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The Tip of the Iceberg: A preliminary exploration of the life and influences of

Reverend Dr. William Herbert Brewster

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SUNDAY, OCT. 7, 1984

TRUE HAPPINESS

True happiness--the desire of the race,
True principles--the hope of the age,
True liberty--all would embrace,
To secure these we all engage.

But what is the price of this trio?
And what does it cost to obtain.
The price to be paid may not be so,
The buyer, the treasure may gain.

Whatever the cost, men will pay,
Whatever the distance, they run,
Whether a thousand years or a day,
They will do what has to be done.

But 'twas better to chase butterflies,
Or seek the pot of gold,
That at the end of the rainbow lies
Or strive the wind to hold.

Than to seek true happiness from without,
And still indulge in sin;
Or subject faith to fear and doubt
For happiness lies within.

---William Herbert Brewster

DR. W. HERBERT BREWSTER, Minister

"THE GROUND IS LEVEL AT THE CROSS"

Reverend Dr. William Herbert Brewster (1897-1987) arrived for the first time in Memphis in the year 1915. The emphasis of this research is the time post-1915 when he was an active political and religious figure in the city and in the region. This study of his life and influences would not be complete, however, without a discussion of the climate in which he began. Brewster was born “in a two-room cabin in the middle of a cotton field hard on the Fayette [and] Hardeman county line, the eldest of eight children”² on what is now called Ames Plantation. He was born in one of two years. This was before a real census was taken in rural western Tennessee. Literacy was scarce, and birthdates were estimated as they accorded with a memorable event of that year. Brewster’s birth year was either 1897, termed the ‘year of the gnats’ where, in Fayette and Hardeman Counties, “there were swarms of gnats [... and] they were destructive to animals as well as to people,” or Brewster was born two years later in 1899 which was termed ‘the year of the hard freeze.’³ Brewster says: “It was a terrifying winter. The trees were broken down under the weight of snow and ice, and the plantation houses were crushed by these terrifying winter storms.”⁴ Brewster remembers: “I chose the year of the gnat because he’s a little fellow.”⁵

His modest beginning and, more specifically, his triumph over certain obstacles associated with Fayette County in the early 20th century served as inspiration to him throughout his ninety years. He remembers: “We didn’t have racial hate back then... I was a big boy before

¹ Brewster, Dr. William Herbert. “True Happiness.” East Trigg Avenue Baptist Church. 7 October 1984. Accessed 29 July 2009. East Trigg Baptist Church Archives.

² “Musician Ministers Gospel with a Song.” The *Memphis Press-Scimitar*. 11 October 1982. Pg. 3. Accessed 23 June 2009. Main Library – Memphis Room, Brewster Biographical Collection.

³ Reagon, Bernice Johnson, Ed. *We’ll Understand It Better By and By: Pioneering African American gospel composers*. Washington: Smithsonian Press, 1992. Pg. 186.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Thornton, Charles. “Gospel Composer Honored.” The *Memphis Press-Scimitar*. 8 October 1982. Accessed 16 July 2009. University of Memphis – Mississippi Valley Collection, 57575.

I learned anything about that. Folks black and white were Jim Dandy⁶ about helping each other out. They'd go by lantern light, cross foot logs and wade [in] water to help each other.”⁷

While race seems to have been less of an issue in West Tennessee to Brewster's young eyes, an issue that he recalls confronting repeatedly was the availability and quality of education in rural Tennessee. Brewster describes his early education in an interview with Dr. Bernice Johnson Reagon, a specialist in African-American oral history, performance and protest traditions and curator for the Smithsonian Institute. Brewster remembers: “You weren't counted by grades, there were readers⁸ [...] that old Blueback Speller carried words, and most of the words rhymed, and at the blue margin there were sentences, poetic sentences, beautiful expressions.”⁹ One of these margined sentences from Brewster's memory illustrates well the emphases of education in this space and time:

Every task once begun,
Never leave it until it's done
Do the labor, great or small,
Do it well or not at all.¹⁰

Life on the plantation was demanding. Farmers and sharecroppers often depended on children to supplement laborer shortages. Employing children as necessary tools toward the survival of the farm had a critical impact on the long and short term continuity of education. Brewster remembers: “The school terms in those days depended greatly upon the weather. By that I mean

⁶ The Band, Black Oak Arkansas, which made this expression (“Jim Dandy to the rescue”) famous in the 1970s came from Black Oak to Memphis in 1969 and signed a deal with STAX records. They site their Southern Baptist Heritage as a major influence.

⁷ “Musician Ministers Gospel with a Song.” *The Memphis Press-Scimitar*. 11 October 1982. Pg. 3. Accessed 23 June 2009. Main Library – Memphis Room, Brewster Biographical Collection.

⁸ “reader,” n. **6**. A book of selected writings (on a particular subject, by a particular author, etc.), esp. used as a school textbook or for exercise in reading; an anthology. *The Oxford English Dictionary Online*.

⁹ Reagon, Bernice Johnson, Ed. *We'll Understand It Better By and By: Pioneering African American gospel composers*. Washington: Smithsonian Press, 1992. Pg. 187.

¹⁰ *Ibid*.

the planting season depended upon how early spring came.”¹¹ In a study done by Sarah Rogers regarding the early education systems of Fayette County, she cites transportation difficulties (students carried themselves to school on foot); age to level misappropriation (Students were often not the appropriate age for their grade); and farm duties as issues affecting the students’ performance in school, access to the classroom, and educational continuation after completion of the primary readers.¹²

Brewster was a diligent student and, as is evident in this early recollection, boasted a fine memory. He finished the readers and, thus, finished his elementary education early, before many other children his age. To give context to his own situation, Brewster says: “In my case, my educational career started in a cabin in a cotton field with a teacher who had been fortunate to have completed the sixth and seventh grade.” In this environment, it was not uncommon for the teachers, themselves, to have been sparingly educated.

