“THE BLACK COMMUNITY IS IN TROUBLE.”
— ANTHONY B. BRADLEY

Continuing the renowned “Cosby Conversation” first started in 2007 by Bill Cosby and Dr. Alvin Poussaint, Anthony Bradley has assembled a team of pastors, scholars, and leaders to address specific issues within the black community.

Covering topics such as the black family, hip-hop, masculinity, and the prosperity gospel, this book will open your eyes to the serious challenges facing the black church today. It will leave you with hope, however, as each contributor brings the conversation back to the Bible and the gospel as the only source of true, enduring change.

“Dr. Bradley consistently brings poignant insights into the Christian, black, and hip-hop communities. Here he gives worldview-shifting challenges and profound, timeless solutions. I’m grateful to have this book in my hands.”

LECRAE MOORE, hip-hop artist

“Candid, convicting, and balanced.”

ERIC C. REDMOND, author, Where Are All the Brothers?

“Dr. Bradley’s call for psychological and spiritual wholeness is a daring, needed charge to our ethnic communities. It is my hope that the thorough brand of freedom he envisions will accompany the resurgence of the gospel in our cities and families.”

JASON WRIGHT, 7-year NFL veteran

ANTHONY B. BRADLEY (PhD, Westminster Theological Seminary) is associate professor of theology and ethics at the King’s College, New York. He is also research fellow at the Acton Institute for the Study of Religion and Liberty and the author of Liberating Black Theology.
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LIST OF CONTRIBUTORS

Vincent Bacote is Associate Professor of Theology and Director of the Center for Applied Christian Ethics at Wheaton College in Wheaton, Illinois. He earned a PhD from Drew University, an MPhil from Drew University, an MDiv from Trinity Evangelical Divinity School, and a BS in biology from The Citadel. He is the author of *The Spirit in Public Theology: Appropriating the Legacy of Abraham Kuyper.*

Anthony B. Bradley is Associate Professor of Theology and Ethics at the King’s College, New York City, and a Research Fellow at the Acton Institute for the Study of Religion and Liberty. He holds a PhD from Westminster Theological Seminary, an MDiv from Covenant Theological Seminary, and a BS in biological sciences from Clemson University. Bradley is the author of *Liberating Black Theology: The Bible and the Black Experience in America* and *Black and Tired: Essays on Race, Politics, Culture, and International Development.*

Howard Brown is pastor of Christ Central Church in Charlotte, North Carolina. Rev. Brown holds an MDiv from Covenant Theological Seminary and a BA in English from Clemson University.

Anthony Carter is lead pastor of East Point Church in East Point, Georgia. Rev. Carter received an MA in biblical studies at Reformed Theological Seminary and a BA from Atlanta Christian College. He is the author of several books including *On Being Black and Reformed: A New Look at the African-American Christian Experience* and is the general editor of *Experiencing the Truth: Bringing the Reformation to the African-American Church* and *Glory Road: The Journeys of 10 African-Americans into Reformed Christianity.*
Bruce Fields is Associate Professor of Biblical and Systematic Theology at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School in Deerfield, Illinois. He earned a PhD in New Testament at Marquette University, an MDiv from Trinity Evangelical Divinity School, a ThM in systematic theology from Trinity Evangelical Divinity School, and a BA in biology from the University of Pennsylvania. He is the author of *Black Theology: 3 Crucial Questions for the Evangelical Church*.

Ken Jones is the pastor of Glendale Baptist Church in Miami, Florida, and co-host of the nationally syndicated radio program *White Horse Inn*. Rev. Jones has contributed essays in *Experiencing the Truth* and *Glory Road*, both published by Crossway. He has also contributed to *Tabletalk* magazine and is a frequent conference speaker.

Lance Lewis is pastor of Christ Liberation Fellowship in Philadelphia. Rev. Lewis holds an MDiv from Chesapeake Theological Seminary and a BA in English from Temple University.

Eric M. Mason is cofounder and lead pastor of Epiphany Fellowship in Philadelphia. Mason received a DMin from Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary and a ThM from Dallas Theological Seminary.

Craig Mitchell is Associate Professor of Ethics, Chair of the Ethics Department, and Associate Director of the Richard Land Center for Cultural Engagement, Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary, Fort Worth, Tx. He has a PhD in Christian ethics from Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary, an MDiv from Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary, an MA in management information systems from West Coast University, an MS in engineering management from West Coast University and in electrical engineering from Naval Postgraduate School, and a BS in electronic engineering technology from Savannah State College. He is the author of *Charts for Philosophies and Philosophers* and *Charts of Christian Ethics*.

