

Moving Past the Music: An exploration of Reverend William Herbert Brewster's Opinions and Beliefs on Race Relations, Civil Rights, and Ethnological Uplift

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“I have been asked over and over why I stayed in Memphis. Somehow, although my work has been on a national scale, I have felt almost as if I have been nailed to the cross here. I have stayed in Memphis and the South because I thought I was most needed here” (Cortese).

These are the words of Reverend William Herbert Brewster, a devoted Memphian whose active life spanned the majority of the twentieth century, and whose influential career lasted almost as long. Reverend Brewster was a nationally renowned preacher, pastoring East Trigg Avenue Baptist Church in Memphis for more than fifty-five years, founding and directing the Brewster Theological Clinic in Memphis, and serving as one of the first radio ministers, *Black or White*, in the Midsouth. “His eloquence and fine command of the English language [attracted] one of the largest listening audiences in the country. . . thus reaching not less than a half million listeners per broadcast” (Williams). His adoring listeners opened their ears to his message, soaking in his melodious and mellow voice. They admired his charm and eloquence, even without being able to see his meticulous appearance. Behind those black-rimmed bifocals and under his stiff white shirt and sharp black tie was a heart beating to a musical rhythm. His largely self-educated mind created hundreds of celebrated gospel songs. It is said that if gospel music’s golden era spanned the years of 1945-1960, then Reverend William Herbert Brewster may have been the key architect of the modern gospel sound. During that period, there was not another gospel composer who matched his rate of production, popular success, or religious influence (Reagan, 233).

Despite his talent and recognition in these areas, Reverend Brewster was much more than a prolific preacher and gospel composer. He was considered by many writers and reporters to be “a human being first, then a man of God, and then one of the foremost gospel songwriters of our day” (Cortese). Reverend Brewster was a natural and influential leader for civil rights who was rooted deeply in Memphis throughout his long career, with his heart for civil rights motivating many of the gospel compositions and sermons for which he was famous. Authors have mentioned again and again Dr. Brewster’s political influence, yet they all too quickly move away from politics and into the more popular topics of Brewster's gospel music and preaching. This tendency seems to be due to the fact that Dr. Brewster’s civil rights leadership looked very different than most others’ who were nationally known at the time of the Civil Rights movement. Therefore, the richness of his views on race relations have not been thoroughly investigated, and it is time to explore this important aspect of Dr. Brewster’s life and influence in the Memphis community. With a biography, autobiography, interviews, memorials, newspaper clippings, and a collection of various original sermons and gospel song lyrics on hand, there is more than enough material available for scholars to better understand Brewster’s leadership role and the theology supporting it. In doing so, it is necessary to consider how Brewster’s approach to civil rights leadership relied on three particular contexts: his diligence as a black man in early 20th century and the opportunities that his fame as a gospel composer afforded him, his religious understandings and commitment as an African American Baptist minister, and his circumstances as a racial and religious leader in twentieth century Memphis.

### **Rev. Brewster’s Background**

First, it is imperative to be familiar with Reverend Brewster's background in order to understand his motivations and approach to leadership. William Herbert Brewster grew up in Fayette County, Tennessee, one of the poorest counties in the state. He lived on a plantation that grew peas, corn, and cotton, where, in Brewster's words, "there was the tenderest relations between white and colored" (Cortese). Brewster's natural optimism allowed him to see the good in the hearts of even the powerful on the plantation. Brewster remained keenly aware, however, that this harsh environment produced a slave mentality. His time on the plantation was in an agricultural environment based largely on sharecropping, the heartless solution used by most Southern farmers who owned land to employ African Americans after the Emancipation Proclamation. The living conditions for sharecroppers were little better than before Abraham Lincoln freed the slaves. From a young age, Brewster was aware of the deeply rooted racial bigotry of the South and recognized that the disease of racism was still thriving.

The plantation is also where Brewster's passion for gospel music blossomed. As a result of the influence of his family and his surroundings, this passion became a significant element of his life. Brewster recalls that his entire family was very musical. His father taught music to the families on the plantation, and at night, almost all of the families would sing together for entertainment and inspiration. Singing songs on the plantation was the most loved pastime for those who labored in the hot fields. Spending his childhood days outside in nature, little William Brewster heard the sounds of birds as songs sent from the heavens. He basked in the glory of his grandmother's beautiful singing voice. He was a boy who had a true affinity for music and who understood that music could inspire people.

In addition to his musical beginnings on the plantation, Brewster also recognized his ministerial talents and longings at a young age. He gave much of the credit to his grandparents,

whom he lived with on the backwoods plantation in West Tennessee. His grandparents were illiterate former slaves, but Brewster says that they possessed minds of great wisdom and God-given divine revelations that allowed for greatly developed imaginations. Brewster revealed that his grandparents “could, in the language of a great poet: see sermons in stone, books in running brooks, lessons in trees, and good in everything” (“Beams From Heaven”). Brewster claimed to have inherited somewhat of a photographic memory from his grandfather, enabling him to have a great knowledge of the Bible at an impressively early age. At approximately ten years old, Brewster had familiarized himself with many of the characters of the Bible and memorized entire chapters of scripture. At the age of seventeen, while still living on the plantation, William Brewster had the deep desire to follow God’s will for his life. In fact, one night, he prayed to God that He would provide him with a sign as to whether he should pursue the career of a pastor. He prayed a specific prayer, saying, “Lord, if you want me to go, wake me up at four o’clock.” After reading Brewster’s sermons and reflecting on the influence of his preaching, it is no surprise that he was suddenly awoken when the clock struck four the next morning. Pastoring to his congregation and investing all of his time in the church is what Brewster considered to be his calling by God. He reflected on his call to preach in his autobiography, saying, “That’s God doing what He will with His own. Everybody is not called like that” (Reagan, 189).

Brewster ventured out of Fayette County with his steadfast and enduring faith in God. With optimism, he left the world of sharecropping, where there was a slave mentality, but where music was a joyous outlet, and where God was a constant source of hope, ready to become a gospel composer and preacher. In Brewster’s sermon entitled, “Divine Alliance,” he states:

God touched the heart of John Brown, Abe Lincoln, Frederick Douglas, Phillip Brooks, Harriet Beecher Stowe, SoJourney Truth, William Lloyd Garrison, Thad

Stevens, and a Nation received a new birth of freedom and black men leaped from slavery's "auction block," to ascend the ladder of deliverance from slavery into the free men of earth. But the world still needs men whose hearts God has touched in Church and in State, in high places and low places.

