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# Who lynched Willie Earle? Preaching to confront racism by Will Willimon

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*Who Lynched Willie Earle? Preaching to Confront Racism*  
Will Willimon  
Nashville: Abingdon, 2017. 138pp. \$17.99

A November 1987 issue of the journal *Sojourners* featured on its cover in bold letters these words: White Racism: America's Original Sin. With his new book, *Who Lynched Willie Earle?* Duke Divinity's Professor of the Practice of Christian Ministry and retired UMC Bishop Will Willimon reflects in provocative ways about how the gospel might address that original and still troublesome sin in White mainline pulpits. Willimon's work is important for a conversation in white homiletics that is far too long in coming: how might culturally privileged preaching confront racism?

To his credit, Willimon is aware of the perils. Much of the literature on preaching and racism has in fact succumbed to a "white gaze" that too often perpetuates a racially oblivious pulpit or fails to take seriously the need to dismantle the entrenched and systemic nature of white racism (xiii). Part of that, for Willimon, includes careful reading of African-American sources not only in a theology of race (James Cone, Willie Jennings, J. Kameron Carter) but in cultural criticism, history, and critical race theory (Michelle Alexander, Carol Anderson, Ta-Nehisi Coates). Willimon knows he needs to attend to African American voices to help the white pulpit do the same.

The outline of the book does a nice job of situating the problem within a world that Willimon knows well: mid-twentieth-century North Carolina and Methodist churches in particular. He begins in chapter 1 with describing the 1947 lynching of Willie Earle in his home town, Greenville, NC, close to the time of Willimon's own birth—yet an historical event he only learned about later. Chapter 2 describes the preparation to preach of Methodist minister, Hawley Lynn, who had only recently been widowed and left with a young daughter, Kathy. Hawley, a

product of mid-century Yale Divinity School and the perduring influence of Halford Luccock. Chapter 3 offers a close reading of Lynn's sermon from two weeks later which though brave, also reflected the limitations of his culturally enmeshed theological view and elements of a conscience only beginning to see its own deformation by white racism. Chapter 4 is devoted to assessing the sermon in greater detail. Here Willimon's careful use of sources is joined to his postliberal critique of Lynn's liberal preaching that, though public (and not private), struggled to be released from cultural notions about civil religion and American justice and insufficiently funded by the church's own scripture and bound up with the church's corporate life in the body of Christ. Chapter 5 lays a groundwork for Christian talk about race and names crucial theological touchstones for how its sin might be confronted. Chapter 6 brings this to bear to the preaching moment and argues specifically for a form of pulpit address that is theological rather than merely anthropological, aims to be exorcistic with its view of white racism, dares to speak up, is decidedly biblical in orientation, moves toward conversion, avoids mere moralism, narrates a counter-narrative capable of sustaining God's people, and offers pastoral leadership in the process.

There is much compelling about Willimon's vision in these pages. He helps preachers to see how enmeshed preaching can be, even when it is brave. More importantly, he envisions concrete practices that, focused on the God-ness of God, nonetheless sponsors a kind of countervailing engagement on the part of God's people, the Church. He also knows how often the struggle seems futile when he laconically imparts at the end of the chapter about Lynn's sermon that all 28 of the men accused of participating in the lynch mob that killed Willie Earle...were ultimately acquitted. At the same time, I wish Willimon could have probed just a bit more deeply and thus bravely himself. Clearly, white liberal preaching proved unequal to the

task of addressing racial justice in America—as Martin Luther King, Jr. himself noted more than once. Could it be, as J. Kameron Carter has suggested, that late twentieth-century theological returns to tradition for *resourcement* themselves participate in a kind of postcolonial melancholy that leaves them less than fully able to respond to public issues of race in the present. That said, I agree with Willimon that a more lively response to white racism involves much more than anthropological work, but deep, theological emphasis. Even then, a more fruitful discussion of the full-orbed problem of white racism in preaching would need to own it precisely as *Sojourners'* American original sin and a postcolonial call to conversion for all, white liberal and postliberal alike.

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