Ralph C. Watkins is Associate Professor of Evangelism and Church Growth, Columbia Theological Seminary, Decatur, GA.
He earned a PhD from the University of Pittsburgh, a DMin from Pittsburgh Theological Seminary, an MA from the University of Dubuque Theological Seminary, and a BA from California State University at Sacramento. He is author of *The Gospel Remix: Reaching the Hip Hop Generation, I Ain't Afraid to Speak My Mind, From Jay-Z to Jesus: Reaching and Teaching Young Adults in the Black Church* (coauthored with Benjamin Stephens), and *Hip Hop Redemption: Finding God in the Music and the Message*. 
The black community is in trouble. Some might even call it a crisis. This book is a continuation of the conversation started by Bill Cosby and Alvin Poussaint, MD, two sages in the black community, in the 2007 book *Come On People: On the Path from Victims to Victor*ors. Cosby and Poussaint did not mince words in speaking about the state of black men and the social pathologies wreaking havoc in low-income black neighborhoods, including children not being parented well, children suffering in substandard public education, media that glory in the dehumanization of women and men, unhealthy eating habits, black-on-black violence, and lack of economic empowerment. *Come on People* was an honest challenge for blacks from all walks of life to pay attention to a group of Americans that have been ignored by many, including the black middle class. Taking this even further, we believe that we will not make progress until we hear from black religious leaders who hold the work and person of Christ in high esteem.

Historically the black church has been a place of spiritual formation and cultural renewal in the black communities. Because the church remains relevant today, that tradition must continue because people need help and hope. The election of Barack Obama to the presidency of the United States was a wonderful example of social progress but can only offer limited hope to address the deeply differentiated social and spiritual issues that have many black communities in America in a new kind of oppression. We need to hear from the Lord. We have assembled some of the most dynamic and progressive black pastors and theologians in America to move this conversation forward because we believe the church must lead in initiating the type of renewal needed to rightly answer the deep questions about solutions to the crisis.
18  Preface

In chapter 1 Vincent Bacote sets the stage for this new movement by addressing the issue of African-American identity and the victim mentality that Cosby and Poussaint discuss in their book. Bacote sets the dynamic realities of personhood and dignity in a theological framework that seeks to establish the best framework for understanding the human person in light of God’s intention for human life. In chapter 2 Bruce Fields provides a powerful vision for strengthening the black family to cast a vision and offer hope for redeeming the most important social institution in black communities. Without strong black families there is not much hope for sustainable change. Howard Brown, in chapter 3, writes forthrightly about sex and sexuality in the black community. Some of the issues Cosby and Poussaint addressed reveal the consequences of divorcing sexuality from the covenant of marriage.

Is there anything redeemable about hip-hop? Can we learn anything from the genre that might help us know how to help people? These questions and more will be addressed in chapter 4 by Ralph Watkins. The celebration of misogyny, violence, and materialism in popular hip-hop provides an easy target for criticism. Cosby and Poussaint point out many of the negative aspects of the music. What may not be so clear, however, is that hip-hop provides signals of pain and suffering that we certainly do not want to miss if we want to accurately apply the gospel to the sin and brokenness experienced in daily life for many African-Americans. Additionally, popular hip-hop presents an image of what it means to be a black male in America that the gospel needs to address. Eric Mason, in chapter 5, “keeps it real” by challenging the distorted vision of black masculinity in our culture and provides a way forward in light of the gospel. The first five chapters are crucial for providing a gospel-driven framework to reconstruct a black identity with meaning and purpose that is in harmony with the realization of the good purposes for human life.

Does the church have any role to play in healing the black community? Since the time of American slavery black churches in
America served as the cement that kept communities and families together within the context of oppression. The church has a central mission to provide the spiritual formation necessary to ignite virtuous social mores in communities and has been doing so for centuries. Lance Lewis, in chapter 6, discusses the redemptive power that local churches can have in helping communities wrestle with complicated issues. In chapter 7, using Isaiah 61:1–4, I introduce readers to a vision of gospel transformation that takes broken people on a journey to liberation with a life redirected to the kingdom in order to become victors and agents of mercy, justice, and faithfulness to the priorities of the mission of God. In chapter 8 Anthony Carter, with great clarity and insight, addresses the need for biblical orthodoxy in black churches if the church intends to be what it always has been for black people and the world: the central destination for renewal.