**Rev. Brewster's Diligence As a Black Man in Early 20th Century Memphis and the Fame  
His Gospel Compositions and Baptist Ministry Afforded Him**

Having been a diligent worker on the plantation, Brewster carried this characteristic with him while pursuing his calling to preach and compose with true vigor. Fortunately for Brewster, nothing could deter him from reaching these goals - not even his circumstances as a black man in early twentieth century Memphis - for the circumstances required diligence. Brewster was one of the few African Americans breaking the mold by pursuing as much education as possible. He was doing so at a time when the African American community was facing social degradation in the southern city of Memphis (West). Though Memphis was becoming more of a metropolis, softening somewhat the white community's harsh hostility toward the African American population, the racial atmosphere remained quite similar, and at times worse, to that of the plantation. This was an atmosphere which required black subservience to whites in all situations, while white people still expected African Americans to smile submissively and meekly accept the lowest possible wages (Honey 19). Brewster made his way through these suppressive circumstances, not knowing that it would successfully lead to a bachelor of arts degree from Roger Williams College in Nashville and a doctor of divinity degree through the American Baptist Theological Seminary. Attending one Baptist institution after another, he craved more and more knowledge in his field. In his own words, "after that, it was a hop, skip, and jump

affair with me for what I wanted, and I was determined to get it whatever it cost. I applied myself. Whatever, wherever it was, if it were essential to being a prepared and equipped preacher, I wanted that” (Reagan 19). He was willing to do what was necessary to become the highest quality preacher he could be. Though born and raised as a Baptist, he even branched out and received Hebrew tutoring from a Jewish rabbi in Forrest City, Arkansas, which he considered to be a marvelous adventure (Reagan 191). He spoke of this experience himself in 1970, while being interviewed by James Cortese, a journalist for *The Commercial Appeal*. Beginning with a chuckle, he said, “I learned Hebrew under a rabbi in Forrest City, Arkansas . . . yes, Forrest City . . . I had a church there once . . . I have never allowed myself to become so Baptist that I could not be a Christian.” Not only did Brewster, as a black man, have enough passion and diligence to climb his way up the educational ladder that for so long had only belonged to the white population, but he proved to continue above and beyond expectations.

What was birthed from Brewster’s constant persistence through the circumstances of early twentieth century Memphis was a second home for Brewster - East Trigg Avenue Baptist Church - where he pastored from 1930 until his death in 1987. He spent twelve hour days in his church, accomplishing his work in a small upper room of this church, where he wrote hundreds of brilliant sermons and where his nationally acclaimed gospel music was born. Ms. Earlice Taylor, daughter of a dear friend of Brewster and a woman who was frequently in Dr. Brewster’s presence from a young age, revealed through beautiful and heartfelt stories the relationship that she had with Reverend Brewster. The majority of her memories took place in East Trigg Avenue Baptist. This church is where singers like Earlice belted out harmonious tunes amongst up and coming musical stars, while being instructed by Brewster himself. Brewster would compose songs all day long, with musicians such as Mrs. Queen C. Anderson, who was the inspiration for

much of his writing (West). Even the world-renowned Elvis Presley visited East Trigg Church, while he sat in the congregation, taking notes on the talent and beauty of Dr. Brewster's original gospel tunes. It was in this church that ground-breaking gospel compositions such as "Move On Up A Little Higher," "Surely, God is Able," "Lord I've Tried," "Climbing Higher and Higher," and "I'll Go" were birthed into the world of gospel music. Singers, whether they were famous or simply members of the church choir, would sit around the piano in that upstairs room all day long while Dr. Brewster scribbled out groundbreaking gospel lyrics onto the pieces of cardboard that his dress shirts had been wrapped in. Brewster would shout out friendly and endearing nicknames to the singers, giving them lyrics to sing to a certain tune. They sang his quickly handwritten lyrics, exposing the heartfelt depth of the words. This church was a center of inspiration. It was a classroom for teaching. It was a hub of talent that revolved around William Brewster. This church was where Dr. Brewster worked his magic.

The songs that Brewster composed and the sermons that he preached did not only gain him recognition within his church congregation at East Trigg Baptist. His gospel songs and sermons were heard by his congregation, then spread to millions of listeners through his radio programs that would air at ten p.m., providing him a true sense of fame and a national fan base. He gained even more recognition as a national leader among African American Baptists. He was the Corresponding Executive Secretary of the Education Board of the National Baptist Convention, Executive Secretary of the Tennessee Baptist Convention, Dean of the Baptist Minister's Conference of Memphis, and Dean of the Shelby County General Baptist Association. He was chosen to deliver the keynote sermon before the delegation of the National Baptist Convention on the Golden Hour of the 100th Anniversary Celebration in 1980. His sermon was acknowledged as one of the greatest in the 100 year history of the Convention. The President of

the Convention, Dr. J. H. Jackson, claimed that it was “a truly great sermon by one of the nation’s truly great preachers” (“Special Note, God’s High Voltage Power”). The fame awarded to him through his success in gospel composing and preaching provided him with a natural position of respected leadership in Memphis and beyond - especially due to the way in which he used his leadership - speaking racial uplift through lyrics and sermons.

### **Rev. Brewster’s Religious Understandings and Commitment as an African American Baptist Minister**

The most prominent Christian themes in Brewster’s religious understanding were ideas of the historical African American Church, which were significant elements of many African American Baptist ministers. The heritage of Black churches is based on a Black theology, which encompasses an overarching theme of liberation. The liberation tradition relies on African American theologians’ own interpretation of Old Testament stories, prophetic pronouncements, and New Testament apocalypse. This trifold breakdown in theology is extremely pertinent to the historical story of African American humanity and the more recent movement of racial uplift. In the Old Testament stories, there are references to a relatable situation of slavery and bondage. The most prominent and significant example is the Exodus narrative. The Exodus of the Hebrew people from Egypt illustrates a group of oppressed slaves who, when God recognized their affliction, were led from bondage. This Old Testament narrative portrays a God who recognizes and disapproves of suffering and oppression, and who is powerful and compassionate enough to rescue the Israelites from their enslavement (Flowers). The belief that slavery was at great odds with the volition and the character of God was subliminal to all slave religion. A significant aspect of this Exodus narrative is the idea within Black theology that the Israelites

symbolize the African American race, classifying the oppressed African Americans as God's chosen people. In Albert Cleage's *The Black Messiah*, he preaches to his fellow African Americans: "You know what God means. . . Understand that God is going to take care of us, the Black Nation, because we are God's chosen people" (54). This illustrates the key concept of Black theology that not only did God support the "Black Nation," but cared for them before the rest of humanity.

