

Free At Last?: The Gospel in the African-American Experience

Carl F. Ellis Jr.

PRA663A – Leadership in Cross-Cultural: Foundations

Martin Edward Lee, January 7, 2020

Carl Ellis, the author, acknowledges God's hand in the midst of the African American's suffering. God was shaping His people to be a light and to do great things. Ellis writes with a great sense of confidence and hope in God. At the same time, he doesn't not pull any punches. He acknowledges the hardships for what they are. He writes, "we have had a four-hundred-year collective trauma from which we have yet to fully recover."¹ Ellis re-visits a question that plagues many people of any background, "What is this 'promised land' like?" Who is going to lead us there? How can we get there from here?"² He decries an apparent lack of leadership in the black community. The leaders of the 60s have "been assassinated or gone off into relative obscurity...[or] have been co-opted by the establishment."³

Ellis frames the problem of the African American experience beginning with "Christianity." He notes, Frederick Douglass's rejected Christianity but did so uniquely. Douglass said, "Between Christianity of this land, and the Christianity of Christ, I recognize the widest possible difference – so wide, that to receive the one as good, pure, and holy, is of necessity to reject the other as bad, corrupt, and wicked."⁴ Ellis believes the black leaders simply abandoned Christianity altogether to their detriment and "filled the void" with secularism and humanism.⁵ He links much of the sense of being leaderless in the black community to this failure of faith. He claims getting in touch with the past necessitates "a God-centered view of the world."⁶ He emphasizes the need for the African American community to develop a "collective

¹ Ellis, Carl F. Jr., "Free at Last? The Gospel in the African-American Experience," (Intervarsity Press, Downers Grove, Illinois, 1996.), 14.

² Ibid.

³ Ibid., 15.

⁴ Ibid, 20.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ibid., 24.

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consciousness”. He asserts, “If our underlying basic commitment is that we are not involved in God’s world, then our entire culture will end up with a distorted view of reality. Godlessness will affect every area of life, and this godlessness will be a kind of cultural death.”⁷

Ellis postulates there are two things that make a religion an ethnic religion, “First, it must arise out of the historical experience of a people and take on itself their cultural identity. Second, its assumptions must be the basic commitment of the vast majority of that people.”⁸ He concludes Christianity is not a “white” religion but rather it goes back to the middle east, to the Hebrews, and ultimately back to Adam and Eve. He strongly asserts, “Thus Christianity is disqualified as the ‘White man’s religion’ in the first sense, for its roots precede the White race by a long shot.”⁹ He asserts, “The Black militants turned away from a valid expression of the universal Word of God...They turned to secular humanism, a little ‘white’ lie in the name of Black truth.”¹⁰ Ellis places much weight on the idea of a “black theology” juxtaposed to “the White man’s religion” and the “Black version of the White man’s religion, and the “Arab ethnic religion”.¹¹ He claims that the African-American Christian experience is anchored by “the Black consciousness” which is a gift from God.¹²

Ellis calls for what he refers to as “the Joshua generation of leaders” to rise up and lead into the future “by an ongoing process of education and realization”.¹³ He calls for education on who the African-American Christians are and who they should be, and renewed revitalization of

⁷ Ibid., 26.

⁸ Ibid., 142.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Ibid., 152 – 153.

¹¹ Ibid., 154.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Ibid., 196.

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the core institutions: Family life, Body life, Economic development, Political cohesion.¹⁴ For Ellis the educational component is key. First, he observes one the biggest problems are a sense of historical isolation, or what he calls “rootlessness”.¹⁵ The current generation is caught up in the now and have lost connectivity with the actions of the prior generation. This characteristic may be deeply rooted (epidemic) in the African American experience and may only become more pervasive over time. Most African Americans have no idea about their ancestry beyond what they can trace to the shores of American, hardly beyond. And sadly, for many there is no ability to trace back even one or two generations. This was my case until I took the Ancestry DNA test and was able to confirm who my African American father was and which African countries our ancestry originated. The Gospel transcends such hopeless rootlessness and immediately connects one, of any race, to the family of God. For the sake of this “Joshua generation of leaders” Ellis recommends investing “in alternative models of schooling.”¹⁶ He claims, “The public school system, as it stands, reeks with humanism.”¹⁷ Additionally he asserts, “Not only that, but it functions primarily not to educate or inform, but to conform our youth to a secular value system that serves only the interests of the elite who call the educational shots.”¹⁸ The author is writing in 1996, some 24 years ago. Charter schools have since become a real viability. I am aware the Rosa J. Young Foundation, of the LCMS, is seeking to establish such alternative educational opportunities. I wonder if any of Carl F. Ellis Jr.’s advice will be utilized to promote the kind of learning necessary to better support the African-American Christian experience inside the Lutheran church?

¹⁴ Ibid., 197 – 203.

¹⁵ Ibid., 197.

¹⁶ Ibid., 198.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Ibid.