Despite the obvious shortcomings of the Fayette County school program, Brewster’s praise of the system was that “[t]hey would not allow a kid to be held back by the slow kids.”¹³ Upon completing the basic reader-based program, Brewster’s education moved to a nearby town where he was tutored by an old Baptist preacher named David Jones. This would have been the equivalent of ‘high school’ in the Fayette County educational program. Tutorage like this was not free. One paid what they were able to afford on a monthly basis. The church that sponsored the tutorage aimed to pay the tutor a salary of around fifteen dollars per month. Each student would pay one to two dollars per month, and from this we can deduce that each educator was in charge of an average of seven post-primary level students. Brewster remembers that Jones “had

¹¹ Ibid., 188.

¹² Rosser, Joy. Personal interview. 8 July 2009. Cited in: Rogers, Sarah. *The Beginnings of Public Education in Rural Tennessee During the Reconstruction Period*. Memphis: Rhodes Institute for Regional Studies, 2009.

¹³ Reagon, Bernice Johnson, Ed. *We’ll Understand It Better By and By: Pioneering African American gospel composers*. Washington: Smithsonian Press, 1992. Pg. 187.

no relationship with the Board of Education. There was not much concern about Black education. What they wanted you to know was how to wash and iron and work in the fields, cut logs and do the things that were the chores of a slave.”¹⁴ Brewster’s first job, before he was sixteen years old, was as an educator alongside Jones where he was paid twenty dollars per week, five dollar’s more than even Jones’ salary. This aptitude for teaching that is shown by these figures was only strengthened by time and experience.

At sixteen Brewster recalls feeling conflicted toward his home church. He identified more with his grandmother’s singing of the spirituals and gospel songs than he did with the ministry. Brewster remembers, “he [the pastor] was preaching to me and a lot of things he would preach, I would know different because I had read it...”¹⁵ Brewster accepted the Christ after a “man who was not the preacher said, ‘This boy has got to be baptized! He’s going to be a preacher. There is preacher all over him!’”¹⁶ He was “baptized in Old Northfolk Creek, a clear stream that [flows] into the Wolf River, on the third Sunday in June of 1914. Shortly thereafter, he began preaching.”¹⁷

The story of Brewster’s personal baptism is manifested throughout his works, prose, and verse alike. One of the more striking instances of this occurs in the hymn “I’ll Never Forget How My Jesus Brought Me Through.”¹⁸

I was young but bless His name I still recall
 How I took the lord to be my all and all
 Then a little when began to turn
 And a little fire began to burn

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Ibid., 189.

¹⁶ Ibid., 190

¹⁷ Magness. Perre. “Brewster a Father of Gospel Music.” *The Commercial Appeal*. 8 June 2000. Pg. CC2. Accessed 29 July 2009. Courtesy of Yvonne Griggs, East Trigg Baptist Church, Memphis, TN.

¹⁸ Ibid.

I stole away with death and judgment on my mind
 So I left this mean and sinful world behind
 My head got wet with the morning dew
 The morning star was a witness too

I know the spirit took my feet up from the mire
 And it set my sinful soul on holy fire
 I looked at my hands and they looked new
 I looked at my feet and they did too

I remember the very day I got baptized
 I was shouting out before I realized
 'Twas mighty pretty down by the water side
 Some were laughing while others cried.¹⁹

These lyrics are more naturalistic than others, bringing in the landscape and connecting it to the sacred act where others might separate the two completely. Oftentimes a baptism is seen as purely symbolic and having nothing to do with the surrounding environment. Brewster, however, embraces the surrounding environment and uses it as a method to reach alternative audiences. I would argue that, in his songs, the Reverend often uses sensory experiences to *invite* a listenership. This is not simply a summons to listen. Brewster's music also acts as a summons toward education. The type of audience that this particular hymn can impact is greater than a hymn that has its textual base in scripture or 'fire and brimstone.'

This event leads us to within a year of Brewster's arrival in Memphis, where he travelled "to get more [educative] preparation."²⁰ He recalls, "It was late 1915, and Mr. Crump (political boss Edward Hull Crump) was coming into power and Handy had just written the blues." In

¹⁹ *Tribute: The Life of Dr. William Herbert Brewster*. 2nd Edition. Memphis: The Brewster House of Sermon Songs, Christian Literature and Dramatic Arts, 1984. Pg. 30.

²⁰ "Musician Ministers Gospel with a Song." *The Memphis Press-Scimitar*. 11 October 1982. Pg. 3. Accessed 23 June 2009. Main Library – Memphis Room, Brewster Biographical Collection.

Memphis, Brewster “entered [the] Howe Colligate Institute, where he studied under T.O. Fuller and Sutton E. Griggs. He then attended Roger Williams College in Nashville... He characterized his education as ‘largely a hop, skip and jump affair [and reminds us that] Negro Institutions of learning that were recognized were few and far between.’”²¹ After going through the Howe Institution, he went “from one to another, whatever the Baptists had.” But, he says, “whenever I would go to a school, I had the problem of having to teach the teachers. Now this isn’t bragging, that’s just the fact.”²² Brewster later received an honorary doctorate from Bennett College in Greensboro, N.C.²³ Many years after having surpassed these many educational obstacles, he reflects: “I’m glad I didn’t know education [growing up] because sometimes a lot of education makes you a poor Christian.”