By means of Black Theology, not only could the African American race claim that God was on their side as the oppressed, but the prophetic pronouncements of the Old Testament provided dignity and a promise of coming deliverance - a promise for a better tomorrow. These pronouncements turn their theology from slave theology which is based on survival, to one of elevation (Wilmore). As the finale of Black theology, there is the New Testament apocalypse. From the past years of torturing slavery to the more recent years of relentless prejudice, the New Testament apocalypse provides a hopeful story of follow through and ultimate justice. The idea of positive completion in the lives of African Americans who experienced these painful truths of history was nearly nonexistent without the ideas of the Black Church.

The themes of Black theology of the historical African American church are extremely apparent and consistent within the works of Reverend Brewster. In sermon after sermon, there is a display of the remarkable knowledge, eloquence, and passion that Reverend Brewster demonstrated as a Baptist pastor in Memphis. His gospel songs are, of course, famous and quite telling of his eagerness to preach racial equality, for Brewster claimed that "a gospel song is a sermon set to music. It must have sentiment and doctrine, rhetorical beauty and splendor" (West). However, a bit of a blind eye has been turned to the importance of Reverend Brewster's many sermons, and there is something quite special about them. The fact that they were spoken

instead of sung to a gospel tune did not rob the message of beauty or splendor. Although the lyrics to his songs genuinely flowed through his hand and on to a page, his sermons were spoken, flowing from his own lips while standing tall at the front of his congregation every Sunday. He claimed the words of his sermons as his own, proudly preaching from the pulpit. Each masterpiece of a sermon is compelling, with a wide range of Biblical lessons over which any talented pastor in America may be preaching. However, there is a string of messages - frank acknowledgements of racial tension and messages of racial uplift- that all woven into the most passionate theme of Brewster's life - Christianity. This is what makes Reverend Brewster's extraordinary role in Memphis specific to him. It was at a unique intersection where his thoughts on civil rights, Baptist theology, eloquence and gospel composing crossed, and this made for a distinctive voice for civil rights during the movement and beyond.

Christianity was the anchor of Brewster's beliefs, including those that are race related. It is essential to note the words of racial uplift that Brewster felt confident using in his sermons. If we pay close attention to this, we will better understand his stance as a pastor during the Civil Rights movement. Brewster wrote thousands of sermons over his long career as a pastor. The majority of his sermons address typical Biblical themes, however, rarely is there a sermon lacking some sort of reference to the ideas of Black theology. Whether the sermon is fully devoted to the issue of slavery, or whether there is a single elegant sentence referring to the Exodus narrative and the hope of liberation from oppression, racial conflict and resolution are spoken to in nearly every sermon.

Although the fact that there is an element of racial uplift in each sermon holds much significance, let us first explore one of the few sermons that is solely devoted to the race issue. "Jesus Became a Magnificent Slave That All Men Might Be Free" is a sermon that is based on

two Biblical texts: Philippians 2:6 and Luke 22:27. The sermon in its entirety can be found as an attachment in the appendix of this paper. Brewster begins with his frank thoughts about slavery, stating, "Human slavery is the most humiliating and excruciating crushing condition of mundane existence. It is crushing because it means one man or individual owning another man's SOUL, BODY, and MIND." Brewster continues to brood on the brutality of slavery; however, where we may expect his attitude to be centered on blame, it is not. Dr. Brewster, when referencing racial tension or preaching racial uplift to his congregation, never simply accuses the white man, which would have been quite natural for him to do. He explains the scars of slavery and speaks of slavery's victims, saying, "slavery proved to be a four-edge sword. It wounded four ways: It wounded the hand of the slave master. It wounded the eyes of the world that saw it. It wounded the ears of those who heard the moans and the groans of the oppressed black people." This is significant and telling of Brewster's mindset - the fact that he did not simply focus on the suffering of the slaves or the slave masters' infliction of excruciating pain. In fact, the first edge of his "four-edge sword" is to remark on the damage the institution of slavery has done to the white slave master. It is clear that Brewster did not ignore the fact that the downtrodden African American race had been thrown in a deeper hole than the white man, but it is noteworthy that he emphasized the harm slavery did to the oppressor. He said African Americans needed to do their part and seek good educations and project dignity. However, this is when he reveals the hope and healing touch of the Christian God that is available to all of humankind. He recognized the painful sin of the world, and that the people of the world - Black or White - must fight against it, striving toward a "Universal Brotherhood." When Brewster does indeed broach the topic of racial issues, he calls attention to it, addresses the injustice, and

then reveals the hope and healing touch of the Christian God, in which a human being can use God's strength not only to right wrongs, but to help pull his way out of an oppressive situation.

In this manner, Brewster continues his sermon, revealing the fourth edge of the sword of slavery, saying that it "struck again the thorned crowned brow of Jesus, the slave of slaves, and caused all of his wounds to bleed afresh, and the scar remained because when the Emancipation Proclamation was issued, the poor slaves was still bound." This passage reveals a wealth of insight into Brewster's mind. He recognized the painful scars that slavery has left, emphasizing that even after the historic day of the signing of the Emancipation Proclamation, the African American race has been struggling under suffocating racism for years and years. Brewster is stating that the fight for equality among races is not over. The goal to create a "Universal Brotherhood" among the people in this world has not yet been reached. He explains to his congregation:

They set the slave free, striking off his chains . . .

Then he was as much of a slave as ever.

He was still chained to servility,

He was still manacled to indolence and sloth,

He was still bound by fear and superstition.