One of the greatest impediments to the healthy mission of the black church has been the rise of the prosperity gospel. The prosperity gospel has devastated the lives of many people who need help from God by distorting the core message of the gospel. In chapter 9 Ken Jones discusses the prosperity gospel in historical context and offers important biblical and theological corrections to a movement that has exploded in black communities all over America. We conclude the book by introducing readers to Michael Eric Dyson, an ordained Baptist minister and professor of sociology at Georgetown University. Dyson has been one of the most outspoken academic critics of Bill Cosby’s vision to move African-Americans away from a victim mentality to one of personal empowerment. The author of sixteen books to date, with more surely to come, Dyson has emerged as a leading voice on helping the black community, often wedding biblical themes with themes in popular hip-hop. In chapter 10 Craig Mitchell provides an introduction to Dyson for readers and provides a theological evaluation of Dyson to put him in biblical perspective.

It is my hope that this book will be read critically and will create new questions for a national dialogue about the black church and her connection to the black community as we move forward.
and the other contributors to this book are all independent thinkers from multiple traditions. While we do not agree on specific prescriptions for change in all areas, we do share a central conviction that there needs to be a resurgence of black religious leadership to properly address the issues that plague the community and every individual person in it. We hope this will be the first step in rallying black religious leaders to lock arms and provide the moral voice that our communities and the world desperately need. There is much work to do, and there is no time to waste. It’s time to “get real.”

Anthony B. Bradley
The King’s College
“Our playgrounds have become battlegrounds. Our streets have become cemeteries. Our schools have become places to mourn the ones we’ve lost.” Those were the words of then Senator Barack Obama in July 2007 after the particularly brutal murder of sixteen-year-old Blair Holt in the city of Chicago. And as sad and shocking as that was, it was not the last murder of a young black person by his peers that caused the collective African-American community to reflect on where we are and to wonder what’s going on.

Within a year of President Obama’s improbable election, Derrion Albert was brutally and mercilessly beaten to death while on his way home from school in the very same city where President-elect Obama gave his historical acceptance speech. How could this happen? How is it that over fifty years after *Brown v. Board of Education* and in the wake of the first elected African-American president of our country that still too often our playgrounds have become battlegrounds, streets have become cemeteries, and schools have become places to mourn the ones we’ve lost?

**THE PROBLEM**

There is much talk, discussion, musing, and writing about what African-Americans should do now. What steps ought we to take to finally address and reverse the social ills and pathologies that have plagued and worked against us? And the position and place of the black church is never far from these discussions. Most of those who discuss these things believe that the church has some role to play,
but that role is not one of cultural transformation. Instead, it is said, the church is relegated to the role of volunteer social service agency. We are to be among those who step in and assist our communities in coping with the pathologies and who are part of the glue that holds our neighborhoods together. Rarely, if ever, are we asked to take a peek at the root causes of those pathologies and speak to them. And even more rarely are we asked to encourage our people to lift their gaze from this world to the world to come. We want the church to be the prophetic voice in our community as long as that voice is aimed at those outside the church who oppress us or those within it who oppose us. Even when we call our people to behave rightly, we are not supposed to tie it to the obedience we owe to our Creator but rather should call for it because behaving rightly makes better social sense than behaving irresponsibly.

Likewise, we want the church to be the visionary of our people as long as that vision is confined to our apprehension of the American dream and leaves out any kind of pie-in-the-sky talk of some far-off new heaven and earth. We want our pie now, and we intend to enjoy it however we please.

Most of us know how we came to view the church this way. The trauma of perpetual ethnic enslavement and subsequent marginalization to barely second-class citizenry created a profound and lasting impression on the psyche, emotions, and souls of black folks. There is no need to bore you with statistics or to attempt to shock you with actual horror stories. We all know the stats and have heard the stories. Against the backdrop of incredible dehumanization, the black church stood as the one foundational rock of black humanity.

As my brother Carl Ellis Jr. says, “You may have worked as a janitor and been called john and ‘boy’ all week long, but in church you were Deacon Jones.” Black people and the black community came to rely on the church as the main agent and actor in our ongoing quest to be simply regarded as people created in God’s image and thus owed a measure of dignity, respect, kindness, and justice.

The church was viewed with respect as a community of people
who looked out for the interests of black people. Moreover, though she did not do it perfectly, the church stood as an example of the life of godliness that those created in God’s image were to embody. The black church was also instrumental in the civil rights struggle. Led by the black church, the black community sustained a multi-decade, peaceful revolution that succeeded in ending entrenched, legalized segregation and discrimination. In effect the church breached the walls of a century of accepted social practice and effectively opened a crack in the door of opportunity for subsequent generations of black folks.