Brewster was ordained and began at his first church, Alexander Baptist Church north of Somerville, in April 1918. There, in June, he met [Julia] Nelson. “They were married on Thanksgiving Day, five months later, and they were married for 68 years.”²⁴ Together, they had two children: Juanita “Nita” Brewster Crenshaw (Poston) and Reverend William Herbert “Ted” Brewster. Both individuals carried on some of Brewster’s tradition. Dr. Samuel Turner calls ‘Nita “an accomplished musician and soloist and Ted “a great preacher and songwriter in his own right.”’²⁵

After this first pastorate, William Herbert Brewster came back to Memphis in the 1920s. Here, “he was captivated by the music of W.C. Handy with its propulsive rhythm.”²⁶ Brewster remembers that early on, he had begun re-fashioning songs sung in his home church in Fayette

²¹ Ibid.

²² Ibid., 191

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Ibid., 190

²⁵ *The Brewster Revival and the Camp Meeting on the Air Ensemble*. Compilation C.D. Used by permission of James and Bernice Gailey, Memphis, TN.

²⁶ Ibid.

County to make them agree with the biblical texts, and for most of his life quietly went about becoming a historic figure in the fields of religious education, race relations, gospel drama, religious poetry, and gospel music.²⁷

Brewster says that he realized the power of music through his grandmother, Harriet Aberston's, singing. "She was singing and laughing out loud and almost hysterically – that Holy Ghost laugh, they used to call it. And then she would be crying. The tears were meeting under her chin...²⁸ It strung a harp in my heart."²⁹ Dr. Brewster adds that he was inspired to write songs during World War 1. This said, it is very difficult, if not in vain, to pinpoint the period in which the Reverend began contributing to the realm of American music. As his granddaughter, Kentosha Brewster-Evans, noted in an interview:

His most famous quote is... 'A song is a sermon set to music,' so, he's been writing sermons for a long time. He just decided to put them to music. So – his poetry; his songs; his sermons all went hand-in-hand... You actually can't put a timeframe on exactly when he started to actually write songs...³⁰

The William Herbert Brewster who is the subject of this research is called by many variations on the name above. Though this is largely due to faulty fact checking and incomplete source material in the secondary materials published between 1950s to the 1990s, there is some cause for confusion. In this work, I have chosen to refer to him without suffix (i.e. as Reverend Dr. William Herbert Brewster; W.H. Brewster; The Reverend or simply Brewster). He seems to

²⁷ Thorton, Charles. "Gospel Composer Honored." *The Memphis Press-Scimitar*. 8 October 1982. Accessed 16 July 2009. University of Memphis – Mississippi Valley Collection, 57575.

²⁸ Brewster, Dr. William Herbert. Interview by Dr. William H. Wiggins, Jr. Tape recording. East Trigg Baptist Church. *Tribute*, 1983.

²⁹ "Musician Ministers Gospel with a Song." *The Memphis Press-Scimitar*. 11 October 1982. Pg. 3. Accessed 23 June 2009. Main Library – Memphis Room, Brewster Biographical Collection.

³⁰ Brewster-Evans, Kentosha. Interview by Kayla Miller and Josie Holland. East Trigg Baptist Church. 10 July 2009.

have been the second William Herbert Brewster in the family after his father. After him, there have been two more William Herbert Brewsters to this date [Summer 2009] in the same family line. The designation *Reverend* does not help to distinguish between the Brewster whom I discuss and his son, who was also a preacher in Memphis.

Brewster often had nicknames for people. His nickname for his son was “Ted,” and he called his grandson “Keith.” When referring to any of the W. H. Brewsters, I will refrain from using the first through fourth numerical designations as a suffix and will clarify the identity of the individual to whom I am referring through explanation of relationship. It should be noted that in many texts, even those which reflect much research, the Brewster who is the subject of this text is often called ‘Brewster, Sr.’ despite information which would negate that designation.

Before the accomplishments that led such Tennessee leaders as former governor and current U.S. Senator, Lamar Alexander and former Mayor of Shelby County, William N. Morris, Jr. to congratulate Dr. William Herbert Brewster on his induction into the Smithsonian Institute in recognition of his gospel music, and before a French film company decided to make a documentary about him, Brewster remembers:

While growing up in Brownsville, Tennessee, some little white boys rode by me on their bicycles singing this little ditty: ‘One, two, three, four, five, six, seven. Nigger on the wood-pile can’t count to ‘leven.’ That thing got to me. And I became determined to show them that I could count to eleven.³¹

We know that it was not in this moment that Dr. Brewster first learned of the racial boundaries and obstacles that music can cross. We can, however, establish this recollection as one of many examples in Reverend Brewster’s life when music extends beyond its source. While this ‘ditty’

³¹ Brewster, Dr. William Herbert. Interview by Dr. William H. Wiggins, Jr. Tape recording. East Trigg Baptist Church. *Tribute*, 1983.

carries a negative intention, its effectuality is changed as an audience is reached. The young William Brewster responds with a dedicated courage rather than showing spitefulness or timidity.

Brewster displays the same courage and assertiveness in his years spent in Memphis, Tennessee. His arrival in 1915 coincided with the arrival of another influential figure in Memphis: former mayor and ‘machine politician,’ Edward Hull Crump. Brewster’s relationship to the former mayor is, for the most part, antagonistic. Brewster responds to Crump’s politics in two fashions: through a very active participation in the Republican representative group of Memphis and through music. E.H. Crump was a democrat.

Upon Brewster’s return to Memphis in the 1920s, Crump’s ‘political machine’ was more permanently in place. Brewster, though he did not ascribe to all of its ideals, was a strong contender for the advancement of the Republican party in the city of Memphis. It was the party of Abraham Lincoln. Brewster says that the name ‘Lincoln’ was next to the name ‘Jesus’ to many, and calls the Lincoln League “The greatest thing that had happened among black people.”³² The name brought people together and encouraged involvement in issues relating to the government.