Brewster calls Jesus "the slave of slaves" and the "Magnificent super-slave" whose love elevated the lowly bondservant and untouchables of every generation to reach liberty through God. Making Jesus a relatable human figure, a super-slave, is a significant element of Black theology. While the African American theologians had seen their race as God's Israelites, or "chosen people" (Cleage), Brewster identified Jesus as the ultimate victim of oppression. Believing this, Brewster's African American community could relate more directly to Jesus, knowing that He loved them - the oppressed - enough to "[leave] the gold paved streets of Eternal Mansions, Ivory Palaces and gleaming Domes to dwell in a low-land of sorrow, walking

his weary way foot sore over thorny maizes and rocky roads.” This picture of Jesus gave the African American church a sense of added motivation, for even “under the most adverse circumstances, He went about doing good. He submitted himself as Creator to the insults. The whipping and the lashings of his own vile creatures.” According to Brewster, there was something extraordinary and significant that oppressed African American members of Brewster’s church had in common with Jesus. Brewster effectively took advantage of these longstanding themes within the Black church and forcefully used them to remember the past, face the reality of the present and motivate toward a better future.

Brewster even compared the small towns of first century Galilee to "ghettos." He reminded his audience that Jesus, the Magnificent Slave, “shared the poverty and squalor of the streets. His habitat was in the ghetto - Nazareth and Galilee. He was associated with the vile and outcast. He became part of the people that Job referred to, when he said, ‘He will disdain you to sit among the dogs of his flock’.” In other words:

He came down that we might go up.

He wept that we might smile.

He sorrowed that we might rejoice.

He died that we might live.

He bore the Cross that we might wear a Crown.

Brewster reminds the audience of East Trigg Baptist of the healing grace of God within painful circumstances, and the possibility of accepting His great strength so that they might, themselves, smile, rejoice, live, and be crowned.

“Jesus Became a Magnificent Slave That All Men Might Be Free” is an extremely powerful and straightforward projection of Dr. William Brewster’s views on racial issues before, during, and after the Civil Rights movement of the 1960’s. What continues to make Brewster unique in the realm of leadership in Memphis during the Civil Rights movement is the fact that

he is sure to include a potent reference of racial uplift in the large majority of his preachings of the Gospel message - whether it be through song or speech - even if the subject of the sermon is not focused on race relations. Although he was a gospel composer and Baptist pastor primarily, his emphasis on civil rights during a critical time period and in a critical location was not ignored, but continuously and consistently brought to the attention of many adoring listeners for whom his words had a significant impact. During the Civil Rights Movement, Black church culture permeated the movement from oratory, to music, to the rituals and symbols of protest, to the ethic of nonviolence (212). Brewster was influential through the Black church as well, elevating the hopes and dignity of his community through sermons and songs that were based on the themes of Black theology.

In Brewster's sermon entitled "Daniel Rolling Stone," he makes his audience reflect on Africa, the homeland of the downtrodden race of African Americans, from where they were stolen away from their country to be enslaved in the New World. He says, "May the kingdom come, O Lord, May thy stone roll on. . . Until Africa the dark continent shall arise and shake off the musty dusk of ignorance and superstition. And the voice of God shall be heard in South Africa. . . May it roll on. . ." In this passage, we are able to get a glimpse of Brewster's mindset of the world. Unlike Marcus Garvey, or many other African American leaders who idealized Africa as the homeland that they were ripped away from, Brewster believes that there is sin and superstition everywhere, including the African homeland. The pain in the American South is not specific to the South, but endemic in every corner of the Earth. Brewster preached in his sermon "Christ, Our Only Hope for the Times":

Every age and every era has had its vexing problems and discouraging situations.

The eras have gone with human history. Some were written in the blood and

tears of the generations upon which they settled. Our age is the most problematical in all history. The only personality that can match the mountains and seas of a confused human race is Jesus! He is our hope for peace.

This shows the powerful influence that the Christian Gospel has on Brewster's life and written work. He reminds his audience over and over again of the painful unrest in the world, and he asks God to save the people. He writes, "When wilt Thou save the people? O God of mercy, when? The people, Lord, the people. Not thrones and crowns, but men! God, save the people. Thine they are, Thy children as Thine angels fair. From vice, oppression, and despair, God save the people!" ("When Wilt Thou Save the People?")

It is not long before Brewster reminds his audience of the hopeful Exodus narrative, which is the theme that occurs the most in his writings. In sermons such as "The All Sufficiency of the Grace of God," "The Awesome Roadblocks of God," "Crosses, Thrones, and Crowns of Jesus," "Danger of Trying," "Divine Alliance," Brewster uses Old Testament stories of the Exodus narrative to preach his lessons within his sermons. For example, Brewster is preaching about a divine call that takes place for those who are a part of the Gospel Ministry. He begins by preaching, "Like Moses, first, every Gospel minister must have his 'burning bush' . . . Sometime he met God and received the word "GO". . . A divine call, which is the green light of the New Testament ministry." Brewster continues by giving examples of how powerful God truly is while preaching to the influence of the Exodus narrative. He states, "The name JEHOVAH - sets the Israelites free. At the name of JEHOVAH - The Red Sea gave way, and the children of Israel went through dry sod. The name JEHOVAH - was greater than that of the Pharaohs" ("The Suffering").

In another sermon entitled, “God Introduces Himself,” Brewster speaks of God’s true character and power. His first story used to describe God’s character is his action within the Exodus story. He says, “A Nation is in turmoil. It was God’s time to make His move for His Emancipation Day. The Nation of Israel was leaderless. They must have a strong man to lead them. That man was not to be found among the flesh pots and the brick kilns of the land of Pharaoh.” Brewster referenced the Exodus story in order to begin to explain how God uses his omnipotence and to express the good that God does in a broken world. While learning a lesson unrelated to the morals of the Exodus narrative, the congregation is simultaneously seeing that God uses His great power and character to provide His chosen people with a fearless and successful leader, Moses. All in all, while preaching about the true character of God, Brewster emphasizes that His character is one of a true Liberator.

Through this Black theology, Brewster is giving his community a sense of hope for a better tomorrow. This theme of hope - hope that the days will progressively improve and head toward a brighter future for African Americans - is very evident throughout Reverend Brewster’s works, and his gospel songs in particular. Brewster continued to follow Black theology, moving naturally from recognizing the theme of the African American race being considered as God’s chosen people, to gaining hope for a brighter future. Brewster’s song entitled, “Is Sin A Tiger On Your Doorstep?” presents beautiful and promising words:

Onward we press our way  
 On to a better day  
 Onward and upward He leads us  
 We’ll ring the message out  
 From hills and mountains shout  
 That the Hope of the world is JESUS.

