them that it was simply coincidental and not an indication of a familial relationship. We also discussed two of the research questions listed on page sixty-one.

Week 7: This final in-person session consisted of a PowerPoint presentation in which the remaining research questions were answered. Since

we were approaching the Christmas holiday and not likely to finish the remaining questions, I informed the group that a Zoom follow-up session would be forthcoming.

Week 8: We held our final follow-up zoom session to focus specifically on the theological aspect of the questions on page 61. I was amazed by the rich theological insight that the participants provided. Some participants wrote their answers down while others were more comfortable explaining theirs.

Brief Summary of Project Participants

There was a total of twenty focus group participants who ranged in age from 35-77. Some of these participants were not available to attend the sessions we had in person due to work scheduled, and a Zoom meeting was scheduled for these participants. However, all of them were present at our final follow-up Zoom session in which they specifically discussed the theological significance of genetic genealogy. These discussions were very rich with theological insight and personal narratives about both their ancestral and spiritual origins. The participant occupations include the following: government, health care, social service, education, private industry, and three retirees. There were nine males and eleven females. Among the twenty participants still employed, their occupations are as follows: registered nurse, college professor, executive director for non-profit agency, public school system assistants, personnel manager, county government agency employee, construction worker, public housing employee, social service assistants, and two from the construction industry. Of the three retirees, one served as a director of occupancy for public

housing, the second was a union leader for over twenty years, and the third served as an electrician.

Research Methodology

I recruited participants of Bethany Missionary Baptist Church (BMBC) by forming a focus group as previously noted in chapter one. I announced the project for two Sundays consecutively during the morning service. I also took some time at the end of church service to share more information about this project and asked any interested members to sign up via a paper sign-up sheet. When I made the initial announcement about forming a focus group, I was surprised how many took interest in this subject matter, including those who had never taken a DNA test. There was no prerequisite to take a DNA test to become part of the focus group, but I did request participants to view a list of seven videos that are relevant to genetic ancestry. These videos are a combination of educational videos, documentaries, and movies. These videos are as follows:

- *Father's Day: A Kirk Franklin Story* by Kirk Franklin via [YouTube](#)
- *The Need For a New Bioethics* by Alondra Nelson via [YouTube](#)
- *Secrets In Our DNA* by Nova via [PBS Website](#)
- *The Lost Family Book Reviews* by Libby Copeland via [YouTube](#)
- *Doubting Thomas* via Netflix
- *Descendant* via Netflix
- *Who Is Christmas Eve?* Via Tubi

These videos initiated our theological conversations about the significance of combining DNA testing with traditional genealogical research, and a variety of ways it can assist us in shaping both our individual and collective identities.

These conversations also initiated my rationale for embarking on a journey about genetic genealogy and how the study of it not only connects us with our past ancestors, but also invites us to research the deeper issues of racial oppression

in America. This oppression was influenced by what Womanist theologian Gay Byron referenced as ethno-political rhetoric, which she defines as the discursive uses of Egyptians/Egypt, Ethiopians/Ethiopia, and Black/blackness through the development of a taxonomy.¹⁰³ Byron argues, “These people and places, south of the Mediterranean, served as symbolic tropes that generated and reflected an ideology of difference.”¹⁰⁴ Byron’s definition of ethno-political rhetoric echo Kelly-Brown Douglas’ anti-Black narrative regarding the negative description of Black bodies and the places these bodies came from.

The Bethany Missionary Baptist Church (BMBC) focus group had three consecutive in-person meetings on Saturdays. These focus groups were all held in 2023 on the following Saturdays: November 18, November 25, December 2, and one Zoom meeting on April 9, 2024. Due to time constraints, each focus group covered two research questions consecutively. Since we had entered the Advent season, I scheduled consecutive meetings to avoid conflicts with the holiday. Attendance varied but remained around 7-10 members per session. I also conducted four personal interviews with focus group members based on the uniqueness of their genetic genealogy experiences.

For example, those whose ethnic origins were different than what they were told. Also, I selected those who identified themselves as biracial, and ways that this dual identity impacted their well-being and self-worth. All participants varied in gender, ethnicity, age, and genetic genealogical experiences. There

¹⁰³ Gay L. Byron, *Symbolic Blackness and Ethnic Difference in Early Christian Literature* (London and New York: Routledge, 2002), 1.

¹⁰⁴ Byron, *Symbolic Blackness*, 1

was a total of twenty members that made up the focus group and not all were still employed; three were retired. The questions presented in the initial proposal were presented in a PowerPoint presentation for group discussion and these questions are the following:

- What can Matthew and Luke's genealogy of Jesus teach us about the significance of researching and uncovering our own ancestral roots, and how does this discovery inform your understanding of who you are in relation to American history, especially our ancestral origins as shown in Matthew's genealogy of Jesus?
- How does this project in genetic genealogy impact your perspective of self-worth?
- What is the significance of learning about DNA, and how does this knowledge impact our understanding of our body as the temple of God, and how does it inform our understanding of the imago Dei concept as human beings created in the image of God?
- Finally, how does genetic genealogy inform my theology about the body of Christ in general, and Black bodies in particular?

These questions were split into two parts during our final Zoom session on April 9, 2024. The answers to these questions varied and were influenced by the participants' understanding of genetic genealogy and the significance of biblical genealogies.

In addition to the BMBC focus group sessions and individual interviews, I designed a Facebook live Bible study series on genetic genealogy. These sessions were designed to bring awareness to a larger audience on the significance of genetic genealogy and test biblical teaching strategies related to the subject. The Bible studies ran for a span of four weeks every Monday, which is a different day than BMBC's traditional Wednesday afternoon Bible studies.

(a) Ethics and Genetic Ancestry Testing

It was immensely critical with a subject like genetic genealogy that I introduced the ethical concerns surrounding this subject matter to participants. This was a critical and constant part of the project implementation. In Chapter 1, I discussed how the scientific community historically has had a questionable relationship with the Black community regarding issues of health and wellbeing. While the depths of the rationale for this distrust and uncertainty is beyond the scope of this project, I did make intentional moves with my participants to mitigate and tend to this distrust. There are several common questions regarding ethical issues of DNA testing that I was sure to address with participants during each focus group session, and especially at the beginning:

1. What happens to my DNA sample if a testing company goes out of business?
2. Does law enforcement have access to a testing company database to help them solve criminal cases? For example, California's Golden Gate Killer murder case was solved by accessing a company DNA database.
3. Does DNA testing reinforce genetic essentialism?
4. Are DNA companies' databases hackable? For example, this recently happened to the 23andMe DNA testing company.
5. How do my DNA results impact other members of my family, especially those that have never taken a test?

Many of these questions were proactively answered at the beginning of focus group sessions. Here, I will summarize how these ethical concerns were

addressed proactively *and* when they were brought up by participants. There are no ideal answers for the first question because no consumer can determine the sustainability or longevity of any company without being a financial officer of that company. Therefore, genetic ancestry testing (GAT) customers must assume some risk when they take this type of test. The United States has access to over 12 million DNA profiles through a program known as the Combined DNA Index System (CODIS), which grants the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) access for solving criminal cases.¹⁰⁵ Krimsky argues, “Most people who send in their fee and a biological sample for an ancestry test are unaware that their results could be used by police to identify criminal suspects in cases where their DNA and the crime-scene DNA seem to be genealogically related.”¹⁰⁶ These are concerns that my participants and all consumers of GAT testing should be aware of before taking a DNA test so that they can be adequately informed of their risk levels.

I discovered through my research that improper interpretation of genetic data can lead to racial essentialist views, which addresses the third question. Since the scientific community has a checkered past with the Black community as already noted and GAT testing is science, Krimsky argues that it has undoubtedly reinforced essentialist views of race among some within the scientific community.¹⁰⁷ GAT consumers must keep in mind that their ethnicity charts provided by the companies they test with use algorithms to estimate ethnicity. Our life as human beings far exceed the predictions of these charts.

¹⁰⁵ Sheldon Krimsky, *Understanding DNA Ancestry*, (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2022), 1.

¹⁰⁶ Krimsky, *Understanding DNA Ancestry*, 95.

¹⁰⁷ Krimsky, *Understanding DNA Ancestry*, 102.

Participants were not as concerned about this issue, but this was the prepared response that could also be used in the future.

In regard to question number four and the hacking of GAT testing data files, I offer a resounding yes! DNA companies' databases can be hacked. I shared with participants that last year I received an email from 23andMe to change my password because their database had been compromised, and a recent CBS news report confirmed this reality.¹⁰⁸ Beyond the excitement of discovering one's ethnicity, a relative, or accessing information about one's health, I have wondered how much thought participants put into genetic ancestry testing (GAT). Those who use GAT are literally sharing a part of themselves with others, and their return on their investment can pale in comparison to the information companies are gaining and what they can do with that information. GAT companies provide their customers with information about a specific area of their DNA known as ancestry information markers (AIMs) that reveal the origins of their ethnicity and this is their primary market.