Brewster’s work with the Lincoln League was largely oratorical, and while he was representing and supporting the Republican Party on the national level, problems arose locally. He says, “When Black people showed interest in getting local positions, it was a tough fight.”³³ There were two groups trying to obtain recognition as the Republican Party Representatives of

³² Brewster, Dr. William Herbert. Interview by Dr. Charles W. Crawford. Project: Robert R. Church Family. Tape recording. East Trigg Baptist Church, Memphis, TN. 6 July 1983. Accessed 21 July 2009. University of Memphis – Mississippi Valley Collection, filename: Brewster.

³³ Ibid.

Memphis. The first, the one to which Brewster belonged, called itself the “Black and Tans,” and, in response, the second named itself the “Lilly Whites.”

In a local Republican Convention, Brewster recalls, “Our strategy to get into the the convention hall was to be there when it opened. When we got it filled up, Mr. Crump ordered the police to come there and route us out.”³⁴ In a later Memphis convention, the Black and Tan party was seated, but then an alarm was pulled, and once out of the building, they were not let back in. They held a separate convention next door. The Black and Tans’ opportunity to represent the Republican Party increased as they moved up from the local Memphis scene.

According to Dowdy, G. Wayne, Crump began his long political career when he was sworn in as a member of the board of public works supervisors.³⁵ Despite the common admiration of the Handys, Brewster is vehemently against the reign of Crump’s ‘political machine.’ Some say W. C. Handy, who named himself ‘The Father of the Blues,’ is in large part responsible for Crump’s election and eventual control of Memphis. His campaign tune called “The E.H. Crump Blues” was heard widely on the streets of Memphis:

Mr. Crump won't allow no easy-riders³⁶ here,
 Mr. Crump won't allow no easy-riders here,
 I don't care what Mr. Crump won't allow,
 I'm gonna barrelhouse³⁷ anyhow.
 Mr. Crump can go and catch hisself some air. ³⁸

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ Wayne, Dowdy G. *Mayor Crump don't like it : machine politics in Memphis*. 1st Ed. Oxford: University Press of Mississippi, 2006. Pg. 3.

³⁶ (*U.S. slang*): (a) a sexually satisfying lover (b) a guitar. The *Oxford English Dictionary Online*. Second Edition. 1989.

³⁷ 1. A low-class drinking saloon, often incorporating a lodging-house or brothel; 2. Designating an unrestrained type of jazz such as is played in barrel-houses, characterized by a forceful rhythm – “barrelhouse.” *OED Online*.

³⁸ Wayne, Dowdy G. *Mayor Crump don't like it : machine politics in Memphis*. 1st Ed. Oxford: University Press of Mississippi, 2006. Pg. 120.

When Crump ran for mayor in 1909 it was common to have musicians play at rallies, and his campaign was no exception. “According to Handy, he [Handy] was hired by someone on Crump’s staff to play at a meeting where he introduced a new composition entitled “Mr. Crump.” During the campaign, Crump’s reform image was ridiculed by many African Americans who added derogatory lyrics to Handy’s tune.”³⁹ Handy led a band that performed on street corners to draw a crowd for Crump rallies. The songs words were not quite an endorsement of Crump but it was still good publicity. This song acted as a very effective form of advertizing for the former mayor. The repeated lines of “Mr. Crump won't allow no easy-riders here” portrays Crump in an ethical light, but the fact that ‘The Father of the Blues,’ W.C. Handy, writes a colloquialized song about him during his campaign makes him both accessible and compelling to a wide audience.

William Herbert Brewster responds to discriminatory issues in Memphis and Crump’s control over Memphis through his composition of gospel music. He says:

After I got started writing music, people began to realize what I was trying to do and were supportive. In 1930, I wrote “Leaning and Depending on the Lord.” About ’35 I wrote “Move On Up a Little Higher”... That music was written at a time [1935] when there were lots of economic troubles. There was this big plant in North Memphis where men would get paid on Saturdays at noon, then gamble away their money. They were resorting to things that were not so good... Mr. Crump [former Memphis Mayor E. H. Crump] would round up dozens of truckloads of these black men, give them pints of liquor, and have them vote from one precinct to another. All that was happening, so I wrote music to encourage people to move up on the scale of living to a higher tone of morality.⁴⁰

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰Smith, Whitney. “Award to Salute a Big Voice in Gospel Music.” *The Commercial Appeal*. 5 December 1983. Pg. C6. Accessed 20 June 2009. Main Library – Memphis Room, Brewster Biographical Collection.

One might question the effectiveness of a gospel song against this degree of secular and political corruption under E.H. Crump's 'political machine,' as the two groups (those who might listen to a gospel song and those who might gamble away all their money) represented are traditionally divergent. Assuming, however, that this separation is absolute would neglect the profound affectivity of the media as a means to influence the Memphis community. Brewster hosted a WHBQ radio program titled *Old Camp Meeting on the Air* which drew crowds of all races and socio-economic situations to the East Trigg Avenue Baptist Church on Sunday evenings at eleven.

Mayor Crump targeted a similar audience with his campaign design. Both men use music to reach across social and political boundaries. Crump's music is played on the street while Brewster's is broadcasted through the WHBQ airwaves. Both men attempt to establish a kind of dominion over the most pliable people of the Memphis population. The song "Move On Up a Little Higher," which Brewster composed as a direct response to Crump's campaign practices could not cross lines without a powerful voice as a vehicle.