But a crack is about all we could expect the church to muster. It would be up to the gatekeepers of American opportunity and social mobility to open the door wide to genuine ethnic unity and integration, a door they simply were not prepared to open. Thus, while black folks could now legally ride in the front of the bus, it was more often than not still a trip to nowhere. The North and Midwest had long proved that African-Americans could effectively be shut out of the opportunities afforded to the newest European immigrant to America, and this without the need for overt Jim Crow laws. Consequently, as we slid into the 1970s we black folks found ourselves in a situation in which we were tolerated but not welcome. We were admitted but not necessarily accepted. Though the government declared war on poverty, it was more like a proxy war than an actual effort to permanently lift black people out of poverty. So while the government continued to promote social and fiscal policies that enabled wealth to concentrate in the country’s new suburban enclaves, black people and the cities in which they lived had to settle for leftover handouts of stale government cheese, butter, and hope. That was the first unforeseen consequence of the civil rights struggle that the African-American community was unprepared to handle. How do you fight against an enemy that smiles in your face and tells you all is well but still holds tightly the reins of power, wealth, and opportunity and then blames you for not getting with the program?
This is the situation in which black people and the black church found themselves throughout the seventies and into Reagan’s eighties. And it is that circumstance that may have contributed directly to the second consequence of the civil rights movement. Langston Hughes once wrote:

What happens to a dream deferred?  
Does it dry up  
like a raisin in the sun?  
Or fester like a sore—  
And then run?  
Does it stink like rotten meat?  
Or crust and sugar over—  
like a syrupy sweet?  
Maybe it just sags  
like a heavy load.  
Or does it explode?¹

I would say that by the time the black community limped into the mid-to-late eighties, our dreams for an integrated society in which we would be authentically judged by the content of our character exploded, sending the shrapnel of hopelessness and despair deep into our communities. Looking at many African-American communities in 1988 would cause one to genuinely wonder if we were better off in 1958. This was the atmosphere within black America when Bill Cosby addressed the NAACP on the fiftieth anniversary of Brown v. Board of Education in Constitution Hall in Washington, DC on May 17, 2004 and declared, “What . . . good is Brown v. Board of Education if nobody wants it?”

What had happened, and how did things so quickly deteriorate in the ways we African-Americans thought of ourselves, our challenges, this world, and our place within it? At some point, and I cannot say exactly when, a segment of our community accepted, embraced, promoted, and glorified the very dehumanization against which the civil rights movement fought so long and so

bravely. In so doing, they effectively redefined blackness in terms of nihilism, perpetual victimization, and underachievement. This idea of blackness was recorded, packaged, marketed, and then sold to the masses as the only blackness that mattered. And if you question whether this became the entrenched notion of modern blackness, just ask yourself who most African-Americans thought was more authentically black in the beginning of 2006—Barack Obama or 50 Cent?

By the time the Democrats finally regained the White House in the early nineties, the African-American community (and the black church) found itself in a war with two fronts. On one side America was still a racialized (though not racist) society in that the economic, social, psychological, and emotional benefits of the country were still weighted toward the dominant ethnicity. On the other side a significant aspect of the greater black community had deteriorated to the point where one wondered if African-Americans longed to remain in the permanent underclass as much as their forebears had longed to end segregation and take their place in America. And it was not as if this new black attitude was just confined to those with a dependent income level. In his series of essays entitled *What’s Going On*, author Nathan McCall wrote about this attitude in the chapter “Faking the Funk: The Black Middle Class of Prince Georges County.” McCall noted how the children of well-educated, middle- and upper-class black people lustily gobbled up the culture of underachievement, negativity, disrespect, and instant gratification.

The black church now finds itself in a two-front war with no real idea of how to engage either front. But *could* the church have foreseen this turn of attitude among black folks? Black people had lived closely enough among whites to see whites’ private depravity up close and personal. We knew firsthand that wealth, power, opportunity, and social status does not prevent people from acting on their all-too-human desires. As Rev. Howard Brown says, “If Ward and June really had it together in the 50s, their children
wouldn’t have been wilding out at Woodstock in the 60s.” We saw and therefore could have known that just because you could hide immorality behind stately homes, superior education, growing economies, and well-thought-out theology articulated in well-run churches doesn’t mean that immorality is not present. We might have seen that the white evangelical church had failed its community, with disastrous consequences. And I’m not just referring to the catastrophic failure of evangelical theology to impact the way that the evangelical church and community responded to a society built upon and determined to maintain white supremacy. It was their innate belief that the blessings of their society must mean that God was on their side that led them to turn a blind eye to the gross immorality that lived within their homes, represented their interests in the halls of Congress, and worshiped with them on Sunday mornings. How did the evangelical church fail the dominant society? They did so by tribalizing the living God.