However, there is a secondary market that collects user data, and it can be sold to other companies for research and drug development. CBS Web News cited an example when millions of 23andMe customers' data was compromised due to a recent hack of the company's website.¹⁰⁹ A well-known cliché for those

¹⁰⁸ CBS News, 23andMe hack let 'threat actor' access data for millions of customers, company say:
<https://www.cbsnews.com/news/hackers-accessed-23andme-dna-data-millions-users/>

¹⁰⁹ Krimsky, *Understanding DNA Ancestry*, 88.

in the GAT industry is, “Data is the new oil.”¹¹⁰It is a known reality that most GAT customers are placed in a larger database, and it is likely that this information can be sold to other industries. This reality makes it imperative that GAT consumers read the privacy policy of these companies or at the very least have their attorney explain the privacy policies of the GAT companies they test with. As I explained to my participants, genetic ancestry test takers need to be cognizant of what impact their results may have on other members of their family. I discovered through my research that some family members are satisfied with their lives the way they are, and they do not want them upended because of another’s carelessness in sharing their DNA results, especially on social media platforms. There are others that don’t want anyone digging up family secrets. As shown here, some of the ethical issues are hard truths that need to be understood before one engages in GAT. These questions were often discussed by me and participants with strong levels of honesty to make sure participants always understood the ethical implications of tests. My objective for this level of honesty regarding GAT testing was in no way to discourage potential users of these methods for genealogical research, but to be cognizant of their own risk levels for utilizing these methods.

Part III: Project Results

BMBC Focus Group Data Analysis

¹¹⁰ Alondra Nelson: *The Need For a New Bioethics*, Youtube Presentation, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VRvv_5CxsLc

In this section I will discuss the project results, which includes the participant responses to the four primary research questions on page 62 above. All four questions were in two parts, and I advised the participants to answer the first part of each question and that we would later circle back around and answer the second part because this would provide some consistency and continuity in the manner the questions are answered. Some of the focus group participants informed me that the four questions initially presented for discussion were a bit technical. Therefore, I changed the format of the questions to make them more user friendly for the participants, and these questions are found in Appendix D. The purpose of these questions consisted of ascertaining the theological views of the participants regarding the significance of genetic genealogy for them individually and collectively as a church. Although about fifteen members attended our final focus group zoom session, between five to seven members answered consistently.

The first question focused primarily on the genealogy of Jesus in the gospel of Matthew and Luke, and its significance to the members of BMBC. The final two questions focused on the five theologies mentioned in chapter two: theology of identity, belonging, body, racial, and spiritual identity, which includes the significance of the *imago Dei* regarding our spiritual identity. Although about fifteen members attended the final focus group Zoom session, between five and seven members consistently answered most of the four two-part questions. Since there were several answers to these questions, I will list them as quote 1, 2, 3,

etc. I will also use pseudonyms throughout this phase of this section to protect the identity of all the participants.

The data showed that all participants were well versed about both the theological and ethnic significance of genetic genealogy, and its relevance to Bethany Missionary Baptist Church (BMBC). Also, they were aware that their ethnic, cultural, and spiritual identities were stolen from their ancestors as a people, and genetic genealogy helped them fill some of these gaps of those missing identities. The first question is as follows: What can Matthew and Luke's genealogy of Jesus teach us about the significance of researching and uncovering our own ancestral roots? The data showed that most participants saw genetic genealogy testing (GAT) showed them a way to discover their ethnic and spiritual identities. Leah Ferguson, a member of the focus group, was eager to offer her answer to the first question. She was more comfortable with reading her written response and elaborating on her answers afterwards. She stated the following,

Genetic genealogy provides information on who we are as an individual and as a culture, as well as where we come from. It gives us an identity. Once we have this information, we have an idea of where we fit in society. Whether it be American, African, European etc. As far as our ancestral origins shown in Matthew's genealogy of Jesus, it provides that we all came from the first humans in Genesis. The Old Testament prophesied of a Messiah coming to bring salvation to a world who sinned against God. It tells how he would be born from a woman, where he would be born, (Micah 5:2) his lineage, (Gen. 12:3, Gen. 22:18), his descendant (Issac), (Gen 17:19, Gen 21:12) tribe (Gen. 49:10), his name would be Immanuel (Isaiah 7:14) "And I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and hers; he will crush your head, and you will strike his heel." Gen. 3:15. Therefore, when Jesus came on the scene, he passed the test of everything that was said about the Messiah. Everything lined up. If anyone at that time had any reason to want to research who

Jesus was and who his people were, they could follow his genealogy for 14 generations and see that that all points to Jesus.

Leah's quote is significant because filling the gap for one missing piece of our identity puzzle can provide us with the motivation that we need to fill other missing gaps, especially our spiritual identity.

For example, Yolanda Jones, another member of the focus group received a genetic test as a Christmas present. Over a year and a half later she discovered a biological half-sister that she had never met. Her half-sister's daughter had taken a genetic ancestry test (GAT) to help her mom find her ethnic origin and more specifically, her biological father. Her half niece reached out to Yolanda's sister Jennifer Williams and discovered the truth about her mom's ethnic origin. Yolanda joined BMBC years ago but had not attended except for funerals and special occasions, but her interest in genetic genealogy inspired her to become a member of the focus group. During her time with the focus group, she looked deeper into Jesus' genealogy in the Gospels of Matthew and Luke. Yolanda stated,

The genealogy of Jesus in Matthew and Luke shows the authenticity of Jesus' biological mom. These genealogies are deeper than what is presented. It refutes the nay-sayers about the virgin birth of Mary. It not only shows the royal line of where Jesus came from, but it also shows our spiritual royal line. King Solomon says, "The good leave an inheritance to their children's children, but the sinner's wealth is laid up for the righteous" (Prv. 13:22). We also belong to Jesus' royal line as adopted spiritual children (Ro. 8:16-17; I Pt. 2:9). Our spiritual birth places us into Jesus' royal line. Both of these genealogies of Jesus show his legality lines and his adoption lines, and it answers some of our own uncertainties of why we feel like we don't belong because in many cases we don't. These genealogies are so much deeper than those few little chapters. When you do the research, you can find out who you belong to. It gives you an identity. Mary is the rightful mother of Jesus regardless of what the nay-

sayers say about Jesus's virgin birth. These genealogies remind us of the reality that we're not who we should be and (GAT) tests answer the uncertain questions of why you feel like you don't belong.

Yolanda's quote reminds me that though these genealogies appear to be boring and redundant to read, the characters and narratives within these genealogies can generate theological conversations about contemporary topics. For example, the topics of teenage pregnancy and out of wedlock births, which was frowned upon during Jesus time and continued to be a stigma by many Christian faith traditions. Mary's pregnancy would have likely caused her to be ridiculed and unaccepted by some or most of her peers. Again, elevating the issue of belonging and acceptance. Helen Burns, a third member of the Bethany Missionary Baptist Church (BMBC) focus group, had a unique perspective on the answers to the research questions. She focused on a theological aspect that some may take for granted. For example, human flaws or imperfection among the lives of biblical characters in Jesus' lineage. She stated,

Sometimes church people tend to think that looking at Jesus' genealogy that everyone is perfect, but Matthew and Luke's genealogy of Jesus show that nothing could be farther from the truth. Although his genealogy shows that he had diversity in his family tree, there was honesty about the character flaws among Jesus' relatives. Discovering our ethnic and spiritual identities within the body of Christ, may uncover truthful realities that may result in some psychological and emotional discomfort.

However, this is part of the identity process. I mentioned in chapter one that while discovering our individual and collective identities may include some horror stories, we need to be prepared for these realities. Byron Edwards, a fourth member of the focus group, agrees with Helen Burns' emphasis on the perfection

model of biblical characters and how this discovery impacted his spiritual identity.

He States,

I took a genetic ancestry test (GAT) about two years ago, and it unearthed things I did not know. Like Yolanda already mentioned, these genealogies in Matthew and Luke are deeper than you think they are. I was relieved to come to the knowledge that these biblical characters were not perfect as already mentioned by Helen. For example, I thought that all biblical characters were perfect. I appreciate the comments mentioned by Helen because I was trying to reach a level of spiritual growth that I could not obtain so it makes you want to give up on church altogether. It started with my paternal great grandfather, who was a church member. After his first wife died, he remarried and after his death, I discovered that he had a total of twenty-one children. He was not allowed to legally marry his second wife because she was white woman and he was Black man, and when they died, they were buried in two separate graveyards because of their ethnic differences. My family inherited the Edwards surname from his white wife. So, they live together as husband and wife, and it's so much else I could say but like Yolanda said it deeper than you think. My spiritual growth changed when I realized that I will never reach perfection in this life. All I can do is strive for and live the best way I can on this side prior to going home to be God eternally.

Byron's comments speak to the realities of racial identity and difference in America regarding the acceptance of Black Americans, the double-consciousness dichotomy previously mentioned by W.E.B. Du Bois in Chapter 1. Black Americans are acutely aware of their American identity while simultaneously striving for acceptance of their racial identity. Byron's quote also speaks of the diversity of ways church members define spiritual identity. All of us have an ethnic identity as well as a spiritual identity, but the latter is often marred by our embedded theologies mentioned in Chapter 2. These hidden theologies rise to the surface when they are challenged by others regarding their authenticity.

Although career and the job identities are not the focus of this project, it is one of the ways that shapes our individual and collective identities. Louis James, another member of the BMBC focus group is the nephew of Byron Edwards in the previous quote, and he discovered that genealogical research showed him that the building trades were a common source of employment in his family's lineage. Louis states,

My Uncle Byron's great grandfather like Jesus' father Joseph showed him his trade of carpentry. My ancestors come from a long line of men that were employed in the building trades. The men in our family adopted the [each one teaches one] motto of passing on our work skills to the next generation of men so that they can secure an economic future for their families. My father and grandfather paved the way for me and my uncle Byron, and I do the same for my sons. Like Jesus, I also try to build up the spiritual lives of men in the church by sharing my musical talents as a leader of the ministry of music. The Bible says iron sharpens iron, and we need to build up one another in a spiritual way.

Louis' quote suggests that there is a spiritual connotation that we can learn from our secular careers that can influence and help shape our spiritual identity. For example, the potter and clay analogy used by the Hebrew prophet, Jeremiah (Jer. 18:1-11). Louis' comment reminds me that both the local and universal church is centered around the family, and this leads me to the next three quotes regarding the first research question about the significance of Jesus' genealogy in the gospel of Matthew and Luke.