Although racism was still eating its way through cities, particularly in Southern cities like Memphis, the preaching of hopeful racial uplift with Black theology at its backbone was a source of relief and inspiration. Although Brewster did not lead marches in the name of hope for racial equality, he preached this hopeful message consistently for decades to his congregation and community of listeners. It is truly significant the way that Brewster's gospel songs spread like wild fire in the nation, making him very well known and adored, and drawing new listeners to his sermons as well. There were many setbacks and discouraging times during the Civil Rights movement. The community of people who heard the words of Dr. Brewster desired and needed to be focused on hope grounded in hope for a better tomorrow. During services at East Trigg, there would be glorious songs being sung with loud and beautiful voices:

That night when in the Judean skies  
 The mystic star dispensed its light  
 A blind man moved in his sleep -  
 And dreamed that he had sight  
 That night when shepherds heard the song  
 Of hosts angelic choiring near  
 A deaf man stirred in slumber's spell -  
 And dreamed that he could hear!

This gospel song entitled, "Let Us As True Believers Continue to Hope and Dream of a Better Day Ahead" illustrates beautifully the racial uplift message that Brewster so loved to preach. He recognized that there is such despair in this world of ours - moral blindness, moral deafness, and racial bigotry. Brewster reflected in yet another sermon that everywhere, there are sink holes of injustice - in every city and every community. Men and women are held back by their race, and children do not receive equal opportunities ("Trouble and Danger in the Woods"). In this same sermon, he continues while saying, "Our communities are over-run by gangs, thugs,

thieves, or footpads. There is disrespect for law and order. There is rioting, looting, and even killings. We hear much about slums and ghettos. There is a cry about rats and garbage and unhealthy conditions in certain areas of our great cities.” However, Brewster reveals the true blessing of hope for a better future. Yes, “there is serious trouble in these woods,” as Dr. Brewster would say, but he would follow that with, “Joy will come in the morning. . . a morning when the redeemed of the Lord shall be rising to exchange their shrouds and winding sheets for Palms of Victory and white robes of Righteousness. When scars will be exchanged for stars” (“Watchman”).

Brewster, as the established Baptist pastor that he was, did not stop his preaching at the presentation of hope without reinforcing the magnitude of the source of his hope. In his sermon entitled, “Divine Proclamation,” he preaches:

When the Emancipation Proclamation was issued by President Lincoln, January 1, 1863, the way was opened for those who had been slaves to become citizens with all rights and privileges for those who had been their owners and their descendants who would be born in the land that had originally proposed liberty for all and all alike. And so those who had been set free by the Divine Truth of the gospel have access to the promise that was a part of the heavenly Bill of Rights that says, ‘Ye shall know the truth and the truth shall set you free’, And those whom the Son set free are free indeed.

Brewster’s aim, through recognizing the Emancipation Proclamation and the need for racial uplift, was to direct the attention and hearts of his listeners not solely on the hope for a brighter future, but to the One who provided that hope. Brewster considers Jesus to be the “Ultimate Savior,” the “Divine Liberator,” and the answer to all of the world’s ills. He makes the point

that the Emancipation Proclamation of 1863 was not the first time that a powerful man unencumbered a group of humans from their heavy load of hardship and suffering. In Brewster's eyes, President Lincoln's action reflected an important step, but only one step toward Jesus' ultimate liberation of humankind from the sin and ills of the world. He was preaching of racial uplift and striving for progress in racial equality with Jesus as his motivation and the source of all of his hope. Brewster may have been thinking of himself as a pastor when he preached, "This commission is one filled with excitement and expectations. Their importance as disciples, was because our Lord had elected them to be His representatives, in crashing the strong bulwarks of racism and religious bigotry" ("Cups of Cold Water").

This is the same motivation behind the Black theology of the enduring African American Church. However, after reading documents reflecting his more personal thoughts on Jesus and Jesus' character, it becomes evident that Brewster does not preach racial uplift with the Gospel of Christianity simply because it is in the roots of Black theology, but that he preaches racial uplift from prejudice and bigotry because he truly believes that it goes against the will and desires of the Christian God. Listen to these words of Reverend William Brewster in his sermon entitled, "A Crisis, A Kremlin, and a Christ":

One drop of the blood of Jesus is more precious, and will solve more problems, secure more justice, guarantee more freedom, institute more power; give a nation more security, a race more dignity; a world more peace, and Hell a greater defeat and Heaven a more glorious victory, then all the blood that has been spilled on the battlefields, shed on all altars; run in all rivers, transfused in all hospitals; since the very beginning, when the blood of righteous Abel was shed by Cain, to the blood of the victims of modern wars, accidents, murders, lynchings, capital

punishments - - if it all were put together as one great sea, and what a deep wide, bloody sea that sea would be.

A large part of Brewster's reasoning behind having so much trust in Jesus Christ of the Christian Church is because of his belief in the fulfilled promises and prophecies of God from the Old Testament to the New Testament. As one of the main themes of Black theology, the Old Testament prophecies and the eventual fulfillment of those prophecies through the life of Jesus, the Messiah of the Christian Church, is another theme of racial uplift evident in Brewster's sermons.

He wrote a sermon entitled "The Universal Proclamation as Stated in the Text," which is based on the Isaiah scripture in chapter 61 and how Jesus quotes this passage in the New Testament book of Luke. Brewster wrote that "when Jesus quoted the words of the Isaiah scripture in Luke 4:18-19, He confirmed a most brilliant and analytical prophesy of the Old Testament concerning himself." Jesus verbally stated in the next verse that on that day, scripture was fulfilled in the disciples' ears. Brewster preached the message of fulfilling prophesy, while providing his community with a sturdy basis for believing in the hope that God provides for the healing of racial prejudice. With proof of an Old Testament prophesy being followed through by the Messiah in the New Testament, Brewster taught that there was "no excuse for doubting that he was the son of God and had come down to the earth to meet every challenge that stood between himself and world Redemption." This is by no means the only prophesy fulfilled in the New Testament, however, it is significant to recognize which prophesy Brewster chose. Luke 4:18-19 states, "The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to release the oppressed, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor." Brewster, with his

heart for his subjugated race, selected a passage about Jesus coming to provide social justice, including freedom from oppression and imprisonment. Reverend Brewster is once again uplifting a racially oppressed community that he is a part of, with the message of Black theology and the Christian Gospel.

