

Dark and Lovely: Is God In It? A Reflection on the 2018 Pittsburgh Theological Seminary Schaff Lectures on Race, Gender and the Imago Dei

by the Rev. Oghene'tega (Tega) Swann



. . . Pittsburgh Theological Seminary has done a marvelous job of demonstrating what matters to God's heart to its surrounding community, as it has faithfully served as the center for healing and reconciliation by providing resources and space for learning about and becoming equipped to tackle social justice issues for the entire community. These programs, which are open to the public, draw a wide audience from all spheres of life—secular and religious—and unites them in one purpose: to *learn* to love and *practice justice* and *show mercy*.

This year's Schaff Lectures were no different. People came from far and wide to hear Dr. Chanequa Walker-Barnes speak on "Race, Gender and Imago Dei." This was a must-attend for me, as I'd been enthralled since day one of reading Dr. Walker-Barnes' book "Too Heavy a Yoke: Black Women and the Burden of Strength" about five years ago. I had since sought a way to get Dr. Walker-Barnes to our area, but alas, lack of funds . . .



Tega Swann and Chanequa Walker-Barnes

. . . The first day at PTS, Dr. Walker-Barnes presented "Until All of Us Are Free: How Racial Reconciliation Fails Black Women" and "Tell the Storm I'm New: What Real Reconciliation Looks Like." Using Alice Walker's *The Color Purple* as the lens through which she wanted the audience to envision the struggle of Black women, Dr. Walker-Barnes helped us identify how talks on racial reconciliation still leave out justice for Black women. In a message that I have paraphrased, she showed us how, in a world that treasures male and White skin, Black women still can't win. She went on to delineate how what we typically wrap up as talks on reconciliation really only further marginalizes Black women. And the crowning point of her message (for me) was the message that a Black woman's equality comes from her own wrestling and confronting the injustices she experiences—her equality is not something that's *handed to her* from the outside; rather, it's something she takes on her own. She realizes she is inherently worthy and she claims her space and place in society— ***on her own terms***.

Too often, the costly band-aid approach to racial reconciliation eliminates Black women's space and place because it does not allow the Black woman to present her self-realized self to the world. Instead, *it's the world still trying to define her place for her*. Finally, she let us know that reconciliation is a journey. It's not something you accomplish just by sitting at the table. Dominant people groups have to take ownership for how their privilege comes at great cost to others. Just like Celie in the *The Color Purple*, marginalized people groups and women of color have to be allowed to work through (not be rushed through) the effects of misogyny from *all men* and *White women*, and after all this the world needs to be ready to take women of color on their own terms!

Truth-telling. These lectures were attended by Caucasian men and women, as well as men and women of color. Hard questions were asked by all, and even harder answers were given, but there was a true spirit of humility, repentance, and a willingness to hear and affirm the message. White and Black men genuinely wanted to know how they could do better. In addition to recommending educational materials, Dr. Chanequa told them, “Stop demanding our silence and stand beside us in our demand for justice.”

The morning before Dr. Walker-Barnes ended the Schaff Lectures, the Seminary put together a special breakfast just for Dr. Walker-Barnes and the women in ministry in the area. It was an amazing time of healing, sharing, learning, and encouraging one another facilitated by Dr. Walker-Barnes. But nothing could have prepared me for Dr. Walker-Barnes’ closing words at this Schaff Lecture series.

The Lectures ended with her sermon in chapel, “When Their Sin Makes Us Hate Our Skin.” The texts were excerpts of the Shunamite’s soliloquy from Song of Solomon 1:5-6:

Dark am I, yet lovely,
daughters of Jerusalem,
dark like the tents of Kedar,
like the tent curtains of Solomon.
Do not stare at me because I am dark,
because I am darkened by the sun.
My mother’s sons were angry with me
and made me take care of the vineyards;
my own vineyard I had to neglect.

Dr. Walker-Barnes reiterated the age-old struggle of the theologians and the church to identify the place of Song of Solomon in theology, yet used these two verses to show how society continues to shame women of color, particularly Black women. She showed how society still only affirms women of color the closer they approximate White standards of beauty, but how **the Shunamite’s affirmation of her dark skin was in itself an act of resistance: “Dark am I, . . . lovely.”**

I leave out the word in between “I” and “lovely” because of the focus Dr. Walker-Barnes drew to it. For example, many translations qualify the Shunamite’s loveliness as being *despite* her “blackness,” thereby furthering the notion that Black is not an acceptable standard of beauty. Yet, she says, the Shunamite’s speech and affirmation of her dark skin was her *pièce de resistance*: Dark am I **and** lovely.

Dr. Walker-Barnes’ treatise on the Shunamite’s standing up for herself and asserting her worthiness (before men of her own heritage and men and women of lighter-skinned heritage) as one equally created in God’s image *summarized and affirmed the growing movement of women of color to stand up for themselves and affirm their worthiness just as they are: dark skin, kinky hair, thick lips, etc.*

The Shunamite woman stands in the canon and reminds us of both the age-old struggle to suppress Black women and other women of color and the righteous resistance such women must put forth: Dark am I, and lovely. Our blackness is not an apology. It is a declaration that we are made in God’s image. Perhaps in Dr. Walker-Barnes’ treatise, Bible scholars and theologians may have found the purpose of Song of Solomon after all: the declaration of the Imago Dei in the bodies of Black women. Thus she concluded, “Maybe God is in it [(the Song of Solomon, as well as the bodies of Black women)] after all.” I agree.



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This blog post by Pittsburgh Theological Seminary Doctor of Ministry student Tega Swann appeared May 8, 2018, on the website CBE International – Voices of Color Chapter in response to the Seminary's 2018 Schaff Lectures by Dr. Chanequa Walker-Barnes (see <https://www.pts.edu/Schaff-2018>). Associate professor of pastoral care and counseling at McAfee School of Theology, Mercer University, she spoke on "Race, Gender, and the Imago Dei."

For Dr. Walker-Barnes' Schaff Lectures, see <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FxNB3W9I6n4> and <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=B7Kx2fQZBjo>.

For the Rev. Swann's full written response, see <https://cbe-voicesofcolor.org/2018/05/08/dark-lovely-is-god-in-it-a-reflection-on-the-2018-pittsburgh-theological-seminary-schaff-lectures-on-race-gender-and-the-imago-dei/>.