**THE SOLUTION**

What do I mean by *tribalizing God*? To tribalize God is to preach, teach, and live as though He exists to promote the narrow interest of a particular group, culture, or country. All cultures do this to some extent or another, which is why it is important for the black church to resist the urge to do so now. Cultures that tribalize God always fail to take Him seriously enough to deal with their own sin issues. This helps answer the question of how Reformed churches in particular could on the one hand affirm that God’s choice to save individuals has nothing to do with any positive traits or characteristics arising from those individuals while on the other hand denying Communion to confessing believers solely on the basis of skin color. They, like their evangelical brethren, gave in to a form of the social gospel by putting the sinful social desires of their culture above the godly eternal truths of Scripture. They failed by not confronting and challenging their communities to embrace Christ authentically and live out the implications of His gospel fully. They were willing
to enjoy the privileges that God’s sovereignty brought them without ever reflecting on the reason behind those blessings. They muted God and relegated Him to the status of divine mascot.

As I stated previously, that is a perfectly understandable way for countries, cultures, and peoples to view God. Despite the radical secularism of the West most of the world is still deeply religious, with much of that religious effort aimed at securing the favor of a particular deity for the purpose of enjoying the advantages of wealth, opportunity, security, and wholeness in the here and now. The problem when you encounter the God of Scripture, however, is that He has His own agenda and refuses to be tribalized. He will not be used or prostituted to carry out the will of a particular country or people group. He cannot be tamed, will not be bribed, would never allow Himself to be bought, and is so utterly complete and sufficient within Himself that He really does not need any of us for anything. Any country or people group that dares view Him as their own private tribal warrior who exists mainly to do their bidding and deliver the goods runs the risk of watching their country or people group crumble in successive cycles of destructive depravity even as they rise to the top of the social food chain.

The challenge for the twenty-first-century black church is that it is exactly what our community would expect of us. They would expect the church to put all of its resources, energy, and effort into facilitating our long climb from the bottom of the well. The danger for the black church is that we could do just that. We could spend the next few decades completely refocusing our mission, pour out of our buildings and into our communities, and tackle all the issues and pathologies that have plagued us since being brought to these shores from Africa. Please do not misunderstand me. The church should be active in addressing the issues with which our people struggle. But if all we do is join the chorus to relieve our distress, then at most we might succeed in reforming our people and communities. However, the subject of this chapter is transforming our communities and culture. And we will not effectively work toward
community and cultural transformation if all we settle for is our place at the table and our slice of the American pie.

What then ought the church to do and teach so that by God’s grace and power we might see genuine community and cultural transformation? What message should we deliver to our people so that by His grace we might have a godly effect not only on our communities but also on America and perhaps on the world itself? We must cultivate a desire for a satisfaction greater than the life of prosperity, comfort, and convenience in the American dream, be devoted to a mission more significant and permanent than lifting black folks from the underclass into the middle class, and determine to seek a place more beautiful, pristine, bountiful, and secure than the suburbs of our major cities.

Where do we begin? The same place Jesus did when He launched a ministry that would eventually transform a people who would transform the world. Jesus once spoke to a community of people very much like ours. Like us, these people lived as a subdominant group in a society in which the economic, political, emotional, and psychological benefits were weighted toward the dominant society. Like us, these people held to a strong belief in God, with the corresponding belief that God would come to their aid against their enemies. Like us, these people believed that the foreign dominant society was their chief obstacle to the life they really wanted to live, and like all subdominant people groups, they bore the scars of their second-class citizenship. And finally, like us, these people were eager to listen to anyone who gave any hint of once and for all dealing with the dominant society and bringing his people back to prominence. Jesus Christ was just such a person. Here was a man who spoke for God, stood apart from the existing religious establishment, and did authentic miracles to back up His new teaching. Surely He would be the one who would lead the great Jewish revolt that would once for all throw off Roman rule and reestablish King David’s dynasty. Or would He?

Eventually and to their own disappointment, the masses would
find that Jesus was much more radical and revolutionary than they bargained for. We too tend to think that Jesus was revolutionary because He sided with the poor and less powerful against the rich and powerful. But that is not the essence or even foundation of His teaching. What made Jesus’s teaching far more revolutionary than His people wanted then and we believe now is how that teaching prepared His followers to transform this world by focusing their minds and affections on the world to come.