Helen Burns, a BMBC focus group member mentioned earlier, was the second member in her family to take a DNA test. She also has three additional daughters that are members of BMBC who also took a GAT test, and I mentioned one of her daughters already, Yolanda Jones. These three daughters

also became members of the BMBC focus group team: Jennifer Williams, Mabel Johnison, and Florence Burns. Although Jennifer moved to another town about forty-five minutes away from her parents, she remained a member of Bethany.

Jennifer's answer to the first question is as follows,

What I get out of this is you want to know where you came from more so back then than now due to the caste systems that existed in many middle eastern countries during the time that these books were written. GAT tools have made it possible for people to know the history of their origins. Knowing where you came from back then was associated with curses, blessings, and inheritance. You had to know what you were gaining for the sake of your children. Back then you needed to know: who blessed your family? Who cursed your family? We got our spiritual history verbally [The oral story] as well as our ancestral roots (Prv. 22:6).

Jennifer's answer reminds me of a conversation I had with my wife years ago.

She told me about a conversation she had with a lady who was from a

Pentecostal faith tradition, who believed that she was cursed because of a so-

called prophetic word she had received during a worship service. These words

impacted both her psychological and spiritual identity because she believed that

her life would never be right until the curse was released by the person who

spoke the curse over her. Perhaps this lady was not aware of the words of the

Apostle Paul, which says that if any human being is in Christ, they are a new

creation; old things are passed and all things are made new (2 Cor. 5:17). Our

spiritual identity rests in the finished work of Christ at Calvary, and not on our

past actions. Also, human beings cannot curse what God has blessed.

One of Jennifer's sisters, Mabel Johnison, focused on the continuity of Christian faith as she read the genealogy of Jesus in Matthew and Luke's gospel.

She states,

We are able to think about the continuity of our faith as we read about Jesus' genealogy in these two gospels. It is that concept of knowing where we came from, and this concept helps us to determine where we are going. These genealogies show us a spiritual context when we think about the continuity of our Christian faith as well as the faith of our forefathers: what they believed, and why they believed. Their spiritual legacy is a reflection of us, and provides a cultural framework.

Mabel's quote reminds me of the spiritual legacy that the Apostle Paul mentioned about his spiritual son Timothy. He acknowledges the faith of Timothy's mother, and grandmother, and these two ladies help to shape his spiritual identity (2 Tim. 1:6). When we research our ancestral histories, it is immensely practical to have conversations with the elder members of our families that are members of Christian faith communities. All their spiritual legacies are buried with them if we fail to extract this information while they are living. Mabel's younger sister, Florence Burns-Jackson believed that the genealogy of Jesus in Matthew and Luke surpasses the names listed. She states,

These genealogies surpass names, but include stories of one's culture, heritage, identity, social standing, class groups, and nationalities. It reminds me of the diverse and inclusive nature of Jesus' lineage. No matter who you are, when you read these genealogies, you can feel welcomed.

There is contemporary political language mentioned by politicians that are seeking to hold public office. They talk often about the 'Big Tent' motto which is supposed to be inclusive of all people regardless of race, gender, socio-economic status, or ethnicity, but when you examine some of their policies or political positions on specific items, nothing could be further from the truth.

There is one final quote regarding the first question worth mentioning because he was the second youngest member of the group, and his name is

Merriam Sloan. When it comes to the significance of Jesus' genealogy in Matthew and Luke, Merriam says,

Our genetic and genealogy stories may not be as accurate as you think they are. Some accounts that we hear may contradict what you thought you knew, and this reality is based on who you asked. And pretty much our historical understanding of who we are may be different based on the information that was given to us. It is important to be mindful of this reality.

Merriam's observation reminds me of the first title that I selected for this project, "Who Do You Think You Are?" This title was selected due to my genetic genealogy discoveries that I had read about but were also prevalent in my own family history. This reality makes me appreciate those who do the research because their findings will either substantiate their discoveries or refute them.

Part two of the first question also yielded some interesting responses regarding our understanding of the genealogy of Jesus in Matthew and Luke as it relates to American history, and our ancestral origins. The second part of the first question is as follows: How does this discovery [genetic genealogy research] inform your understanding of who you are in relation to American History, especially our ancestral origins as shown in Matthew and Luke's genealogy of Jesus? I have already mentioned that genetic ancestry testing (GAT) and genealogy research is significant to the Black church tradition because it provides a unique tool to help us recapture some of our lost ancestral histories, which a few of the focus group participants mentioned when they provided their answers to the four primary research questions. It also provided insight about the concept of race as a myth, and how this concept became a social construct for racial oppression in America and other countries. I mentioned earlier in this

project that my desire for embarking upon this study and those of BMBC was twofold.

It consisted of providing additional tools to research their family's ancestral journey, and to discover the intersection of race and genetics. The immigrants who graced the shores of American soil came to this country to seek a better life for themselves and their family, and they also came with their legal documents to substantiate their ethnicity, gender, and marital status. Most were able to secure jobs within the various industries during that time: agriculture, manufacturing, textiles, and other forms of employment. However, it was a different story for enslaved Africans.

They were stolen from their homeland in central and western Africa, they were packed on ships like sardines, enduring the stench of their own urine, feces, and other bodily fluids as well as those of their enslaved counterparts. They were stripped of their names, religion, cultural values and norms. Men were beaten to prevent any potential threat, and women and girls were raped. Finally, they were sold to a perpetual life of enslavement with no ending in sight. I can imagine some of them echoing the sentiments of the Hebrew captives when they were carried away into Babylon, "For there our captors asked us for songs, and our tormentors asked for mirth, saying, 'sing us one of the songs of Zion!' How could we sing the Lord's song in a foreign land?" This ancestral journey has been about recovering as much history as we can about our ancestors, and we have a new tool available to assist us with this process. Lisa Evans, another participant of the BMBC focus group stated,

Knowing where you came from we will understand our contribution to American history. For example, by knowing where I came from, I found out that my family had a history of making quilts. Our family was invited to the U.S. White House when Barack Obama was serving as the forty-fourth president. A book was on the table, and low and behold! I discovered a family ancestor that made quilts. Sometimes quilts and hair-braiding were used as maps to assist in traveling.

Enslaved Black Americans were known for using a variety of methods to communicate to other enslaved members including drums and negro spirituals. One of the adjunct professors from Pittsburgh Theological Seminary who taught one of my Doctor of Ministry courses mentioned an enslaved Black woman who used quilts to communicate Bible verses. I think that the course was entitled: Is It a Sermon? There were several members of the BMBC focus group that echoed Lisa's story. For example, Yolanda Jones, previously mentioned, stated,

I'm learning that that was not taught in the school system that I attended here in Niagara Falls. We were blindsided and most of the American history taught to us was such a lie. When you find out where you came from, it changes the playing field of who you really are. You approach the world with more confidence. We were taught the basics. For example, it is believed by many that most of the sporting games we enjoy here in America were created by Europeans, but many of them were also created by Blacks. It is embarrassing when people ask about your roots and you don't have a clue where you're from. My friends from Africa know where they came from including their tribe, and they speak multiple languages, and sometimes this makes you feel robbed of your heritage. I now understand more why people feel the way they do about history, especially United States history.

Leotis Owens, another member of the BMBC focus group, expressed similar sentiments regarding American history. He stated,

I'm from Alabama, and my niece traced our family history and discovered that my great great grandmother was a Native American. She had long silky black hair, but her skin complexion was dark like a native from Africa. I was told that she was from the Cherokee Tribe. She was brought to North Carolina on a slave ship, but my niece traced her lineage all the way

back to the West Indies. We that are Black Americans were cheated out of our history, but I believe one day we will get justice.

Helen Burns, who was previously mentioned, echoed similar sentiments, stating,

The first thing it does regarding our place in U.S. history is when we know where we came from, it dispels the lies of what we have been told as a people. I recall coming home from grade school as a kid and I told my father that I learned that Columbus discovered America, and he abruptly told me that it was a lie. A lot of times we don't know where we came from because we weren't immigrants. Our people came on a slave ship. American history is biased and tainted regarding our ethnic groups. If you don't know where you came from, we don't have any concept of who we are as a people.

Leah Ferguson's answer to this question was centered on her experiences as a biracial American. She says,

It gives me an awareness of who I am. I'm from mixed cultures but I was exposed to only one half of who I am. Outside of being told my great grandfather was white, I didn't know anything else about that part of my family. After doing DNA testing, I found out he was born October 1889 in Summit Mississippi, died in Pike, MS in 1969 and my great grandmother was Dinah Ford born in 1888. This union brought about my grandmother who was very fair and had long dark hair. With that being said, I was teased as a child for my light skin and green eyes as a black girl and it affected me growing up. I always looked for acceptance from the black race and even as an adult I still hear comments about how light I am. I now appreciate who I am and wear it proudly. I still like to lay out in the Summer to get that golden tan and it's relaxing. I am a product of my DNA, and this is how God determined that I would look, and I am grateful to be who He made me to be. My self-worth is not in being accepted in any race, my self-worth is being who I am called to be and that is a female made in the image and likeness of my Creator.