It was first sung on the *Camp Meeting on the Air* by Queen C. Anderson, a former member of East Trigg Baptist Church and notable voice in gospel music and then was recorded by Mahalia Jackson, also formerly of Brewster's congregation. This recording was released in 1948 with the Apollo label. It is cited as the song that skyrocketed Jackson to fame, selling an astonishing eight million copies.⁴¹ According to *Billboard*, it is the best selling gospel song of all time.⁴² Brewster perhaps recognized in Mahalia Jackson a potential to inspire and direct an audience. The song begins:

⁴¹ Koster, Rick. *Louisiana Music: A Journey from R&B to Zydeco, Jazz to Country, Blues to Gospel, Cajun Music...* (2002), Da Capo Press, page 271.

⁴² Jackson, Mahalia. *Billboard*.

<<http://www.billboard.com/search/?keyword=Move+on+up+a+little+higher#/search/mahalia%20jackson>>.

One these morning soon one morning
 I'm gonna lay down my cross get me a crown
 soon one evening late in the evening
 Late in the evening I'm going home live on high
 Soon as my feet strike Zion
 Lay down my heavy burdens
 Put on my robe in glory
 Going home one day and tell my story
 I've been coming over hills and mountains
 Gonna drink from the Christian Fountain⁴³

With “Move On Up a Little Higher,” Brewster targets the poor, complacent, dispirited, oppressed and traditionally unrecognized population. This ‘target audience’ extends beyond the Memphis community, and, through the song’s fame, actually reaches this listenership. Brewster’s song, though originally written for a passion play, is designed and lyricized so as to be particularly appealing for the oppressed or the weary, beckoning them toward a higher plane of life that does not include an instance of being rounded up and exploited by the governing body for a cause that is not their own.

The song sets new tones in the gospel genre, resembling enough more contemporary songs (such as those by W.C. Handy), while keeping an encouraging suggestion. “Move On Up a Little Higher” refrains from praise of the material world, and directs focus to what is after. In heaven, the song suggests, there is no regard for status, and it is not the ‘social-ladder’ that one must climb to achieve happiness, or even their full potential. The mention of ancestors waiting: “gonna meet old man Daniel...; Paul and Silas...; my friends and kindred...; my loving mother” is even more striking in the aftermath of the Second World War.

⁴³ Brewster, Dr. William Herbert. *Tribute: The Life of Dr. William Herbert Brewster*. 2nd Edition. Memphis: The Brewster House of Sermon Songs, Christian Literature and Dramatic Arts, 1984. Pg. 23

Ethnomusicologist Guthrie Ramsey reflects on the post-war Afro-American sentiments through the imagery of a Christian climbing the ladder to Heaven.⁴⁴ While these ‘popular sentiments’ might attribute to the song’s reputation, the song was written before this was the case. Brewster says:

The fight for rights here in Memphis was pretty rough on the Black church . . . and I wrote that song "Move on Up a Little Higher." . . . We'll have to move in the field of education. Move into the professions and move into politics. Move in anything that any other race has to have to survive. That was a protest idea and inspiration. I was trying to inspire Black people to move up higher. Don't be satisfied with the mediocre . . . Before the freedom fights started, before the 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.⁴⁵

Mahalia Jackson’s recording of “Move On Up a Little Higher” sets up a communal expectation that Brewster hopes will ripostively affect his audience so that they first acknowledge the corruption in their lives and then, most importantly, are driven to improve their spiritual and moral situation. For Brewster, active participation is key in the realization of all change.

Brewster, for a 1959 Celebration of the Emancipation Proclamation writes:

This program has been planned [...] with the hope that it would arouse and inspire every citizen of color to press forward for complete and uninhibited citizenship. Just as the Children of Israel were not free when they crossed the Red Sea, the Negroes were not free when Abraham Lincoln signed the Emancipation Proclamation. [...] Freedom never becomes a reality until the individual himself desires, and demands it... We hope... each individual will be inspired to develop within himself such a passion for freedom until no obstacle can prevail against him.⁴⁶

⁴⁴ Ramsey, Guthrie P. *Race Music: Black Cultures from Bebop to Hip-Hop (Music of the African Diaspora)* (2003), University of California Press, page 52.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ Brewster, Dr. William Herbert. Program for the *Celebration of the Emancipation Proclamation*. Ellis Auditorium, 1 January 1959. Accessed 29 June 2009. East Trigg Baptist Church Archives.

Mr. James Gailey says that the East Trigg Baptist congregation under Reverend Brewster “was like one big family.” Brewster, he claims, had a knack for knowing or predicting the individual strengths of the young people in the congregation. “If they aspired to be something, he would try and help them. If they wanted to sing [...] he would try and help them into a role of leadership and always encouraged them to get an education.”⁴⁷

Brewster had a complicated relationship with Crump’s governance over Memphis. Brewster names W. C. Handy a major musical influence, despite Handy’s help in fueling Crump’s political machine. In 1970, W.C. Handy’s wife appears at a ceremony with Brewster as he is presented an award by Commissioner Bill Farris – representing the City of Memphis – “in recognition for his contributions to the religious life of Memphis, the Mid-South, America and the World, by the great number of hymns, gospel songs, spirituals and anthems for which he is so widely known.”⁴⁸

⁴⁷ Gailey, James. Interview by Kayla Miller. Fresh Slices Sidewalk Café, 1585 Overton Park Ave Memphis, TN 38112. 23 July 2009.

⁴⁸ Caption to Photo – By: Ernest C. Withers, date unknown; Brewster, Dr. William Herbert. *Dr. William Herbert Brewster: The Man and his Message*, “Watchmen of the Night.” National and International Tributes in 1970. Education Board of the National Baptist Convention U.S.A. Inc.