### **Rev. Brewster's Circumstances as a Racial and Religious Leader in Memphis**

The circumstances confronting Rev. Brewster as a racial and religious leader in Memphis, as well as his decision to remain in Memphis, helped mold his image as a civil rights leader differently than the images presented by national leaders of the civil rights movement such as Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. and Stokely Carmichael. The racist environment and dominating white power structure in Memphis influenced Brewster to avoid being overtly confrontational, at least in a political sense, about his opinions on racial politics. Brewster recognized that his words and actions could potentially divide his church, escalate racial tensions and put himself and others at risk. Dr. Brewster already had an effective means to voice his opinions more safely. As he stated in his autobiography, "Before freedom fights started, before Martin Luther King days, I had to lead a lot of protest meetings. In order to get my message over, there were things that were almost dangerous to say, but you could sing it" (Reagan, 201).

During his influential years at East Trigg Baptist, Brewster positively asserted his right as an African American man to state his opinions on anything and everything. However, he was acutely aware that he was living in an overwhelmingly segregated and racist atmosphere.

Despite the fact that this would have been true in virtually any city in the South during the years of the early civil rights movement, Memphis was a bedrock of the prejudice-ridden South.

Memphis is generally known as the home of the blues and rock and roll, however, the city has

another equally important history as an outwork of slavery, and a place where the meaning of freedom was unknown for African Americans (Honey, 8). The searing racial prejudice of many made the South a threatening place for Black men or women, no matter how many legal rights the government had granted them on paper. In Brewster's own words, "Prejudice of any kind is ugly and ridiculous. It is the dryrot of the soul. It is a devil to the senses and a witch to the spirit. It sets race against race, nation against nation, and kingdom against kingdom" ("Sons of Goliath"). While setting race against race, the Old South had taken on a new persona following the hype and hopefulness of the Emancipation Proclamation, and his name was Jim Crow. In the City of Memphis, the etiquette of Jim Crowe increasingly required black subservience to whites in matters small and large (Honey, 18). The humiliations of African Americans were experienced daily. In the twenties and thirties when Brewster was beginning his career in Memphis and diving into his life at East Trigg, African Americans were not permitted to go to public pools or parks, with one exception - Overton Park, which permitted African Americans one day per week. African Americans could not walk to school through a white neighborhood without the fear of being arrested. An all white police force arrested black folks for insignificant violations of racial etiquette (Honey, 18). As a result of the prevailing racism and segregation of the time, Brewster was already pinned into an unjust and difficult position, as an African American man who held a position of leadership in the African American community through his gospel music composing, preaching, and pastoring in Memphis.

The white political power structure was also a significant limiting force within the city. For nearly half of the twentieth century, Memphis was home to one of the "toughest political bosses ever to emerge in the United States" - Mayor Edward H. Crump, otherwise known as the "Crump Machine." While the political machine had authority, there was an atmosphere of

suppression and opposition to struggles for civil liberties and civil rights in Memphis, as Crump acted as a plantation boss to the city (Honey, 51). In this political environment, Dr. Brewster took the leap of faith to start a ministerial training school in Memphis. Although he ultimately was successful in founding his school in the basement of his own East Trigg Avenue Baptist Church, his plans were originally impeded and brought to a halt by white leaders who feared the presence of Northern, progressive, African American student visitors in the city. Under the political machine of Edward H. Crump, any kind of unorthodox view in Memphis became suspect, as the civil liberties of the Bill of Rights and the Fourteenth Amendment were simply stowed away. (Honey, 44) When Brewster was able to follow through with the establishment of his theological clinic, Reverend Brewster spoke of his school saying, "I have a school here now that is the result of what we started because we were beaten down by the segregationists, who did not believe we would have been an asset rather than a liability to the community by attracting students from all over . . . Men came from everywhere, from every section of the nation, because we had some of the best teachers." (Reagan, 192) Not only did Brewster resist the segregationists' opposition of him teaching seminary, but he began an institution, providing those students with some of the most qualified teachers around. Rev. Brewster always loved challenges - to meet them and overcome them - but the fact that they were indeed difficult challenges for the black man in early twentieth century Memphis cannot be ignored ("Behold the Man!").

Brewster's racial and political environment painted an image of his leadership that looked very different than other public civil rights activists. Martin Luther King Jr., for instance, set an image in the minds of many of what a civil rights activist should look like. Dr. King was passionate, eloquent, religious, and determined. His heart ached for the far-off dream of a

“Beloved Community” to become a reality for the nation. Like Brewster, King was articulate and well educated. Dr. King was an ordained Baptist minister, received his degree of divinity at Crozer Theological Seminary, and his doctorate in systemic theology at Boston University School of Theology. Dr. King travelled tirelessly from city to city leading protests and he reached the point of becoming the national voice for the oppressed. This enabled him to gain a national network of supporters, championing his words of determination and non-violence in support of civil rights (King, Melvin). Unlike Brewster, Martin Luther King Jr. made the decision to leave his home church. He was asked by Dexter Church in Montgomery to be their twentieth pastor, inviting him and Coretta King to be installed as the First Family of the church. In 1954, the Kings did indeed become the First Family at Dexter, but only a short year later, Dr. King’s role in the Civil Rights movement called him away and he was willing to pack up and leave Montgomery to become the powerful and incredible face and leader of the Nonviolent Direct Action Civil Rights movement. He ended up following wherever the movement led him, and embraced any leadership role that he could: from being the official speaker of the Montgomery Bus Boycott, to founding the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, to leading the Birmingham Campaign. He led the Freedom Walk in Detroit, followed by the March on Washington, while speaking to an audience of 250,000 Americans. He was Time Magazine’s “Man of the Year” in 1964, and received international awards, including Nobel Peace Prize. He even came to Memphis, the location of his assassination, for the Sanitation Workers' Strike. Dr. King was constantly on the move, placing a memorable image in the minds of Americans as to what a dedicated civil rights activist looks like (Tolbert).

In contrast to the style of leadership Dr. King exemplified during the Civil Rights movement, we see the stereotypical image of a radical activist through a leader such as Stokely

Carmichael. Carmichael's role in the movement was born through his activity within the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee - more commonly referred to as SNCC. The more involved and invested he became with the movement, the more he fulfilled this civil rights activist image.