To put it another way, Jesus taught that His followers should desire an otherworldly satisfaction, devote themselves to a mission more significant than lifting the temporary fortunes of their people, and determine to seek a place more beautiful, peaceful, just, secure, and loving than any place this world has to offer. In what ways did the Lord’s teaching do this, and how can it guide us in the quest to transform our communities? Let’s begin by considering an overview of the Sermon on the Mount, one of His most important messages. The first part of Jesus’s teaching in this message is commonly referred to as the Beatitudes. They are called that because each saying is preceded by a word translated “blessed.” What does it mean to be blessed in this sense? It means to enjoy God’s special, unmerited favor that ultimately results in having a strong desire to love, know, delight in, and enjoy God as an end in and of itself. In other words, those who are blessed in the biblical sense are blessed because above all things their chief desire is to enjoy the soul satisfaction that only comes through a worshiping relationship with God through Jesus Christ. In fact, the very first beatitude (“Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven,” Matthew 5:3) captures that sentiment perfectly. “The poor in spirit” are “blessed” because by God’s grace they have realized that only a worshiping relationship with the living God through Jesus Christ can deliver the authentic soul satisfaction everyone else craves. Our people and communities will never ultimately find satisfaction in an American dream no matter how much prosperity, comfort, and convenience it delivers. All of the money, social respect, and upward
mobility that we could ever gain will mean nothing apart from a thriving, worshipping relationship with our Creator.

How could a deep desire for a vital, worshiping relationship with God through Jesus Christ transform our people, culture, and communities? A look at the rest of the Beatitudes reveals that once an individual, family, community, and culture settles for nothing less than soul satisfaction, they are prepared to take on the world. Why? Because they have been freed from having to wear themselves out chasing the mirages of worldly satisfaction that are as fleeting as the summer’s morning mist. Such a person or culture is then able to seek satisfaction in pursuing the agenda of his or her Creator-King, which involves spreading His love, grace, holiness, peace, justice, hope, knowledge, righteousness, and worship for His glory and for the good of those impacted by His influence through His people.

We move from seeking satisfaction in something other than this world to devoting ourselves to a mission more significant than raising the temporary fortunes of our people. This is another place where Jesus is far more revolutionary and radical than we commonly think. The key to that mission is found in the beatitude in which Jesus declared that one of the characteristics of the blessed ones is their willingness to endure rejection and intolerance because of who He is and what He came to do. By the time we come to the end of Matthew’s Gospel we find that Jesus’s mission had nothing to do with raising the temporary fortunes of the Jewish people. Instead His mission involved living a sinless life, dying a sacrificial death, and physically rising again from the dead to satisfy fully God’s standard of righteousness and justice and so pay for the sins of God’s people. That is the springboard for the mission Jesus gave to His closest followers, which involves spreading godliness throughout the world by working to make active followers of Christ among people of all ethnicities.

This highlights the reality that Christ’s stated mission for His church is cultural transformation to the extent that whole people groups reorient their existence around obeying, worshiping, serv-
ing, loving, and delighting in the living God through a worshiping relationship with Jesus Christ. Embracing this mission will move us from the notion that maintaining the military, political, and economic dominance of the United States is somehow God’s will or must at least be a part of His plan. It also affirms the truth that it is not His express will to raise black folks into the middle income levels of American society so they can enjoy the “blessings of liberty.” Finally, we must grasp the truth that we can no longer regard the black church as our black church simply on the basis that it arose from our shared history and struggle, so that we now shape its content, mission, and direction for the temporal fortunes of our people. Rather, the black church is black to the extent that it calls black people to drop their African-American idols, take up the cross of Jesus Christ, and become active followers of Jesus Christ.

How will devotion to a mission more significant than lifting the temporary fortunes of our people transform our communities and culture? Once again let us look at some passages from the Beatitudes. After declaring that His followers would endure hardships, Jesus went on to say that those same followers would spend their lives exerting a positive godly impact on their communities and culture (see Matthew 5:13–16). They will do this by engaging in face-to-face, life-on-life contact with those in their communities and by using their talents, abilities, and acquired skills to build up the quality of life for those communities. They will do this in pursuit of their primary mission—to spread godliness throughout the world by declaring the gospel and making active followers of Jesus Christ.