49

Left to Right: Reverend Dr. William Herbert Brewster; Mrs. W.H. Handy; Fire and Police Commissioner, Claude C. Armour and Commissioner Bill Farris

The religious texts for which he is applauded at this ceremony have very strong educational themes. Education, Brewster maintains, is an essential ingredient towards reform. Celeste Williams of the *Commercial Appeal*, writes that “[s]everal people who knew him said he made it a point to remind them that he simply wanted to be known as ‘God’s sharecropper’...

⁴⁹ Photo by Ernest C. Withers. Brewster, Dr. William Herbert. *William Herbert Brewster: The Man and His Message*, “Watchmen of the Night” – Glowing Testimonials: National and International Tributes in 1970. National Baptist Convention U.S.A. Inc.

But those who remember him [in various capacities] had many other words.”⁵⁰ Brewster, in his autobiography, insists, “I have always been first a lyricist,”⁵¹ but, perhaps before this appellation is appropriate, he is an educator. Brewster “discovered early that young people are attracted to and by music and said, “I wasn’t afraid to change the beat,” he said.”⁵² Brewster brings the message of gospel music into the reach of a secularized audience through the adoption of a different sound. Reverend Brewster was a key member on the Education Board for the National Baptist Convention U.S.A. Inc. for many years. While he held this position, he never tried to separate the issue of race from the platform of education. In the “National Baptist Spotlight,” a monthly news bulletin and commentary, he reminded members:

By their sit-ins, Negro students in the South are demonstrating the silliness of a system which denies the right of humans to eat alongside one another. They are getting an impressive amount of support from white students outside the South. They are getting some, too, from students in the South who find that they cannot rationalize or defend these paradoxes. The spread of education in the South has produced a force for those students who have overthrown the government of Syngman Rhee in Korea [which has] obviously been stirred to the depths by oppressive practices.⁵³

Brewster often reveals a strong interest in and awareness of global politics in sermons and publications for which he is responsible. He urges both the Convention and his own congregation to remember the sacrifices of others so that his audience might realize that it is in this way that change affects further changes.

⁵⁰ Williams, Celeste. “Brewster, Composer, Dies at 90: Memphian Called Giant of Gospel.” *The Commercial Appeal*. 16 October 2009. Pg. B1. Accessed 23 June 2009. Main Library – Memphis Room, Brewster Biographical Collection.

⁵¹ *Tribute*.

⁵² “Musician Ministers Gospel with a Song.” *The Memphis Press-Scimitar*. 11 October 1982. Pg. 3. Accessed 23 June 2009. Main Library – Memphis Room, Brewster Biographical Collection.

⁵³ Brewster, Dr. William Herbert. “The National Baptist Spotlight: a monthly news bulletin and commentary.” *The Education Board of the National Baptist Convention U.S.A. Inc. Volume 3*. 1 September 1960. Pg. 4.

Brewster's poem, "I'm Determined to be Somebody, Someday" was written specifically for students to emphasize the necessity of these sacrifices and of the hope toward a happier future. The poem reads:

The present conditions and dark circumstance
 May make it appear that I have not a chance;
 The odds may be against me, this fact I admit,
 I haven't much to boast of, just a little faith and grit;
 In spite of the things that stand in my way,
 I'm determined to be somebody, someday.

There's no royal blood a' coursing in my veins,
 No great family background for me remains;
 I haven't had a chance as others have had,
 My living conditions have been kind'a bad;
 But it makes no difference what some people say,
 I'm determined to be somebody, someday.

Some may think that I have made a poor start,
 Well maybe I have but I'll handle that part;
 At the end of each round I'll be on my feet,
 For there's something in me that's hard to beat;
 The fight may e tough, but I'm in it to stay,
 For, I'm just determined to be somebody, someday.

There's really somewhere I would like to go,
 There's truly some things that I would like to know;
 There's certainly some things that I'd like to see,
 And something special I'd like to e;
 Let others do as they will or ma,
 But, as for me, I've just got to be somebody, someday.

As a member of a once downtrodden race,
 To the courts of Heaven, I've appealed my case;
 I know that Jehovah is the judge on the bench,
 Tho men may curse, deride and lynch;
 My blood will cry from the ground and say,
 "Tho you slay me, I'll be somebody, someday!"

My head may be bloody and my skin may be black,
 But nothing shall throw me off the track;
 I'll climb the ladder, round by round,

Until my feet strike higher ground;
 And when I do, just remember what I say,
 I'm determined to be somebody, someday.⁵⁴

About this poem, Brewster says: "I have written a poem that has gone around the world and has been the bridge over which thousands of youngsters have succeeded [... that] is the poem that has outlived anything that I have ever written and has become universal. A lady was here the other day to translate it into French."⁵⁵

In a sermon titled *The Light of Freedom Still Shines in America: An address for the Emancipation Celebration or a Freedom Rally*, he ends his address with:

Others [slaves] remembered how old John Brown had tried and failed, and they made up a song on the plantation in memory of that old rugged warrior who died that the slave might be free, and they started singing:

John Brown's body lies a-moulding in the clay
 But his soul goes marching on.

John Brown's knapsack was strapped upon his back
 But his soul goes marching on.

The stars of heaven are looking kindly down;
 On the grave of old John Brown

Julia Ward Howe caught the tune and added the words of *The Battle Hymn of the Republic* that was so eloquently rehearsed by Dr. Martin Luther King [Jr.] the night before he was assassinated in Memphis. These are the words:

Mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord
 He is trampling out the vintage where the grapes of wrath are stored
 He hath loosed the faithful lighting of his terrible swift sword
 His truth is marching on.

In the beauty of the lilies, Christ was born across the sea,

⁵⁴ Brewster, Dr. William Herbert. *Tribute: The Life of Dr. William Herbert Brewster*. 2nd Edition. Memphis: The Brewster House of Sermon Songs, Christian Literature and Dramatic Arts, 1984. Pg. 129.