Leah's reflection reminds us that acceptance and belonging impacts all of us regardless of our gender, ethnic origin, or nationality, but even more so of those with mixed ancestry. I recall a conversation with a biracial male that I was working with from one of my previous employers. He informed me that he would never date a black woman or have children by one because of his negative

experiences as a biracial American man. His Black facial features seem to be more dominant than his white features. He wasn't accepted among his white peers because they saw him as Black, and he wasn't accepted among his Black peers because they saw him as half white. One final comment regarding part two of the first questions came from Leah Ferguson, previously mentioned, and she uses Matthew's genealogy of Jesus as a starting point. She stated,

I'm going to use Jesus as an example, and I may have already said this in the first part of the question. Jesus passed the historical test given by the biblical prophets. So in the Old Testament, the Bible prophesied about a messiah coming to bring salvation to the world. It told where he would be born, his lineage, his descendants, his tribe, and even his name, Emmanuel. When Jesus came on the scene, he passed the test for everything prophesied about him; and if anyone had any issues with that during that time, they could have looked it up, and they would have seen that it pointed to Jesus. About Black folks, we were told that when they took us from Africa and brought us to America, they [enslavers] made us slaves, and we were looked upon as not human, and not valued as persons. We were treated as animals, but we came from specific tribes, royalty included. We came from people that contributed to this world today, and as we learn more about that, it will change our concept about who we are today.

All the answers to the first question acknowledge the reality that some of our ancestor's customs and religious practices were erased or considered sacrilegious. The answer to the first question provided by the participants shows that learning about where you came from helps us carve out a path to try to fill the missing identities in all of our lives, especially our spiritual identity in Christ. Genetic ancestry testing enhances this search in ways that Alex Haley could have never imagined. This tool was not available when Haley wrote his award-winning *Roots*, which motivated several people across ethnic and gender lines to research their family's ancestral journey. It has become one of the most

important tools in the twenty-first century for genealogical research. Gates argues,

DNA testing can be used to estimate the proportion of a person's ancestors who lived long ago in different regions of the world: Europe, Asia, Africa, and the Americas. Such analyses exploit the fact that whereas most DNA variations are shared by all human populations, deriving from our shared ancestry in Africa, a subset of DNA variations arose or changed in frequency during the tens of thousands of years that our ancestors were migrating and living across the globe.

GAT companies like Ancestry.com can now provide an estimated timeline of the routes your ancestors may have taken in the form of maternal and paternal haplogroups. I shared with the focus group that if I knew then what I know today, I would have gone around collecting saliva samples of my paternal and maternal relatives. Also, I would have asked them to take me to their family grave sites, neighborhoods, and anything else that would recapture some of their lost history, and this leads us to our second BMBC focus group question.

How does this project in genetic genealogy impact your perspective of self-worth? Leotis Owens was one of the first focus group members to answer this question, and he brought insight to the eldest member on the Zoom call. He stated,

It may not help us currently, but it may help the next generation and the generation after them. I was born and raised in Alabama, and we had no knowledge of who our grandparents and great grandparents were until my niece did DNA testing and genealogy research. She went back further than we could have ever imagined. If you look at the ages around this room, genealogy and DNA testing may not help us any more than it already has, but it will be more beneficial to the next generation. If we could ever change the thoughts and mindset of the younger generations and bring them back into the fold of what we're searching for, maybe they can benefit from it so that they can understand who they are. Most of us

on this call are beyond the threshold, you know what I mean? We're not going to get as much out of this as they can. In fact, we can't, no matter what we find out, it's not going to take us any further than where we already are right now.

I think if we can teach our kids where they came from and how they got here, maybe we can help them better understand themselves. I have one more thing I want to say about this question. One day Pastor Burns was looking at me funny, and noticed that I had blue eyes, and then the next day his wife looked at me in the face and said, 'My husband told me you had blue eyes, and yes, we know where you got them from.' I got my blue eyes from my great great grandmother from the West Indies. Thanks to the genealogy work of my niece that traced our family history all the way back to Nigeria. She discovered that a whole tribe of Black people from Nigeria had blue eyes, and this is how I connect to Nigeria.

Leotis comments made me aware of how significant it is to pass our genealogical knowledge and legacies to the next generation, just like Matthew and Luke did in the genealogy of Jesus in their gospel narrative account of his life. I recently read an internet article, which explained why Matthew called Jesus the son of Abraham and the son of David. He is making a connection of Jesus to the father of the people of Israel.¹¹¹ Helen Burns echoed Leotis's sentiments regarding the significance of DNA testing and it impacts our self-worth. She states,

The operative word here is DNA testing. A lot of the test kits tell you where you came from as already mentioned by Leotis and Leah. Somebody says, 'You'll never know where you're going until you figure out where you came from. Even white people that thought they were completely Italian or something else until they take a DNA test and discover that they have Black ancestry in their genes or some other nationality. They can now look at themselves differently. Sometimes I have heard a lot of white people use the word white trash because they don't know where they came from, and then they take a DNA test and find out that they are so mixed up with so many ethnic groups. When you get the results of your DNA test, you discover that you came from Ireland, Poland, Africa, or some other region. Now with DNA testing, you can start looking at the history of what happened in these places, and see that you have value, and that you came from somewhere.

¹¹¹ <https://bibleproject.com/blog/jesus-genealogies>

Leotis and Helen's comments bring me back to one of the subtitles of this project, which is the subject of belonging. There seems to be a deep longing in all of us to know our origins, and Alex Haley described this longing as 'marrow deep' and it pushes us to keep searching until we are satisfied with the answers to fill those missing pieces in our identity puzzle. I believe Matthew was strategic and intentional in starting his narrative of Jesus' life with his genealogy, especially by mentioning the two well-known patriarchs, Abraham and David. Furthermore, his counterpart Luke was also strategic and intentional by tracing Jesus' family tree all the way back to Adam, showing himself to be humanity's savior, in which everyone can feel like they belong. One final comment about Helen's mentioning the value of specific places reminded me of a conversation during the early part of Jesus' ministry. When one of his disciples discovered that the promised messiah came from Nazareth, he made a negative reference about Jesus's hometown, which implies that nothing good can come from that town (John 1:46). Mabel Johnison also chimed in on this question and she stated,

I think what both my mom (Helen) and Brother Leotis shared were very insightful and I think as they were going through their answers to the question about how DNA testing add value to our self-worth and I believe that it adds both pride and shame or some other type of purpose, and I say this for obvious reasons because you know where you come from, but sometimes finding out who you are is not always advantageous for people. Sometimes people are embarrassed, and they're ashamed of the history of what other people have done in their lineage. Also, I think it can provide purpose when you know, and that can be the positive or negative end. You can either continue the work of your family line or you can change the narrative of your family line. So I think this is how DNA testing can impact our own personal value.

When I consider Mabel's comment and the previous comments made by her mom, Helen, we can see that human perfection is not something we are going to

see during our earthly journey, Jesus' earthly life notwithstanding. In light of Jesus' genealogy in Matthew, it can provide comfort knowing that the savior of humanity's ancestors had a questionable past, but the redemptive love of God provides us with grace to deal with our past. Although our past actions and those of our ancestors may have some residual consequences if they were negative, they do not define our ultimate identities.

Although the final two research questions were less theological and more social scientific in nature, the answers provided by the participants were theologically rich, especially when they answered the second part of the third question regarding the *imago Dei* concept. The third research question is as follows: (A) what is the significance of learning about DNA? (B) how does this knowledge impact our understanding of our body as the temple of God? (C) How does it inform our understanding of the *imago Dei* concept as human beings created in the image of God?

Louis James was the first participant to respond to this question, and his response was followed by Helen Burns' youngest daughter, Florence Jackson.

Louis stated,

I haven't taken a DNA test, but my family did a genealogy family tree. Our family tree provides information that traces back to my grandfather Jack and his wife Matilda that I already mentioned in the first part of question one. When I look back at my family line, which includes my mother and her siblings, I can see the value of education. My mom went back to college later in life during her thirties or forties, and I attended my uncle's graduation when he received his academic credentials. My family members were successful in their academic pursuits and these are the things that I try to imitate from my family.

Florence followed Louis' comments and stated the following:

So I knew in Matthew's genealogy it mentioned five different women: Tamar, Rahab, Ruth, Bathsheba, and Mary, and all of them didn't have the best reputations. Tamar dressed as a prostitute and committed incest with her father-in-law, Rahab was a prostitute, Ruth was a Gentile and her descendants had a contentious relationship with the Moabite Tribe, and Mary's pregnancy before marriage was held in suspect by the religious community of her time. When we look into our family histories, we can reflect on the strong, unexpected or even controversial figures in our family tree, but ultimately understand their lives paved a way for us. No matter what they did, it still paved a way for us, and I think it's cool that we get to view Jesus' genealogy and see that it wasn't perfect. I think it's super cool that we get a genealogy of God and the Lord, and see how beautiful that God wrapped himself in flesh and allowed us to see that it wasn't perfection in Jesus' background so I don't have to expect perfection in mine. I can accept it for what it was and be grateful for these people in the mission that they served to get me where I am today.

Louis' comment is significant to the Black church regarding the theology of identity. We find our identity in the following ways: our jobs, careers, education, race, ethnicity, gender, marital status, fraternities, community organizations, faith communities, denomination affiliations, and a diversity of other ways. When these things are absent from our lives, some of us tend to lose our sense of identity. Historically, we tend to focus on the negative things in our own lives and those of our ancestors, and sometimes these negative views impact our sense of identity of who we are compared to what we can become. For example, if one's family line holds strong racial views against certain ethnic groups, does this mean that future generations should embrace those same views? Florence mentioned in her response that the four women in Jesus' lineage had questionable characters, but the biblical writer saw fit to include them in Matthew's genealogy. When I was doing research for this project, one book referred to this checkered past in our family line as sap on the tree, which implies

that we too may find questionable characters in our family tree as it was with Jesus' family tree, but characters don't ultimately define who we are or what we can become.¹¹²

The final three responses to the first part of question three from Leah, Louis, and Jennifer focus on the significance of learning about DNA, and that it intersects with their views of the theology of the body, especially as it relates to the *imago Dei*. Regarding to the significance of DNA testing, Leah stated,

It provides us with health information like genetic diseases and mental health disorders. Once we understand the mechanics of our DNA, we can make informed decisions of what we must put in our bodies, how we treat our bodies; proper care, rest, exercise, and eating healthy, and if need be, take medications to help us ward off the negative impact of diseases like diabetes, high blood pressure, or high cholesterol. The Bible reminds us that our body is the temple of God (I Cor. 6:19). What are we putting into these bodies that we consider God's temple? Are we taking care of this body since it's the only one we're going to have on this side of glory? God was so wonderful to give us this beautiful machine, and we need to take care of it as long as we can. So that concludes my view on the first part of the third question.