We conclude our short homily on transformation by calling our people to long for a place more beautiful, peaceful, righteous, secure, and loving than any place this world has to offer. This is where the radical nature of Jesus’s teaching obliterates our pre-conceived notions about who He is and what He came to do. Take another look at the Sermon on the Mount, and note how many times Jesus refers to “the kingdom of heaven.” What does He mean by this phrase? The kingdom of heaven is the express, purposeful
rule and reign of the living God over all His creation for His own glory and our good. The essence of the kingdom is the worship of the King, Jesus Christ, and the pursuit and establishment of His rule, word, peace, gospel, and service. The kingdom has both a now and not yet dimension. It exists now in that Christ is the King, and His rule extends directly through His church, which consists of those who have been called by the Father, have been born again through the power of the Spirit, and have believed in the person and work of Jesus Christ for forgiveness of sin. The church is characterized by a group of people who orient their lives around the worship of God, an obedient walk before God, and an active witness for God. It exists not yet in that there is a point in time when Christ will rule from an actual new heaven and new earth. This rule will encompass every living being in the universe, will extend to every millimeter of the universe, and will never end. Moreover, the place of Christ’s rule (the new heaven and new earth) will be the most glorious, beautiful, peace-filled, holy, righteous, loving, secure, fulfilling place that humanity will ever experience. And this is the place that we as God’s church long for with all our heart and soul. Consequently we are determined to seek His rule in the here and now.

So how can a people so heavenly-minded possibly be of any earthly good?

Let us cast our eyes on a portion of the Sermon on the Mount, the last half of Matthew 6. It begins (v. 19) with Jesus’s declaring, “Do not lay up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy and where thieves break in and steal.” Why do people spend their lives doing all they can to get as much as they can in the here and now? They do so because from their perspective the here and now is all there is. But here is the more probing question: how can those bent on seeking the lifestyles of the rich and famous ever make a real and lasting difference in their communities? On the other hand, how can those determined to make His rule their primary concern affect their communities? They can because having been freed from chasing the mythical, middle-class mirage they
can reposition themselves to extend the blessings of the rule of the King to their communities and culture. In so doing they point those communities and culture to the return of the King and the glorious, eternal kingdom that will be the ultimate and permanent fulfillment of all their hope and longings.

THE WAY FORWARD

So where do we go from here? What must the church do to chart the way forward for our people?

We can begin by accepting that at root our challenges are theological and not sociological. That is not to say that our problems do not have sociological consequences—they do. What do I mean by saying that the root of our problem is theological? I mean that despite our outward religious veneer we are at war with God and are losing badly. We have disregarded His person, degraded His worship, disobeyed His Word, and dismissed His Son. And yes, I am talking about the church. Since the root of our problem is theological (that is, it lies in the way we misunderstand and thus misapprehend who He is and what He is about), we have no choice but to approach the solution from a theological vantage point. We can do this by making use of theological methods built on core biblical realities.

The first method that comes to mind is that of gospel-driven prayer. Gospel-driven prayer is prayer that prioritizes the expansion of the kingdom through the promotion of the gospel, which leads to individuals becoming active followers of Jesus Christ. It is prayer that joyfully embraces the blessed truth that we live for the glory of God. It’s the kind of prayer that fills the Scriptures. What ought we to pray? Taking our lead from Scripture, we should pray that God would give those who believe in Christ a gnawing craving to know Him as an end in and of itself. We could pray that God’s people would demonstrate that He is indeed and in fact more than enough to satisfy the longings of our souls. In line with that, we must pray that God’s people would experience the living water promised by
our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. We must pray that this experience of genuine spiritual life through Christ alone will flood our souls to the extent that we are permanently weaned away from the hollow trinkets of this world.

Why the emphasis on prayer? Isn’t prayer just a bit passive in light of our very real and present dangers? Prayer is essential because, among other things, prayer acknowledges that God and God alone can make the inward changes to the heart that result in lasting change. Engaging God in prayer admits that we lack the power, intellect, common sense, and will to make definitive lasting change. Prayer also accepts that God is at work in the world and in our people through Jesus Christ and by the power of the Holy Spirit for His glory. What do we mean by that? Simply that God acts so that once the goal is accomplished, we will recognize that it happened by His wisdom, power, goodness, grace, and knowledge for the express purpose of bringing individuals and groups of people to turn from sin and turn to Jesus Christ.

Our next weapon in this war for the souls of black folks is the preaching of the Word of God. Allow me to suggest a more scripturally consistent way for pastors to preach the Word and for participants to listen to the Word.

Few would argue with the rich preaching tradition of the black church. Fewer still would deny the emotional power of black preaching. My call is not for us to change the style of black preaching as much as it is to center our preaching squarely in the text of Scripture. This kind of preaching takes its cue from Scripture by allowing the text and themes of a particular passage to form the essence of the message. Pastors must pray and strive not necessarily to get a word from the Lord but to be empowered by the Spirit to faithfully preach the Word we have already been given. Our preaching must move from hit-or-miss topics aimed at speaking a word to our current life episodes to moving through the books and major themes of the Bible.

