ELIJAH'S MANTLE

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African American Church Leadership, edited by Lee N. June and Christopher C. Mathis Jr
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PARKER BOOKS

ELIJAH'S MANTLE

Empowering the Next Generation of African American Christian Leaders

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Editor

Kregel Ministry

Elijah's Mantle: Empowering the Next Generation of African American Christian Leaders

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To all our Elijahs, from all our Elishas

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Introduction

BRICKS WITHOUT STRAW

There is a popular line in the African American community. It is a storyline rooted in the oral history of America, a line deeply etched into the fabric of American society. For African Americans, it is a toxic storyline that lays blame. It is a harsh judge, a stealer of hope, a killer of dreams.

The line goes something like this: "When are Black people ever going to get it together? Other ethnic groups find ways to work together; why are we always acting like crabs in a barrel? Slavery was over a long time ago; we have to stop acting like victims."

We take issue with that line of thinking. First of all, the last enslaved African American, Charlie Smith, only died in 1979. The last child of an enslaved African American died in the twenty-first century. So we see that slavery is not the ancient history that some make it out to be. But secondly, and more importantly, there are a number of contingents of African Americans who are defying, challenging, and daring the stereotypes.

These individuals are all around us. Their untold stories abound, and have the potential to empower generations of African Americans.

In 1984, I gathered a group of African American evangelical leaders from around the nation to participate in a historic gathering that allowed us to share some of those stories and strategies, but most importantly to interact with an eye towards learning, collaboration, and growth. We refined that group, and now one hundred leaders who comprise "The Summit" meet annually.

I was in conversation with members of the African Christian Fellowship when a question came up. "We have to discuss why Africans who come to this country are more successful than African Americans who are already here," said a member of the organization.

That's not true for everyone. The children of our Summit members are doing quite well. They are college graduates, doctors, teachers, ministers, and business owners. They are, in their own way, working the way we have tried to work to "turn the world upside down."

It is true that African Americans lag behind their white counterparts on a number of measures, when taken as a whole. In *Succession of Leadership*, we lay out that historical narrative in a way that aids in understanding the development of Black America. Part One, "Living Epistles," lays out the "present state" of a select group of members of the Summit, a organization of Christian leaders that encourages members to network and help each other reach their God-given visions. Finally, Part Two, "Living Principles," Summit members lay out a roadmap of principles, tactics, and strategies for effective ministry leadership.

In every successful people group, there is an intergenerational passing of information, resources, and contacts. When that happens for several hundred years—as is the case with those people groups who were not subjected to the stripping of language, customs, and culture—the group can grow in strength upon a firm foundation.

Unfortunately, that did not happen with African Americans, as the poem[1] below illustrates:

Bricks Without Straw

Bricks without straw
Bricks without straw
is how we came over

a piece of memory here
(most of it obliterated when they banned our native tongues)

a Bible verse there
(concocted to mold obedience
but we looked deeper, further
into its real truth…and created a whole 'nother kind of church...)

1. The poem "Bricks Without Straw," © 2004 Diane Proctor Reeder. Used by permission.

Bricks without straw
Bricks without straw
is how we came over

Everybody else brought their culture over intact
the family ties, the rituals
the businesses and institutions
the language
whole cloth no worms that ate holes through them
  no evil and gnarled hands to rend the cloth
into shreds

Make bricks without straw
they shouted to us
holding the straw in their hands
controlling even the bricks of our existence

What's wrong with you Can't you get yourself together

And now we ask ourselves the same thing

We forget.

Bricks without straw
Bricks without straw
is how we came over

So we took what little we were given
a piece of cloth, a pig's intestine, a plot of land,
  a word, a verse, a memory

a corpse

and waved our spirit-wand over the whole lot,
pieces and things and children and spouses and brothers and sisters
  and cousins and friends

And up jumped whole cloth, buildings
wrestled up from nothing but dirt
schools and funeral societies and banks and insurance companies
and picket fence homes and whole new church denominations
where none had been
and deacons and ushers and choirs and songs to remember our story . . .

A story made from bricks
without straw
but with much blood prayer tears sweat
and groanings that cannot be uttered.

The Summit's strategy is not to bemoan the condition of African Americans. Rather, it is to build on a legacy of African American Christian leadership, paying special attention to its history of strength, integrity, intellect, and honor in the face of impossible circumstances.

The stories of successful African American evangelical ministries abound. These stories are all but hidden from the mainstream media, which seems to revel in painting a different picture—a picture of lack and dysfunction. But before we draw our conclusions, let's take a step back. This first chapter, "The Narrative," will help us do that.

PART ONE: LIVING EPISTLES

Examples of Effective Leadership Succession

Ye are our epistle
written in our hearts,
known and read of all men.
~2 Cor. 3:2 KJV

Chapter 1

THE NARRATIVE: HOW WE GOT HERE

Matt Parker

The sweeping history of African American development finds its genesis in Africa and then moves across the Atlantic to the Americas, where twists and turns of circumstances and God's providence combine to create a scenario that includes the entire sweep of the human drama, from the tragedy of broken families to the quiet success of the extended family that served Black families so well—a concept deeply, almost genetically, rooted in the African village model of community.[1]

In August of 1619, Antony and Isabella Pedro, and other Africans, stepped ashore to what is now the state of Virginia. Thus began the history of Africans in America. Antony and Isabella were married, and around 1623 gave birth to the first African American child. They named him William, and baptized him under the auspices of the Church of England.

They came, these first African Americans, as indentured servants and enjoyed the same status of White indentured servants who sold their services for a stipulated number of years. The available evidence suggests that most of this first generation of African Americans worked out their terms of servitude and were freed.

