

CHAPTER 2

Encouragement

*Let us encourage one another—and all the more as you see the Day approaching.
(Hebrews 10:25, NIV)*

Joel's Reflection

Encouragement from the black church and its preachers provides one of the backdrops for my writing these reflections along with Bill. On a warm Texas September night in 1992, I resigned from one of the largest and most influential churches in the nation, First Baptist Church of Dallas. As a result of that decision, I moved from a huge home to a tiny apartment, from a large salary to no salary, from being on national television and radio to literally disappearing from the public eye. The story is too long and complicated, and its details are not helpful to relate here.¹ Suffice it to say that more than seventeen years ago, I thought I had lost everything—including the support of my denomination and many colleagues whom I had counted as friends...

But through it all, one minister kept calling me. The late Rev. Dr. E. K. Bailey, pastor of the Concord Missionary Baptist Church in Dallas, picked up his phone and called me again and again and again. He had no inherent reason to do so, other than the grace and bigness of his own heart. The conversations were always similar and warm: "God is not through with you. God did not give you what he gave you for you to stop. You must preach." Frankly, I thought my kind friend meant well but had no idea the reality I was living. Yet, those calls to my tiny apartment gave me the oxygen of hope. He helped me to breathe. I did not dare believe his words of encouragement, but they held a glimmer of promise and possibility. Here was a black preacher holding out a life preserver to a white preacher who felt forgotten by his own faith community and abandoned by many he had known. Dr. Bailey became a healing balm.

Bill's Reflection

When Joel and I began this journey together, he predicted I would find more encouragement than I had ever experienced in my career. I paid attention because Joel had many more years of relating to black men and women of God than I did. I had no idea of what Joel meant, but I certainly was eager to learn. Now, five years down the road, I know Joel to be a truth teller. My experience with black preachers has given me a level of encouragement way beyond anything I have ever known, and the foundation of that encouragement, I believe, is trust.

I was fortunate to be able to have a level of credibility among some black preachers, because Joel told them I was trustworthy. I could, of course, lose that trust, but I began on a high note. From the first meeting I ever had with a group of African American church leaders, until today, I have been overwhelmed with encouragement, not only professionally, but also personally.

I have pondered for years why this quality of gracious compassion and encouragement is so often found in black culture. My conclusion is that oppressed people have an abiding sense of empathy with those in life's low places. When people live out of grace themselves, they extend grace to others. Jesus said that the one who has been forgiven much, loves much, and I have seen also that those who have suffered much, encourage much.

RESPONSE FROM **Rev. Dr. Maurice Watson**

Joel Gregory and Bill Crouch have underscored an aspect of the African American religious experience that is a part of the woof and warp of our churches. Encouragement is a theme that is threaded throughout the fiber of black church life. Consequently, I was not surprised to read their reflections of the high level of encouragement they received through their interaction with African American Christians.

Historically, the African American church has always been a source of encouragement and hope for its people. Our forefathers and -mothers were able to survive the atrocities of slavery because of the role the black church played in encouraging them to believe that "a better day is coming." Their circumstances were unbearable, but the message of encouragement they heard through their church experience helped them to survive.

The African American culture has suffered great oppression, and with oppression came severe loss and lack of opportunity. But as a people, we have continued to maintain our generosity of spirit and have been willing to extend great grace and unending compassion to others.

This is the beauty of the African American church, incessantly giving and demonstrating God's love, joy, and hope to all who enter her doors. We are that forever tower of refuge and safe haven for our community. This amazing body of believers has proven time and time again that it is a forgiving institution that embraces those who have nowhere else to turn.

__Takeaways

1. Embrace those who have hit life's hardest places. You never know when they will reciprocate when you need the same encouragement and uplifting.\
2. Leave judgment to others and to God. There will always be plenty of judges, but few encouragers.
3. Commit to reaching out and lifting up someone different every day. You will be blessed in the process.

From [What We Love about the Black Church: Can We Get a Witness?](#)