Leah's comments reminded me of something that I heard from a preacher years ago. He said that clergy men and women tend to be the worst at self-care regarding taking proper care of our earthly temple. When I became aware of this lack of care, I initiated a health moment as part of our worship services. We have three nurses in our congregation, and they were tasked with preparing a two- or three-minute short talk on some aspects of health. These talks are done during the announcement period when the sermonic moment has concluded, and no

¹¹² See *Essential Guide to the Genealogy of Jesus* (Massachusetts: Rose Publishing, 2021), 7

subject was off limits. Louis's comments regarding the significance of DNA testing focused primarily on the second part of the question because he has not taken a DNA test. He stated,

So far as why it's important to learn about DNA like the question says and how this knowledge helps us see our bodies as something special as we all know, God's image is stamped on us from the beginning of our creation. We are made in the image of him and our bodies like a temple, we must preserve it while we have it. God has blessed us with this vessel, and we should use it to glorify him. Humanity has God's stamp on them.

Louis's reflection on the significance of our bodies as the temple of God substantiates the previous comment made by Leah. We must be intentional when it comes to the proper care of our bodies as God's earthly temple, including our physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual wellbeing. The Apostle Paul says, "Or do you not know that your body is the temple of the Holy Spirit within you, which you have from God, and that you are not your own. For you were bought with a price; therefore, glorify God in your body." (1 Cor. 6:19-20). We are God's representatives on earth and when people see us, they are viewing a reflection of God. It is our responsibility to make sure that we are representing the presence of God on earth. Jennifer's reflection also echoes the sentiments of Leah and Louis. She states,

I feel it's important to learn about your DNA like Sister Leah said. You learn about the small stuff, but more importantly you also learn about how small you are. As much as we are different, we are all the same. God created all of us on the same channels. We have to be the temple, and we have to be made in the image of God for all of us to still be clicking or talking on the same instruction. It makes you understand that even with all of our differences, those chains don't change, and that the creator had to be the creator for those chains [DNA] to stay the same in every one of us.

They only changed by a little bit, and it is that one percent that makes us different. This was already mentioned in the PBS documentary that was listed on our handout during our first session. It's amazing that we are all the human race and we want to differ ourselves all the time. We are made in his image and that means as much as we are different, we are all the same. We have the basics and understand that God was so specific that he created us as unique human beings, and by your parents only a few things changed from them.

Jennifer's reflection reminds me of what the prophet Isaiah expressed when he had a vision of God, "And I said: 'Woe is me! I am lost, for I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among people of unclean lips; yet my eyes have seen the King, the Lord of host'" (Is. 6:5). When we are in the presence of God, we get a glimpse of how small we really are as Jennifer already noted. The final three participants respond to the second part of question three. Helen stated,

I would like to reference the 1990 Human Genome Project for my answer for the first part of the third question. When God created man, he created him all put together. Our hearts are in the same place, our lungs are in the same place, and this explains why a surgeon can operate on you no matter what color, race, or nationality. A surgeon can operate on your esophagus, and he or she can do heart surgery because all of our body parts are in the same place. Thank God he made us all put together and that little bit, that very little bit is the difference. Can you imagine if my lungs were in my foot because I'm a certain creation or nationality or somebody else's heart was in their ear? So the idea that we are made in the image of God, all of us are put together. The scripture says that God blew his breath into me, and humanity became a living soul (Gen. 1:27). If we could see the soul of humanity, how much would we look like God? And do we all look like God because the breath of God is in us? That is some question? Well one song writer said, 'If variety isn't the spice of life, then why does salt and pepper go together so nice.'

Lisa echoed Helen's reflection, and she stated,

It's funny that Sister Helen mentioned that because I met a person yesterday [4/12/24] and they were saying how they didn't know who they were. They were white they thought, but they realized that their family was the United Nations. They said because they had so many different people in them that they said that we were actually all just alike. He said that I am no different from you; I can dance like you, I can move like you, and my

sister has kinky hair like you. So that's another point brought up that once you know your history you are actually like everybody else.

Charles Smith focused his attention on difference within the body of Christ by embracing the concept of love. He says,

When I think about myself made in the image of God, it makes it easy to love my brothers and sisters in Christ because of the love of God. If I could look past the person and show the love of God to my brothers and sisters in the body of Christ as well as those on the streets, that helps me understand that being in the image of God means accepting his gracious gift to humanity. Because he sent Jesus out of his love, we must have this same love for one another (Ro. 5:8; I Jn. 2:9-11).

I see both scientific and theological points in these reflections. Helen mentioned the Human Genome Project, in which genetic scientists looked at every cell in our body. However, it differs from what the BMBC focus group was concerned with regarding their experiences with DNA or genotyping. The latter looks at specific cells in our body known primarily as Ancestry Information Markers or (AIM) whereas whole genome sequencing is descriptive of the Human Genome Project. When God created humanity, they were declared good. A perfect God created a perfect human body until it was tainted by the sins of Adam and Eve and generations after them.

The Apostle Paul draws a spiritual parallel between the human and the body of Christ in which he implies the oneness of the body while simultaneously saying that if one member is celebrated, then all of them are celebrated, and if one member hurts, then all of them are hurting (1 Cor. 12:18-25). Although oneness is expressed in these two reflections, the racial realities of both the local body and the universal body of Christ reminds me of a quote spoken by the Rev.

Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.,¹¹³ in which he referenced the 11:00 am Sunday worship services as being the most segregated hour in America, and this reality remains relevant in the twenty-first century. We have made significant progress in America regarding race relations, but a lot of work remains not only in secular society, but even more so within the body of Christ.

The final answer to part two of the third question came from Monique Udler and she stated,

I want to piggyback on what Helen said about God's creation of humanity. I was talking to a woman the other day about the eclipse that occurred earlier this month. We got into a conversation about the creative nature of God. This means that anybody that knows a creative person understands that one shade of paint or color doesn't make a complete piece of art. The artists are always looking for ways to tweak their work to make it unique. When you look at God and the flowers he made, you can see how multifaceted our God is. When we look at one another and look past the color of our skin or the way our hair looks, we can see that we're all made exactly alike.

Monique's reflection substantiates what Charles Smith mentioned earlier about how the love of God within us as Christians gives us what we need to look past our differences and demonstrate God's love towards others the same way he looked past our sins and embraced us with his love (Rom. 5:8). The final question that the participants responded to is as follows: How does genetic genealogy inform my theology about the body of Christ in general, and Black bodies in particular? This question focused on the theological aspects of exploring the subject of genetic genealogy as it relates to our Christian faith as a local and universal body of believers, and its significance to Black bodies. Since

¹¹³ https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1q881g1L_d8

Leah had all of her answers written down, she took the initiative of responding to this final question. She stated,

Genetic genealogy informs my theology about the body of Christ in general by believing that God created all humans the same. We have the same material that comprises the human body. We don't have the body of an animal, but as humans. We may come in different shapes, sizes and colors, with different features but we are all a part of the human race. As far as Black bodies, that has not been the case. Slavery identified the Black race as being less than human, not valued as a human, treated as an animal that was owned but not loved and valued. Learning that all humans are 99.9% identical in our genetic makeup just blows my mind, and the reality that 0.1 percent causes someone to treat others in such an inhumane way.

Leah's reflection reminded me of two books by Tony Evans that I referenced in this project entitled *Are Blacks Spiritually Inferior to Whites: The Dispelling of an American Myth* and *A Survey of the Black Church in America: Exploring Its History, Ministry, and Unique Strengths*. Both books substantiate Leah's reflection on how Black bodies have been viewed historically, especially by those in power who claimed to be Christians. An accurate understanding of the creation of all human bodies presupposes how we should treat them regardless of their ethnic differences. We are all included in the Psalmist's reflection on the human body and its significance to God as his special and unique creation, and the author of the book of Hebrews substantiates this view (Ps. 8:4-8).

While Leah focused on the uniqueness of the human body and the historical way that Black bodies were treated in America and other places, Helen placed her emphasis on the unique way that all of us worship God. She states,

When you find out where you came from, you understand that all of us don't worship God the same way. Some of us have our own way of

worshiping even within our own African heritage. Our ancestor's enslavers tried to make it look like we were steeped in occult practices, and some may have been. We have to understand that God did not begin spirituality in the United States of America. He started way back then and if he had not done that, we would not be here today. When we know and understand where we came from it changes our views on many things. I can honestly say that none of us have the same views on spirituality if we were to sit down with each other and express our views. Some of us would not say anything because we rather go with the status quo, especially regarding the community of believers and our unique significance. Even Baptists worship differently than Pentecostals, and they worship differently than their Methodist brothers and sisters. When you put all of us in the same room and the Spirit of God visits us with his presence, you can see what difference it makes in our worship experiences (Acts 2:44-47) This is what makes the difference for all of us here today.