⁵⁵ Brewster, Dr. William Herbert. Interview by Dr. Charles W. Crawford. Project: Robert R. Church Family. Tape recording. East Trigg Baptist Church, Memphis, TN. 6 July 1983. Accessed 21 July 2009. University of Memphis – Mississippi Valley Collection, filename: Brewster.

With a glory in his bosom that transfigures you and me;
As he to make men holy, let us die to make men free
While God is marching on.

Glory! Glory hallelujah! Glory! Glory hallelujah Glory!
Glory hallelujah. Our God is marching on.⁵⁶

The message of this post-1968 sermon does well to give readers a summation of some of Brewster's beliefs according to his influences.

Dr. Brewster's philosophy reflects an insistent juxtaposition of ideas, secular and biblical. Published on many of his church bulletins, sermons, and items published by the Education Board for the National Baptist Convention U.S.A. Inc. is a line of poetry by Omar Khayyám (1048-1143), a Persian thinker, mathematician, and poet: "The finger writes and having writ moves on."⁵⁷ Despite this non-religious verse, Brewster's writing banner was all biblical: "Bible-based and Christ-Centered."⁵⁸ These spiritual and secular interactions continue from the written word into Brewster's actions and intentions for music. While Brewster's message is deeply spiritual in all of his writings and compositions, they keep a tangible application in the secular world.

Brewster's songs such as "Move On Up a Little Higher" and Poems such as "I'm Determined to be Somebody, Someday" and traditional songs such as "John Brown's Body" and the "Battle Hymn of the Republic" carry an obvious but valuable trend. They stress the fleeting and transient demands of one's mortal existence. While they emphasized 'the after,' the songs do not neglect the responsibilities that, while on earth, an individual keeps. "Move on Up a Little

⁵⁶ Brewster, Dr. William Herbert. *The Light of Freedom Still Shines in America: An address for the Emancipation Celebration or a freedom rally*. Sermon. East Trigg Baptist Church. 1 January, Exact date unknown [Post 1968]. Accessed 29 July 2009. East Trigg Baptist Church Archives.

⁵⁷ Quotation appears on Brewster's funeral program, used by permission of James and Bernice Gailey and is mentioned in *Tribute.*; Khayyám, Omar. *The Rubáiyát of Omar Khayyám*. Trans. Edward Fitzgerald. New York: George H. Doran Company, 1919. Quatrain 51 (LI).

⁵⁸ Brewster, Dr. William Herbert. *Tribute: The Life of Dr. William Herbert Brewster*. 2nd Edition. Memphis: The Brewster House of Sermon Songs, Christian Literature and Dramatic Arts, 1984.

Higher” is, as Brewster himself notes, as much a commentary on contemporary social issues in Memphis in the 1930s as it is an urgency to the Memphis community to, using the colloquial, ‘straighten up,’ lest the Zion described in the song not be realized by the community who Brewster sees as bending so easily to Mayor E.H. Crump’s expectation of them. “John Brown,” for example, is called by Brewster: “the old rugged warrior who died that the slave might be free.”⁵⁹ His actions, marching presumably, affected the motion of his soul even after the physical action itself was stunted, and the “Battle Hymn of the Republic” very much handles the crux of this claim in the phrase: “As he to make men holy, let us die to make men free.”⁶⁰ Individuals are not the focus of the gospel drama except in the expectation of service, and individual glory is never the end of a mission. One is expected and encouraged to leave the world a better place than it is as it is experienced.

The structure of “John Brown’s Body,” “Move On Up a Little Higher,” “Battle Hymn of the Republic,” and “I’m Determined to be Somebody, Someday” use repetition similarly to emphasize their respective messages. This insistent repetition became the standard for many proclamations and speeches during the Civil Rights Movement. Martin Luther King, Jr. is noted for employing this characteristic in his speeches.

⁵⁹ Ibid.

⁶⁰ Ibid.



61

Left to Right: Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.; Myrtle Jackson; Dr. W.H. Brewster

“Dr. Brewster was one of the early promoters of Dr. Martin Luther King [Jr.]. This was a mass rally at the Mason Temple for his [King’s] first appearance in Memphis. Myrtle Jackson is leading the devotion. Dr. King joins in the singing. Dr. Brewster is preaching.”⁶² Dr. Samuel Turner, who is often called ‘Brewster’s right hand’ by the East Trigg Baptist Church congregation, says of Reverend Brewster:

Like his master, Dr. Brewster is a great champion for the underprivileged. This noble cause motivated him to form the Brewster Theological Clinic; to preach over 6,000 sermons over his 65 years of preaching;⁶³ to compose in a fifty year period over 200 gospel songs; to compile from over 60 years of research numerous articles of black roots.

⁶¹ Photo by Ernest C. Withers. Brewster, Dr. William Herbert. *William Herbert Brewster: The Man and His Message*, “Watchmen of the Night” – Glowing Testimonials: National and International Tributes in 1970. National Baptist Convention U.S.A. Inc.

⁶² Original caption to photo.

⁶³ Numerical figures accurate in 1977.