His involvement in the movement continued to grow, and not long after, he had become the face of the radical Black Panther Party. Throughout his career, his opinions narrowed and his political stance strengthened. Beginning as a SNCC activist who supported integration, he later became the nation's voice for Black Nationalism and Black Power. Carmichael was not the one to coin the term "Black Power," however, he did indeed publicize and popularize the term (Stewart). He was a visible participant in the Freedom Rides, led Black Panther rallies around the nation, and later voiced his opinions about the Vietnam War, along with Martin Luther King, in New York City to a national crowd. King and Carmichael, along with Marcus Garvey, Bayard Rustin, Ralph Abernathy, and many other widely known activists, all have something significant in common. They were leaders present at the events that attracted the most national support and publicity for their cause. They were public activists who served as voices for a widely dispersed group of people, people who were committed to lives outside of the civil rights movement (Carmichael).

What sets Reverend Brewster apart from these activists, creating his own specific and special role in the movement, is that he was one of the individual voices rooted firmly to supporting racial uplift in a specific place. His was a local, consistent voice for civil rights who lived virtually his entire professional life in one city: Memphis, Tennessee. He certainly had enough talent and charisma to become a national civil rights leader. Sometimes, we forget that the supporters of a movement, acting outside of the national spotlight, are powerful agents of change. This is especially the case with Dr. Brewster, who despite the fact that he already had a

national reputation for his gospel music and preaching skills, chose to remain in Memphis.

Unlike Dr. King, Brewster's full-time pastoring had him anchored in Memphis - "nailed to the cross" in Memphis - leading him to have much loyalty and devotion to his community. During a time when it was dangerous for an African American to express his true thoughts on civil rights politics, he had to be careful choosing his words. Unlike Stokely Carmichael, for example, Reverend Brewster could not bolt to the next city on his itinerary if he received threats or negative publicity for expressing his opinions. Rev. Brewster had to think twice before becoming too confrontational in response to the social and political climate of his day. Rev. Brewster had a congregation and community to nurture - his own "Beloved Community" to be a part of and to take care of for decades. He had baptisms, weddings, and funerals to attend to. He had a sermon to preach every Sunday. He was often visited by other preachers who idolized his brilliant sermon writing and eloquent delivery. Let us not forget the everyday work that he devoted as a mentor to up-and-coming pastors and gospel musicians. He fulfilled a great leadership position in the world of gospel music that he remained dedicated to. Although he was in the midst of what most Black citizens found to be a discouraging environment, he was able and willing to continue his speaking out against racism. He used his musical and pastoral talents to preach racial encouragement, stirring the hearts of many to press on and continue the fight for equality. He wanted well-being and happiness for his community. As he told the New York Times in 1969, "I want it to be said when I'm gone that I plucked the ground and caused something to grow." All that he did, and the determination and devotion he put into it, was designed to increase hope and dignity to confront the racial bigotry of his beloved community, Memphis.

### **Rev. Brewster's Views as a Racial and Religious Leader in Memphis**

Despite his difficult circumstances - the negative, racist, and divided South that he lived in - Reverend Brewster forged a Christian based style of leadership that was practical and effective. Providing a sense of racial uplift in his community had been a long lasting goal and passion in Brewster's life. He confidently stated, "I emphasize [racial uplift] every opportunity I get. I urge racial equity whenever and wherever it can be merited" (Cortese). It did not take the official Civil Rights movement of the 1960's for Reverend Brewster to begin preaching words of racial uplift and hope for a brighter future for his people. "Long before the concept of Black pride was codified, Brewster's songs and sermons exemplified racial dignity" (Reagan, 244).

Behind this leadership was what Brewster considered to be a progressive and humane view of the racial situation of his day (Cortese). One important aspect of the promotion of civil rights for Brewster was that it was a constant work in progress. In his mind, racial tension would not be resolved by a separatist protest or a rally alone, but by living together and working together. On the 104th anniversary of the liberating day of the Emancipation Proclamation, Dr. Brewster stated that "there [were] battles yet to be won for equality. But they [could not] be won by Black Power. They [could not] be won by Molotov cocktails. They [had to] be won by walking together" (Cortese). Brewster's protest inspiration was to push on and continue to move forward, never settling for a situation that would be "good enough." Not only was his dream for the children of God to walk side by side, but to "move into the field of education" together, "move into the professions" together, and "move into politics" together. He wished for African Americans to "move into anything that any other race [had] to have to survive." William Brewster's doctrine was for downtrodden African Americans to continue walking forward and never be satisfied (Reagan, 201).

Brewster's fight for equality was a God-centered fight, recognizing Jesus as the answer to all turmoil. Brewster preached, "In our anxiety to establish a Universal Brotherhood, we must accept the teachings of Him, in whom there is no Jew, No Greek, No Black, No White; No East, No west, No North, No South, and even no male or female, but all ONE in HIM" ("A Crisis, A Kremlin, and A Christ"). This aspect of Brewster's racial uplift is the most significant, for in Brewster's eyes, without Jesus, there would be no solution or help for any obstacles. He preaches in the same sermon, "In Christ, there is the one and only infallible remedy for the ills of the world. The Political ills could be remedied, by recognition of Christ, as King. . . All racial tension and strife could be banished forever, by Him, who himself, was the product of a minority group that was writhing under the iron bootheel of the godless Roman Empire." For Brewster, along with the Baptist Christian Church, it is through the "teachings of Him" that comes strength to continue forging ahead.

All of Reverend Brewster's political opinions on civil rights match up quite well with his own work ethic, his emphasis on education, and the position of leadership that he sustains at East Trigg Baptist and among his national fans. For instance, Brewster did not attend Black Power political rallies or make threats to win the fight for equality. Only Dr. Brewster himself speaks of the protest meetings that he led before the movement gained national publicity and before Martin Luther King was so widely known. Brewster did indeed enter into the public political scene with the support he gave to Dr. Martin Luther King at the beginning of King's public career. Reverend Brewster participates before stepping back to continue his peaceful walk with his community in Memphis due to the importance he places on nonviolence within the movement and struggle for equality, stemming from the nonviolent teachings of Jesus. He claimed that "it takes dedication to solve this thing. We talk about peace. Genuine peace comes

only through men of good will. We should all come back and join the human race, because what we have been doing is splintering. Races, nations and tribes are but branches of the great big tree of humanity” (Cortese). Brewster believed that working together, in peace and steadfast determination to improve understanding, would be the means toward eliminating the deeply engraved racial bigotry of our nation. This train of thought is parallel to Dr. King’s platform of determined, but nonviolent direct action. However, it is not long before Dr. Brewster disappears from those photos of him supporting Dr. King because of his loyalty in continuing his steadfast walk with his Memphis community - preaching racial uplift every Sunday and in between - and to his gospel career, where he did the same. He persisted with his peaceful and powerful leadership of the congregation of East Trigg Baptist for over fifty-five years, well outliving the critical years of the Civil Rights movement of the 60’s. He continued to thrive and inspire others through preaching the Gospel, singing the Gospel, and preaching words of racial uplift through his Gospel-centered eyes.