Helen's views are in sync with those of Henry H. Mitchell regarding the origin of Black spirituality and religious practices. Mitchell, who initiated the first Black Church Studies Program in America at Colgate Rochester Divinity School mentioned in one of his books about the historical Black church that all of our culture and religious practices were not lost during the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade as many have believed. He states,

Of course, this is contrary to the widely circulated assumption that Africans were largely stripped of their native culture and religion during or after the voyage to these shores. The truth is that there is much hard evidence proving that Africans retained a great deal of their original cultural heritage. This is especially true of religion, which was much harder to stamp out than visible behaviors such as styles of manual labor. The long-handled hoe of the colonies may have won out the back-straining short-handled of Africa, but the tenacity of the communally embraced belief system was far greater. It was the people's psychic survival kit.¹¹⁴

Although the central focus of this project has shown that all humanity shares a genetic commonality, they are unique in the variety of ways that they express

¹¹⁴ Henry H. Mitchell, *Black Church Beginnings: The Long-Hidden Realities of the First Years* (Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2004), XV.

their theology, spirituality, and worship practices. These unique brands of the Christian faith lead us to select faith communities that make us feel comfortable in our worship experiences. I grew up in the Black Baptist faith tradition, as did most of the BMBC focus group participants, but I changed to a Pentecostal faith tradition during my young adult years because I was attracted to their musical worship styles, which was absent from my tradition during that time. However, I did return to my Baptist roots because the musical styles are now available in the Black Baptist tradition. The final quote for the fourth question came from Kelly Waters. She expressed to the focus group members that she remained silent during our final session because she was gleaning so much from the participants' responses, but she felt it was significant to share her historical perspective regarding Black Americans. She stated,

Our identities were stolen from us as well as the brilliance of our minds. Think about all the inventions that our ancestors started, and your mind would be blown away when you learn about the inventions of Black people. I have never had a DNA test done yet, but I do know my family history. I want to piggyback on what Leotis Owens said earlier. The brilliance of our minds was stolen, and our ancestor's enslavers used it as their own and profited from them. Think about Black Wall Street, and the way it was destroyed because of white supremacy. The demoralization of Rosewood seems to be a pattern that is still happening today to our Black brothers and sisters, but our justice will come if we believe what the Bible says about the first being last and the last being first (Mt 19:30). The dynamics of the current oppressive environment seems like it's making sure that the last will never be first regarding Black people.

Kelley's answer to question four reflect most of the participants thoughts about the cultural and religious heritage of Black Americans, and this stolen heritage regarding our ancestors is one of the primary reasons why genetic genealogy is

significant so that we can recapture some of what has been stolen at least for the sake of the next generation and those who follow them.

Part IV: Summary

This project explored the significance of genetic genealogy to the Black Church faith tradition, and ways that this study shaped various theologies within this tradition: theology of body, belonging, identity, racial identity, and spiritual identity, especially as it relates to the *imago Dei*. Black Americans are not responsible for what happened to their ancestors, but they are responsible for passing on the rich legacies of their ancestors to future generations. Imagine the number of hours spent on researching that could have been saved if they had the tools of DNA testing, which scientifically substantiated the discoveries made using traditional genealogical methods. Chapter four will explore the major themes that were discovered during the three in-person focus group sessions, and our final Zoom session held in April. I will also discuss some contemporary uses of genetic genealogy as an evangelistic tool to reach those that are not members of a Christian faith tradition. Many evangelistic tools have been used to reach others with the redemptive message of Christ: basketball, shopping trips to various locations along with other tools, and genetic genealogy is no exception.

CHAPTER 4

Part I: Evaluation of the Project

When I consider my evaluation of this project, I am reminded of a conversation I had with one of my maternal uncles, who worked as an automobile mechanic. We were in a conversation about some of his customers, who were complaining about the cost of repairing their car. He explained to me that sometimes a customer brings a vehicle to him for a minor repair but when he tries to fix this repair, a deeper problem occurs that requires more time to fix than he had anticipated. Because of the additional time spent repairing these deeper automobile issues, he must charge more money than the customer is prepared to pay. Likewise, I discovered a similar experience when I changed my Doctor of Ministry project from a social justice topic to one that explores genetic genealogy from a theological perspective. Since I had spent a significant amount of time researching the social scientific part of the project, I discovered areas to research that required more time investment than I had expected. The social scientific aspect of this project was relatively easy, but making a case for this subject matter theologically became immensely challenging. As I began to spend more time on the theological aspects of genetic genealogy, I became more informed and able to elaborate on its theological significance.

However, as I reflect on the genetic genealogy stories that were shared by the members of the Bethany Missionary Baptist Church (BMBC) focus group participants and the Christian fellowship that ensued afterwards, the time

investment made these experiences worthwhile. It brought smiles to my face when I played back some of the recordings and saw how much fun we had discussing this topic. Other BMBC participants, who had never considered doing a DNA test also took an interest in initiating a journey to explore their ancestral roots utilizing this twenty-first century tool. Since genetics as a single topic is primarily about the human body, several of the BMBC focus group members became more intentional about treating their bodies as the temple of God regarding adequate rest, diet, and exercise (1 Cor. 6:19). Also, they took a keen interest in researching the genealogy of Jesus in the gospel of Matthew and Luke, which they had not previously done prior to this project. It motivated them to do deeper research to discover what these genealogies meant for them personally, and as members of the body of Christ. I was amazed at some of the theological insights that they presented during our final Zoom session.

Since I am employed as a dual career pastor, I seldom get the opportunity to engage in personal conversations with the members in a group setting like the one generated by the focus group. A participant of the BMBC focus group said something that resonated with me during our final Zoom session. He implied that the elder members of the group may not get as much benefit from genetic genealogical study as future generations, and I concur with his sentiments. For example, I was thrilled when a younger member of the church made inquiries to me about taking a genetic ancestry test. He has been absent from the church for a while, and we spent a considerable amount of time together discussing the process he should take to research his paternal roots. He was already familiar

with his maternal side of the family, but he knew very little about his paternal side until he took the genetic ancestry test (GAT). He texted me a picture of his ethnicity chart as soon as he got his results, and he was elated to finally discover his ethnic roots. He was uncertain of his racial or ethnic identity, and his GAT test help to fill this missing piece in his life. These inquiries by former members who have been absent from church life, has the potential to lead to further conversation about Christian renewal that could lead a person recommitting their lives back to God and the local church.

This research project revealed the extent of the vulnerabilities of the Bethany Missionary Baptist Church (BMBC) focus group participants that they were ready and willing to share regarding the process of discovering their ancestral roots utilizing the tool of genetic ancestry testing (GAT). Once the focus group members were comfortable with each other and felt that they were in safe spaces for these virtual and in-person gatherings, they were willing to be transparent about their GAT experiences. They spoke openly about discovering new relatives and what it meant to them to finally belong to a particular region or ethnic group, and how this sense of belonging impacted their psychological, emotional, and spiritual wellbeing. Many identified with the Jesus story regarding rejection by their own people (John 1:11-13). The Jewish citizens had anticipated a messiah that would overthrow the Roman government and reestablish the Davidic kingdom. However, the kingdom that Jesus referred to in his conversations with his disciples was a spiritual kingdom not a political one as they had expected. This became a topic of discussion with the focus group due

to matters of colorism within the Black community. Historically, Black Americans with a dark-skinned complexion were treated differently than their light-skinned counterparts. Likewise, light-skinned Black Americans were treated differently from their dark-skinned counterparts.

Part II: Key Project Themes

There was one primary theme that consistently surfaced during the BMBC focus group in-person sessions, which was the theme of belonging. I will elaborate on this theme in this section. Also, there were several sub-themes that surfaced during the focus group discussions relating to various identities. These identities were the following: individual, cultural, racial, ethnic, hidden, stolen, and spiritual identity. Finally, there was one specific theme that was mentioned by several participants of the focus group, which was the imperfection of the biblical characters that were listed in Matthew and Luke's genealogy of Jesus. More specifically, some of these characters include the five women listed in Jesus' genealogy of Jesus and they were: Tamar, Rahab, Ruth, Bathsheba, and Mary. Although these various sub-themes were mentioned throughout the conversations during our BMBC focus group sessions, I will elaborate on them only as they relate to the primary themes of the project: ethnic, racial, and spiritual identity and their implications for belonging. I mentioned in chapter two that the theme of belonging is a constant in our lives from our early childhood years to our latter adult years. We often mentioned these identities in our conversations with others, and these conversations are centered around our careers, jobs, academic achievements, family members, political affiliations, and

finally our local faith communities, which include the denominational affiliations associated with these communities.

There is a deep desire within most of us to belong, and this yearning for belonging initiates our journey to complete or satisfy other missing pieces of our identity puzzle. When we read about Jesus's genealogy in the gospel of Matthew, he immediately focuses on his Jewish identity, which includes his ethnic heritage. Matthew immediately focuses on Jesus' family tree by naming those Jewish men and five women that were part of his ethnic heritage. He begins Jesus' genealogy with Abraham, the most renowned patriarch in Jewish history and ends his genealogy with David, one of Israel's most respected kings. Mitri Raheb, author of *Faith in the Face of Empire* argues, "Jesus was a Middle Eastern Palestinian Jew. If he were to travel through Western countries today, he would be 'randomly' pulled aside and his person and papers would be checked."¹¹⁵ If Jesus was alive today, he would find himself among those that are oppressed and experiencing intense pain and suffering in Gaza City Israel.