But the history of African Americans reaches back much further, into

1. This chapter has been adapted from Matt Parker, *Teaching Our Men, Reaching Our Fathers* (Detroit: Parker Books, 2010)

the distant past when the great African Sudanese empires of Ghana, Akrum, Mali, Songhai, Meroe, Egypt, and Ethiopia flourished on the African continent. Lerone Bennett Jr., in his book *Before the Mayflower,* says:

"It is already reasonable, in fact, to believe that the African ancestors of African Americans were among the major benefactors of the human race. Blacks, or people who would be considered Blacks today, were among the first people to use tools, paint pictures, plant seeds, and worship gods. They founded empires and states. They made some of the critical discoveries and contributions that led to the modern world."

Despite stellar achievements in these and many other areas, the image of African Americans is negative and no one seems immune to that characterization. African American men are automatically suspect. They are often judged without a trial or jury—even before all the facts come to light.

There is very little awareness of the contributions that African Americans have made to science, medicine, history, and civilization. The National Task Force on African American Men and Boys, chaired by activist and former United Nations ambassador Andrew Young, published "Repairing the Breach," which identifies a number of African American males who have succeeded at all levels of American society. The report points to Dr. Benjamin Carson, a world authority on brain surgery and the first neurosurgeon to successfully separate Siamese twins joined at the head. It mentions Colin Powell, the first African American ever to head the post of chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff and later served as President George W. Bush's secretary of state. It heralds Garrett Morgan's invention of the traffic light, making urban travel safe for all. It was released a few years before the historic election of Barack Obama as the first African American president of the United States.

Not only that. As we celebrate the election of our first African American president, Barack Obama, we must also remember the late Shirley Chisholm, the first African American—man or woman—to run for president under the Democratic Party. Her courage paved the way.

There is the late U.S. Congresswoman Barbara Jordan, who spoke so eloquently about integrity during impeachment proceedings against President Richard Nixon; or the first African American female secretary of state, Condoleezza Rice. Not to mention the named and unnamed church mothers who teach young women, chastise the boys to mind their manners, and command respect from everyone because of their own above-reproach reputations.

One common thread unites our many past and present Black heroes: They all had to overcome tremendous obstacles and take on singularly difficult challenges. We must continue to remind America, African American people in particular, and the world that one of the great characteristics of African Americans is the ability to overcome all challenges—past, present, and future.

At one time, the African American church was a strong, pervasive, and revered institution. Young people who had no problem stealing, cheating, and purse snatching wouldn't dare pursue their illegal activities in the proximity of a church. While they might curse and fight in school, they would be careful to be polite to the preachers, the deacons, and the "mothers" in the church.

All that has changed drastically. There are reasons for this, and there are ways to address the problem. African American churches of today have a great opportunity for leadership in the spiritual, social, political, and economic development of African Americans.

The African American church movement started in the late 1770s with the founding of the first churches in South Carolina, Virginia, Philadelphia, Georgia, and New York. Churches were founded by free men and women as well as those who remained enslaved. The church was the place where leadership was taught and where people benefited from economic, political, and social education in addition to being taught the Word of God. God's Word was made relevant to the African American condition at the time. Most of our historical leaders came from the African American church. Throughout history, these churches provided social, political, economic, and spiritual leadership for many in the African American community.

It was a necessary development. After all, the Christian church established during the two hundred-plus years of African enslavement in this country was an overtly all-White, or all-European, institution with little or no room for persons of color. African Americans were not welcome. In fact, it may surprise some to learn that the legal prohibition against Blacks and Whites marrying was overturned only well into the civil rights movement, in 1967 by the U.S. Supreme Court in the *Loving v. Virginia* decision. At the time, sixteen states still had that marriage prohibition on their books.

In fact, evangelical churches on the whole were diametrically opposed to any efforts to address the issue of racial equality from its first stirrings during the U.S.-sanctioned enslavement of Blacks to the civil rights movement that began in the 1950s. It has been established that members of many

White evangelical churches were actually also Ku Klux Klan members, and that pastors held the status quo of overt and covert racism even when the very concept became less and less popular as national policy.

Without the intervention of the church to mount a strong faith-based response to the sin of racism, racism was free to do its damage. And damage it did, with an overrepresentation of drugs in African American communities, an overrepresentation of poor educational conditions, and an underrepresentation of financial investment in increasingly Black cities.

The Black church held firm, working against the odds to anchor communities and remain relevant. Unfortunately, the damage had been done and the economic and social devastation contributed to a decline in family stability and a rise in drug use, health disparities, and poverty. But numbers don't tell the whole story. The real story is that African Americans continued to strive and excel, even in the most dire of circumstances. Instead of focusing on the reasons for our failure, why not focus on the factors in our success, and then build on that?

Statistics can distort. Many of you have heard it repeated that "There are more African American men in prison than in college." Now it is true that African American men are overrepresented in the criminal justice system, and that is a reality that must be addressed. But the statistical data simply no longer bears out that statement. In 2009, 919,000 Black men were enrolled in college, and 827,000 Black men were in prison. Add to the fact that we are comparing apples and oranges, because most college students are in their twenties. If we were to do a more realistic comparison, we would compare the number of Black men in their twenties in college to the number of Black men in their twenties in prison—which would make the gap even wider. And how many of you knew that the number of Black men in prison is actually on the decline, as is the number of unwed pregnancies in the African American community? We and the mainstream are so much quicker to trumpet our bad news than our good news.

The twenty-first century has ushered in a revival in many of our African American churches. These churches believe that they can achieve something that no other institution or program has yet been able to do: create a nurturing, learning, healing place for African American men, women and families. In so doing, churches can provide the self-respect, confidence, and spiritual grounding that we must have to build our communities and our world.