### **Conclusion**

“The Spirit of the Lord God is upon me because the Lord hath anointed me to preach good tidings unto the meek. He hath sent me to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives and the opening of the prison to them that are bound” (“The Gospel Minister”). Reverend Brewster was a preaching man who had a beautiful way with words. At the core of his heart, he held his pastoring position at East Trigg Avenue Baptist Church, sharing his passion for the Christian Gospel and all of his opinions and beliefs that stemmed from that enthusiasm. As part of his sermon “Especially the Parchment,” he preached:

As for me. . . [The Bible] is a helmet for my head, traveling shoes for my feet, a light for my eyes, a hearing aid for my ears. It is a fire in my heart, it is wisdom for my mind, it is salvation for my soul, it is the resurrection for my body; my joy in sorrow, a smile through the tears. It is my health in sickness and my strength in weakness; riches in poverty, sweetness in bitterness, it is peace in my confusion, light in darkness. It is bread for my hunger and water for my thirst.

The Word of God was the book that Reverend Brewster lived his life through, and that all of his writings and words were motivated by. Realizing the full extent of how passionate he was for his vocation, it becomes quite clear as to why his leadership role in the Civil Rights movement fell easily into place and how his beliefs impacted his style of leadership. After reviewing many of his sermons, poems, and Gospel lyrics, the absence of any bitterness or hate in Brewster's words is striking. At a time when it was only natural and expected to blame others for a negative environment, Brewster remained remarkably hopeful and forgiving. In 1970, Rev. Brewster told a journalist for the Commercial Appeal, "I think things are going to rectify and the world will get back on track. I am a firm believer in God. I do not believe the great God of the universe will permit man to ruin His world irreparably."

Reverend Brewster also set an example as a peaceful protester, just like Martin Luther King Jr.: unlike Dr. King, Rev. Brewster chose to protest in his own community, and it was a determined and hopeful protest that lasted fifty-seven years in Memphis. Unlike better known civil rights activists like MLK Jr. and Stokely Carmichael, Brewster did not devote his entire career to a national and public regimen of protests and marches but he was without doubt a significant and important civil rights leader. Reverend Brewster's role in the Civil Rights movement was unique and specific to him, starting with a significant number of receptive

listeners of his Gospel songs and ending up spreading his words of racial uplift heard throughout the nation, but almost always originating from Memphis. From a plantation long ago, he began with a song in his heart and a desire of social justice for everyone, based firmly on the teachings of Jesus. When the time of the Civil Rights movement of the 1960's came about, Reverend Brewster was here in Memphis ready and waiting. He had a heart that cared for what the Gospel preached, a hope for his downtrodden community through the Gospel, and many adoring admirers to listen to his words of racial uplift. Whether he wanted to devote his life and career to the Civil Rights movement or not, his poems, Gospel lyrics, and sermons were devoted to the racial uplift that everyone needed to hear during that difficult time in the American South. With this, I recall the words of the Kansas City Call once more, "[Reverend Brewster] has achieved the rare distinction of a prophet being honored in his own home. That's something to sing about. And for a man to receive such an honor... well brethren, take it from this Corner... 'Tain't done every day, you here'. Now, whatchubet" (Williams).

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Ms. Earlice Taylor, a close family friend of Reverend Brewster, allowed me to interview her in order to better familiarize myself with Brewster's personality. Earlice Taylor is a gifted singer and was asked by Reverend Brewster to work with him on Gospel music

performances. Through her personal and heartfelt stories regarding her association with Brewster, she revealed a more detailed look at his life during his long working days at East Trigg Avenue Baptist Church. Earlice Taylor's stories contributed tremendously to my understanding, helping the donated documents to come to life.



He shared the poverty and squalor of the streets. His  
 habitant was in the ghetto - Nazareth and Galilee.  
 He was associated with the vile and outcast. He became  
 a part of the people that Job referred to, when he said, "He  
 will disdain you to sit among the dogs of his flock." In other  
 words, He came down that we might go up.  
 He wept that we might smile.  
 He sorrowed that we might rejoice.  
 He died that we might live.  
 He bore the Cross that we might wear a Crown.

O thy sweet Galilean  
 Lowly Nazarene  
 Magnificent slave  
 Conqueror of the grave  
 Hallelujah to thy name  
 For Evermore the Same.

For he turned down the bloody sweat he shed with his father  
 before the world was, And before the morning stars were  
 father and the sons of God shouted for joy!  
 He left the highest and came down to the lowest.  
 He left the most holy to come down to the most sinful.  
 He left off the celestial robe and Glistening Girdle to  
 come down and to wear the soiled garment of the wilderness  
 of man.  
 He descended from the place of the sea of glass and soon of  
 heavenly rest, to come down to a trail and ruggedness such  
 would be thunders and stones fallen upon the billowy waves  
 of the sea of Galilee, while lightning flung its lurid glare  
 played its lightning upon the frowning lowering clouds  
 that threaten to shipwreck his disciples.  
 He left the gold paved streets of Eastern Mansions, Ivory  
 Palaces and gleaming domes to dwell in a low land of sorrow,  
 walking his weary way over stony paths and weary  
 roads, coming to the end of each day's road with no where  
 to lay his head.  
 Under the most adverse circumstances, He went about doing  
 good. He submitted himself as Creator to the limited. The  
 reigning and the fashion of his own vile creature. Truly he  
 was a magnificent Super-Slave, whose love and virtue elevated  
 the status of the lowly bond-servant. The power, the wisdom,  
 and the output of all ages - potentially into the glorious  
 liberty of the children of God.

A WORD TO THE VICTIMS OF IMPRISONMENT

To those who have been discouraged, even for having done their  
 in prison, And who feel that society may look upon you as ex-  
 cone, lift up your heads, look into hearts who in the language  
 of the text condescended to men of low estate, in order that  
 He might lift them up.