Part III: Key Project Sub-Themes: Ethnic, Racial, and Spiritual Identity

Ethnic Identity

I define ethnic identity as those groups of people that we share a genetic ancestry with including Africa, Europe, the United States of America, and other

¹¹⁵ Mitri Raheb, *Faith In The Face of Empire: The Bible Through Palestinian Eyes* (New York: Orbis Books, 2014), 1.

regions of the world. The question of ethnic identity raises some additional questions of why this subject matter is significant. What draws a person to risk sharing such a personal and private aspect of themselves by taking a genetic ancestry test (GAT) in addition to the likelihood that they will be placed in a larger database where others may have access to their genetic information? The answer to this question seems to be an intense desire to discover one's own unique ethnic identity, which became a central concern of the BMBC focus group discussions. This desire is the motive behind the main ancestral question that most of us wrestle with: where did I come from? Ethnic identity drives us to seek our ancestral roots by following their paper trails utilizing the tools that some GAT companies like Ancestry, 23andMe, My Heritage, and Family Tree provide. These tools include census records, and other legal documents to ascertain what their ancestor's journey may have been like, and what type of clues they may have left behind. Ethnic identity is driven by our need to know our own ethnic origins, and places us on a path towards self-discovery.

When I took a verbal survey of the focus group and asked them why they had taken a genetic ancestry test (GAT), there were two primary reasons that surfaced: a deep desire to discover their own ethnic identity and a desire to discover who their relatives were. The primary reason that most participants mentioned for taking a GAT raised another question. What is it about ethnic identity that makes us want to belong to a specific group of people? Jewish identity played a key role in placing Jesus to a specific ethnic and cultural group as we discovered in Matthew's genealogy of Jesus. It also plays a key role in

connecting us to a specific ethnic group though we may not share that group's cultural experiences. Although most of the participants that had taken DNA tests showed that they share ancestry with those from the West African region, their cultural identities were primarily the United States. Both ethnic and cultural identities are interconnected. When a person discovers their specific ethnic identity, it becomes a starting point to explore the cultural traditions that we share with people from those regions. For example, when a female participant of the BMBC focus group shared her ethnicity chart and discovered that she shared 37% ancestry with Nigerians, a male participant chimed in and told her that he now understands her love for drums. Historically, drums were a primary musical instrument for the Africans historically and remain so today. When enslaved Black Americans got ready to organize a revolt against their enslavers, they would communicate a message with a specific type of drumbeat. This instrument remains a part of several Black church faith tradition worship experiences. Drums are part of our historical and cultural identity.

Racial Identity

While my definition of ethnic identity is more broad-based and includes a diversity of ethnicities here in the U.S. and other regions of the world, my definition of racial identity is narrower and more specific. Moreover, my definition also refutes those categories defined by those scientists and founding fathers mentioned at the beginning of chapter 1. It was these definitions that created

inaccurate perceptions of Africans and Black Americans as less than or inferior to Europeans and other groups. Gay Byron argues,

It is safe to conclude that assumptions about ethnic groups, geographical locations, and color differences in antiquity influenced the way early Christians shaped their stories about the theological, ecclesiological, and political developments in their communities. As a result, Egyptian/Egypt, Ethiopians/Ethiopia, and Black/blackness became associated with the threats and dangers that could potentially destroy the development of a certain 'orthodox' brand of Christianity.¹¹⁶

The Genesis account of creation refutes this way of looking at or categorizing a person or groups of persons based solely on their physical features or attributes. Our worth and value as human beings is based on the manifestation of God's personal and covenantal presence within us and our Christian witness in the world. This view of humanity, Cortez argues, places them in a particular theological context representative of the *imago Dei*.¹¹⁷ Since most of the focus group participants were Black Americans, the ones who had taken a DNA test wanted to know about the specificity of their African origins because they believed it adds value to their ancestral, ethnic, racial, and spiritual identities. They knew their ancestors were from some part of Africa but had no available information or data to point them in the right direction.

I discovered from listening to the Black focus group participants that European ancestry seems to be the default ethnicity that Black ancestry takers seem to compare themselves with. I pondered on the rationale of why this

¹¹⁶ Gay L. Byron, *Symbolic Blackness and Ethnic Difference in Early Christian Literature* (New York: Routledge, 2002) 123

¹¹⁷ Marc Cortez, *Theological Anthropology*, 37

identity with European ancestry was significant to them. However, this question seemed intrusive in a group setting, but additional research into this area for everyone could produce some interesting insights. When one of my paternal cousins asked me to share the results of my DNA test, he immediately focused on the percentage of European ancestry. This came as a surprise to me because I was particularly focused on discovering my African ancestry. Also, several of the Black participants within the focus group placed more emphasis on discovering their European identity rather than their African identity. Perhaps, the rationale for this has a great deal to do with how Black American identity is viewed in this country as something inferior or less than compared to white identity.

J. Kameron Carter, an associate professor of Theology and Black Church Studies at Duke University Divinity School offers an excellent theological explanation for this focus on whiteness as the default identity, especially regarding the Genesis account of creation (Gen. 1:27). He argues, "I point to how whiteness came to function as a substitute for the Christian doctrine of creation, thus producing a reality into which all else must enter. How theology came to underwrite this racial work has everything to do with the modern quest to sever Christianity from its Jewish roots."¹¹⁸ Likewise, this rejection of Black identity by the purportedly default white identity seems to perpetuate W.E.B. Du Bois double-consciousness narrative that I initially mentioned in chapter one, and

¹¹⁸ J. Kameron Carter, *Race A Theological Account* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008) 5

throughout this project. This narrative remains relevant for the twenty-first century.

Discovering a specific racial identity is one of the most significant aspects of DNA testing. Most genetic ancestry testing companies have traveled to several countries and continents to do DNA testing, and this is why they can compose a basic ancestry estimate based on the living reference population they have tested. The analysis of the test takers in various regions of the world has the capacity to unlock secrets about our ancestors and their ethnic origins. Knowing your ancestral roots provides a sense of pride and confidence in crafting a bright future for us and future generations. Although extreme poverty existed in the area where Jesus was born, Matthew and Luke made sure that future readers would know the richness of his ethnic and racial origins among an oppressed group.

Spiritual Identity

Although our ethnic and racial identities are viewed by some as different or inferior to the dominant white identity, our spiritual identity places all humanity in the same category. I define our spiritual identity as our commitment to the finished work of Christ done at Calvary (2 Cor. 5:17-18). The Apostle Paul utilizes an analogy of the human body and likens it to our spiritual body as one united

body regardless of race, ethnicity, gender, or other categories used to separate people from other groups. There are a variety of diversities regarding the unique ways we manifest our spiritual gifts. However, our spiritual identity is defined by the oneness we find in our identity with Christ (1 Cor.12:12). This spiritual identity as the universal church was manifested by the presence of the Holy Spirit on the day of Pentecost. Luke makes it clear that the unique presence of God manifested by the outpouring of the Holy Spirit was not limited to the dominant Jewish audience that was present throughout Jesus' ministry. There was a diversity of nations represented (Acts 2:5-9).

Some in the audience seemed confused about this manifestation of God's presence within and among those that were considered by some of the religious leaders of Jesus's day as unclean. However, Peter assured them that this manifestation was not a result of any alcoholic influence as some had presumed, but God's presence among those deemed unworthy was the fulfillment of biblical prophecy (Joel 2:28-29). Joel's prophecy suggests that the manifestation of God's presence within, among, and through humanity surpasses boundaries and limitations placed on us by others. If we are negligent in tending to our spiritual identity, this void has the potential to send us on a vicious cycle of seeking but never satisfied. Robert S. McGee, a professional counselor and author of *The Search for Significance* argues, "Whether labeled self-esteem or self-worth, the feeling of significance is crucial to man's emotional, spiritual, and social stability and is the driving element within the human spirit. Understanding this single need

opens the door to understanding our actions and attitudes.”¹¹⁹ Our spiritual identity is ultimately found in our submission to God and his plan for our lives, and our value is seen through God’s eyes and not how we are viewed by others.

Part IV: Evaluation of the Primary Question

There were three primary questions for this project:

- (1) How significant are DNA testing and genealogical research for the African American Church in general and the congregation of Bethany Missionary Baptist Church in particular?
- (2) What questions does it raise about ethnicity, difference, and belonging in the church?
- (3) How can these questions initiate deeper and more effective conversations about racial identity?

I have sought to answer these three questions by introducing DNA testing to the members of Bethany Missionary Baptist Church as a twenty-first century tool that will assist them in tracing their genealogical roots. Traditional genealogical methods were done primarily by utilizing the use of federal, state, and county records, and these records include the following: United States Census Reports, State and county records of birth certificates, death certificates, military records, newspaper articles, and marriage license. However, genetic ancestry tests or GAT are used to substantiate the validity of these records. This method of combining GAT testing with traditional genealogical methods is

¹¹⁹ Robert S. McGee, *The Search for Significance*, (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, Inc., 2003) 11

significant to the Black church tradition because most of our ancestors were enslaved and treated by their enslavers as property. Specifically, the Black Baptist Church became a place for Black Americans to express the four fragile freedoms of the Baptist faith tradition: Bible, soul, religious, and church freedom. It also became a place to help them establish both their self-realization and their own self-identity.¹²⁰ Therefore, it became historically challenging to trace these roots because many of their ancestors were listed as tick marks on an enslaver's inventory sheet. I have viewed some of these slave schedules, and many of them were listed by their gender or age. Their humanity as human beings created in the image of God was not considered.