Why must our preaching change in this way?
Preaching through the books and major themes of the Bible is the most effective way to allow the text of Scripture to shape and form the essence of the message. This is crucial because faithful preaching through the texts of Scripture is the way we highlight and emphasize the character and nature of God as expressed fully in the person and work of Jesus Christ. And when the people of God hear and perceive the glory of God proclaimed through the tapestry of Scripture that culminates in the sinless life, sacrificial death, and glorious resurrection of Jesus Christ they get a vision of Him and not of themselves. They are lifted from an unhealthy concentration on their own issues and their desires to have their dreams fulfilled and are drawn to a godly focus on the grand vision of the living God, which is to fill His world with godliness. Seeing this vision as worked out in Scripture will move us to enlist in the mission of expanding His kingdom into our communities and culture. It is this vision of the glory of God, the saving gospel of His Son Jesus Christ, and the certain triumph of His eternal kingdom that we must take into our communities.

How are we to do this?

We take this message of cultural transformation into our communities by having the church cultivate a lifestyle of service for a lifetime. This simply means that every believer in Jesus Christ commits to setting aside regular time to engage his or her community by doing good using the abilities, skills, and talents he or she has. Followers of Christ view this aspect of their faith in much the same way they view attending regular worship, Bible study, choir practice, and men’s and women’s groups.

What steps can we take to begin to develop this dynamic? We have to begin by keeping the main thing the main thing. A heavenly mind-set is crucial if we wish to have churches that actually transform communities. The Sermon on the Mount is proof that those who are heavenly minded can make real and lasting change. They can do so because in Christ they’ve already been given all that brings authentic soul satisfaction, in Christ they’ve been given the greatest
of all callings and missions, and in Christ they’ve been given a place in an eternal kingdom that is far more beautiful, righteous, peaceful, glorious, and wonderful than any neighborhood no matter how nice and well-kept in suburban America.

So where do we get started? I’m going to use one example of how a church can focus on a particular group of people within its area and effectively serve them as a way of bringing tangible, long-term transformation to their community. In this hypothetical example a local church will focus its energy on high-school teenagers aged fourteen through eighteen. Their goal is to provide a holistic youth ministry that will result in increasing the graduation and college acceptance rates at the neighborhood high school.

To begin, the church takes a comprehensive assessment of its members’ talents, skills, acquired abilities, etc. This is not to be confused with their spiritual gifts. Instead these are abilities (e.g., painting) or acquired skills (e.g., carpentry). The goal is to generate a database of all available skills and talents that can be used to serve the youths and their families.

From there the church will reorganize how it spends its time and money. Concerning its time, they will have to transition one of their regular fellowship times (e.g., Wednesday evening Bible study) into a community focus night. This will be a time to work with the community teens and their families. The church can organize this night into a time of academic, social, cultural, and spiritual enrichment. For instance, the church could take that evening to prepare and serve a meal to the teens and their families followed by a presentation and discussion on various topics related to getting and staying in college. The church can also use this evening as a way of matching up community youths and their families with church members who will commit to praying for them on a regular basis.

Another way the church could serve community youths is by establishing a safe, organized place for teens to go immediately after school. The church could open its building to serve a healthy meal, provide a place to begin doing academic work, and even give indi-
vidual counseling to those students who just wish to talk. In keeping with its commitment to the community youths, the church will invest some of its financial resources into hiring a full-time youth director responsible for directly engaging the youth and coordinating the church’s ministry with those youths’ parents/guardians and the school.

Since it’s important to get as many members as possible involved in this ministry (assuming the church takes this on as its major community outreach), the congregation will also take a full survey of the parents/guardians of the youths it serves with the aim of having church members begin to use their skills to address the felt needs of these families.

This is just one possible way for a church to begin to effectively engage its community with a view to gospel-driven transformation. The overall goal is not confined to merely increasing the graduation rate of poor African-American students. The goal is to have the community see and closely observe a group of people who live for someone greater than themselves, serve a cause far more significant than helping their people obtain the middle-class mirage, and look forward to a place far more glorious than a 2,500-square-foot building in a quiet development in a cul-de-sac.
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JASON WRIGHT, 7-year NFL veteran

ANTHONY B. BRADLEY (PhD, Westminster Theological Seminary) is associate professor of theology and ethics at the King’s College, New York. He is also research fellow at the Acton Institute for the Study of Religion and Liberty and the author of Liberating Black Theology.