Before I provide my commentary on how these questions were answered, I would like to revisit a question that I was asked often by the members of Bethany Missionary Church (BMBC) and others that I shared my project idea with. I was asked the following question: what has genetic ancestry testing got to do with theology? Since I have already elaborated on this question in the introduction, I will only mention a few things that are relevant to how this question was answered during the research phase of this project. When Black Americans initiate a genealogical journey to research their ancestral roots beyond the 1870 U.S. Census reports, they run into brick walls for a variety of reasons already mentioned in the first two chapters. Theologically, genetic genealogy points us in the appropriate direction to correct some of the wrongs of the past regarding our collective identities, especially our spiritual identities. When you know your

¹²⁰ Wayne E. Croft Sr., *A History of the Black Baptist Church: I Don't Feel No Ways Tired* (Valley Forge: Judson Press, 2020), XV.

ancestral roots, you approach the world from a different perspective. The American enslaved past of Black Americans tends to focus on their deficits and not their surpluses and strengths.

Black Americans, like every human being are created in the image and likeness of God. We have contributed significantly to American society in general, and to the Christian faith community in particular. The three primary questions were answered for this project by considering the level of intensity that increased from the initial meeting to the final Zoom focus group session. I could ascertain their level of study by the way that they answered the final questions that dealt with Jesus' genealogy in the gospels of Matthew and Luke.

Conclusion

This research project focused on the significance of genetic ancestry testing (GAT) coupled with traditional genealogical methods for the members of Bethany Missionary Baptist Church. The goal of this project consisted of providing them with adequate tools to research their ancestral roots that will assist them with shaping their theology as it relates to their sense of belonging, body, identity, racial identity, and more importantly, their spiritual identity. All of us have a need to belong, and this need drives us to seek the missing pieces of our identity puzzle. Filling this void in our lives provides us with resources that we can use to help shape these various identities. If we are successful in filling one of these identity voids, it can give us the motivation that we need to fill these other voids.

Genetic ancestry testing and genealogical research fills this void by placing us on a path of self-discovery and self-reflection so that we may discover our place in the world. If Matthew and Luke saw that a thorough knowledge of Jesus' genealogy would give us a better understanding of him and what he accomplished for humanity, our own ancestral journey would provide us with a better understanding of ourselves and what we can accomplish within the timeframe God has provided for us. We considered the enslaved past of Black Americans and how this can impact their research efforts. Also, we looked intensely at the genealogy of Jesus in the gospel of Matthew and Luke, and gleaned what they can teach us about our own ancestral journey.

Matthew's genealogy of Jesus shows us how significant it is to embrace our own ethnic identities. He made it clear that Jesus descended from an enslaved people, but also from a line of kings and very prominent ancestors. Additionally, it also shows us that perfection does not exist in any of our genealogies. We have things in our family histories that we are immensely proud of, but we also have things in our families that require deep work. Nevertheless, the biblical writers saw fit to include these in the Jesus story to show us that God's love for humanity surpasses our challenges and provides ample opportunities for our successes.

Appendix-A

- Best DNA test for African Americans regarding regions in Africa: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-_1tgdRfHXA
- Best DNA test regarding price: <https://www.dnaweekly.com/blog/best-dna-tests-for-african-ancestry/>

Appendix-B

Bethany Missionary Baptist Church (BMBC) Focus Group, Session I:

Agenda

Bethany Missionary Baptist Church

Doctor of Ministry Focus Group

Session 1: Saturday November 18, 2023

Student: Rev. Raymond H. Allen

- Prayer
- Scripture: Psalms 139:14
- Project Title: Who Do You Think You Are?
- Sub-title: Belonging, Identity, and Genealogy Within the Black Church
- Short Lecture on Genealogy and Direct to Consumer (DTC) DNA Tests, also known as Genetic Ancestry Test (GAT)

Types of DNA Test:

- Autosomal: inherited traits from mom and dad, which includes 16 sets of great grandparents
- Mitochondrial: inherited traits from matrilineal line only
- Y-Chromosome: inherited traits from patrilineal line only and can only be taken by males. Fathers pass the Y-chromosome to their son, and his son, and so on. However, if a father has no sons, this chromosome dies with him. It is a term used in genetic testing known as 'daughtering-out'.

Types of DNA Testing Companies: known as the Big (5)

- Family Tree: 1st company in the U.S. to offer GAT, founded by Bennet Greenspan.
- 23andMe: founded by Linda Avey, Paul Cusenza, and Anne Wojcicki. This company focuses primarily on health variants that are passed on from generation to generation. They also provide a genetic family tree based on relatives that are Geno-typed or those who did a DNA test with this company.

- Ancestry: founded by Rex Sittner, Robert Shaw, and John Sittner, and they have the largest database of all the DNA testing companies in the world.
- My Heritage: founded by Gilad Japhet
- Living DNA: founded by David Nicholson & Hannah Morden

Additional DNA Testing Companies:

- African Ancestry: Founded by Rich Kittles & Gina Paige
- CRI Genetics: Founded by Alex Mulyar
- Nebula Genomics: founded by George Church and the only company that offers whole genome sequencing, in which the entire genome is sequenced.
- Circle DNA: founded by Danny Yeung, Dr. Lawrence Tzang, and Professor Michael Yang. This genetic ancestry testing focuses primarily on health that provides the test taker with over (170) health reports plus a brief ethnicity ancestry chart.

Stories of our DNA:

- **The Oral Story:** what your mom, dad, or guardian told you who your biological parents were.
- **The Legal Story:** your government issued documents; birth certificates, adoption certificates, census reports, or any other documents that list your heritage or ethnicity.
- **The Scientific Story:** the results of your DNA test or maternity test.
- **The Horror Story:** unexpected DNA surprises. Discovering that your mom, dad, or the person that raised you is not your biological parent/parents.
- **The Biblical Story:** all of us are welcomed into God's family through the redemptive work of Christ on Calvary's cross; Romans 5:8

Suggested YouTube Videos: attached.

- Session 2: we will explore and discuss research questions about the benefits of genetic genealogy.

- Contact information: cell & email contact: please provide your cell phone and contact information so that we may contact you if we must cancel a session due to inclement weather conditions.
- Social work/therapy resources: if you feel you have been traumatized due to an unexpected genetic discovery, please see Pastor Allen and he will provide you with contact information to a social worker and a therapist that specializes in trauma informed care.

I thought it would be beneficial to the focus group and those interested in genetic genealogy to host a genetic genealogy series during our Facebook live noon Bible study, and I also had several types of genetic tests available to those who wish to purchase one. The following handout is what I shared with the Facebook Bible study attendees:

Why Study Genetic Genealogy as a Biblical Concept?

Alex Haley, bestselling author of roots says, "In all of us there is a hunger, marrow deep, to know our heritage-to know who we are and where we came from. Without this enriching knowledge, there is a hollow yearning. No matter what our attainments in life, there is still a vacuum, an emptiness, and the most disquieting loneliness." Haley inspired Black Americans and several ethnicities to research their ancestral roots.

The Origin of This Desire

- The need for knowing and understanding our origins is part of being human.
- Knowing our origins gives us identity for the present, guidance for the future, and a powerful connection to the past.
- This knowledge gives us a sense of being rooted and belonging to a specific family, nation, state, county, city, community, group, and a particular ethnic origin.
- Finding a connection to the past gives us a sense of purpose and meaning.
- As humans, our identities as individuals are shaped in a large part by our families.

- Families extend beyond the immediate relatives in traditional societies, and the specific clan and the larger community plays a defining role in developing our individual identities.
- The human identity of Christ is deeply rooted in the history of Israel and in human history.
- The gospels of Matthew and Luke reflect Jesus' identity in both Israelite and human history.

Ways to Discover Your Family History

- Talking to our oldest living family relatives.
- Using a variety of research tools available to us today.
- Visiting old neighborhoods, villages, and cemeteries.

Appendix-C

What is Genealogy?

- A genealogy is a collection of the names of the people in a family lineage, and it may include information about your relative's birth, marriage, offspring, age reached, achievements, and death.
- Genealogy is also knowing about our spiritual ancestors, which the Bible provides an extensive list.
- God invites all of humanity to accept his invitation to be a member of his family (Biblical Story); Eph. 2:19; Phil 3:20; Ro. 8:15,23; Gal. 4:5; Eph. 1:5
- Our family tree may also include some sap on the tree, and its main task is making sure that every organ is wee-fed and growing.
- Sap is one ingredient we may discover as we research our family history, and Jesus' family was no exception.
- We find military heroes, prostitutes, those born of ancestral relationships, spies, foreigners, kings, paupers, and the list is endless.
- Historically, genealogy was used for political purposes to preserve royal lineages that would legitimize their rightful place on the throne as we see in the last chapter in the book of Ruth and Jesus' genealogy in gospels of Matthew and Luke.

Two Main Types of Genealogies

- **Lineal:** lists of members of each generation, either in ascending or descending order, and they take the following form: **A begot B, B begot C, etc.** (Gen. 5:1-32)
- **Segmented:** These genealogies are a family tree branching out into clans and lineages, and they take the following forms: **The sons of A are B, C, and D, etc.** (Gen. 36:1-5)

Appendix D: BMBC Follow-up Zoom Meeting

I held an additional BMBC Focus Group Zoom Follow-up Session held on April 9, 2024, to gather more theological data that we were not able to get during the first few sessions. I gave the participants my original research questions, but some complained that they were too technical. Therefore, I revised the questions from page 55 to make them less academic and more user-friendly for the congregation. Below is my revision of those questions:

1. How can learning about Jesus's family history in the Bible, like what's shown in Matthew and Luke, help us understand the importance of knowing our own family history? How can finding out where we come from help us understand our place in American history and who we are?
2. How does learning about your family history through DNA testing change the way you see your own value?
3. Why is it important to learn about DNA, and how can this knowledge help us see our bodies as something special, like a temple? How does understanding DNA help us understand the idea that we are made in the image of God?
4. Lastly, how can learning about our ancestors through DNA testing change our views on spirituality, especially regarding the community of believers and the unique significance of African American heritage?

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