His accomplishments are far too numerous for us to numerate here... His most famous poem, *I'm Determined to be Somebody, Someday*, has motivated countless nobodies to be somebodies. His most famous gospel song, "Move On Up a Little Higher," has moved the oppressed to succeed in spite of few opportunities. In his forty-five years of radio ministry, he has edified and saved thousands.⁶⁴

Further promoting Brewster's message is his relationship to the then-armature musician, Elvis Presley. Neal and Janice Gregory, in their book *When Elvis Died* write:

When this young fellow Elvis passed," said Memphis' oldest active black minister, "it was a saddening thing. It was like the clouds themselves wept." The grief of Dr. W. Herbert Brewster [...] gospel songwriter, unrelenting civil rights activist, political power broker, and minister of the East Trigg Baptist Church, [this grief] was common among many in the black community.⁶⁵

The authors of this work are trying to make the case that Elvis was embraced by the African American community in Memphis, Tennessee. Their interview with Dr. Brewster continues: "There was no integration at that time [early 1950s]." recalled Brewster, "Nobody spoke of it; nobody thought about it." Despite this separation, the demographic of his listenership at East Trigg Baptist Church in the late 40s and early to mid fifties, did not resemble the typical congregation at a Memphis church, black or white at a time when Memphis still had separate water fountains and bathrooms according to race. Elvis attended the *Old Camp Meeting on the Air* on Sundays at eleven pm. The physically present audience at East Trigg Baptist Church during these broadcasts realized an ambitious goal of Brewster's, and was largely made up of undergraduate college students, medical students, and longtime members of East Trigg Baptist Church. The following photo and caption describe this audience and Brewster's tagline phrase: "When Grace is in, Race is Out."

⁶⁴ The Brewster Revival and the Camp Meeting on the Air Ensemble. Compilation C.D. Used by permission of James and Bernice Gailey, Memphis, TN.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 108



This picture was taken during one of the services of the East Trigg Avenue Baptist Church in Memphis, Tennessee. The pastor, Dr. William Herbert Brewster, has for years had the distinction of attracting an unusual attendance of white people, at his Church. His eloquent preaching, plus the music – that he personally writes and directs, – have not lessened in drawing power after more that 30 years. He, always says: “When Grace is in, Race is Out.”⁶⁶

Sources differ regarding Brewster’s method of composition used for his songs – that is, how they got from Brewster’s head to sheet music, and to singers such as Mahalia Jackson and

⁶⁶ Jones, Francis E. East Trigg Avenue Baptist Church Historical Publication. Date Unknown [Estimated to be mid-fifties]. Pg. 15.

Sam Cook who made them famous. His great granddaughter, Ms. Brewster-Evans, maintains that “what’s so fascinating a-thing” about her great-grandfather was that he never physically played the music he is so noted for. Though she says that her own singing ability, facility in brass instruments, and her great-aunt Juanita “Nita” Brewster- Crenshaw’s piano playing is evidence that the talent was there, but without outlet in the form of an instrument – “Big Daddy could *not* sing.”⁶⁷ She remembers that he composed the music by humming:

He hummed and somebody else played... That’s just how it went. [...] You know, and she was playing and he’d say, ‘Ok, no. I don’t want that there. That’s not where that goes. I don’t like that. I don’t like the way that sounded.’ He was very demanding. He was, he was wonderful, but he was demanding at the same time: “No. I don’t want that.” You know, he meant what he said. ⁶⁸

When Ms. Brewster-Evans was asked how Reverend Brewster managed to write over 200⁶⁹ compositions using this method, her reply was: “It’s easy when you have a gift.”⁷⁰ Even with this gift, Brewster worked longer hours at East Trigg Baptist Church than many work in ordinary jobs. He boasted a dedicated staff which consisted, primarily, of volunteers from the congregation. Ms. Yvonne Griggs remembers that even if an idea had come to him at the last minute, people would work hard to realize it. “It always worked out.”⁷¹ Ms. Brewster-Evans, who lived with Brewster as a child, recalls: “He was always at work. That’s what he called it.

⁶⁷ Ibid.

⁶⁸ Ibid.

⁶⁹ Reagon, Bernice Johnson, Ed. *We’ll Understand It Better By and By: Pioneering African American gospel composers*. Washington: Smithsonian Press, 1992. This number differs among secondary sources. Brewster, himself, may not have known the exact number of songs that he composed. I have chosen this number, as it is the most modest and appears to reflect the most research.

⁷⁰ Brewster-Evans, Kentosha. Interview by Kayla Miller and Josie Holland. East Trigg Baptist Church. 10 July 2009.

⁷¹ Griggs, Yvonne. Conversation with Dr. Carole Blankenship and Kayla Miller. East Trigg Baptist Church. 29 July 2009.

God's work... 11 'o' clock, he'd come in... He used to fall asleep chewing his food...⁷² The following photo depicts Dr. Brewster working in his office.



Brewster in his office in the original building of East Trigg Baptist Church with his personal secretary, Mrs. Fletcher. Pictured on Desk from left to right are his daughter, Juanita Brewster Crenshaw (Poston) and his wife, Julia Brewster

Reverend Dr. William Herbert Brewster's achievements have been compared to the playwright Langston Hughes by Dr. William H. Wiggins of Indiana University. According to

⁷² Brewster-Evans, Kentosha. Interview by Kayla Miller and Josie Holland. East Trigg Baptist Church. 10 July 2009.

Wiggins, Brewster “broke these old dramatic molds” as a playwright.⁷³ Former City Councilman, James Ford said, “I can think of no man who has done more to support the spiritual growth of Memphis than Dr. Brewster... He preached the gospel so eloquently that the devil ought to be afraid to light in Memphis.”⁷⁴ When remembered, Brewster is called ‘great’ by many people and is compared to figures like Thomas A. Dorsey and even to English poet and political activist John Milton⁷⁵ by some journalists. I have tried to justify these comparisons by illustrating his talents, learnedness, achievements and successes.

It is necessary to balance a study of Brewster with the qualification that he was, first, a man who lived and was completed by imperfections. He preferred to remain un-romanticized. An audience must accept these conditions in order to achieve a widened perception of an appreciation of Brewster – his life and his works. Brewster, himself, does not shy away from those qualities that humanize him. He says in many interviews: “I think a person ought to be grateful. I thank God for the wounds and the scars that I have received... I’ve not sought fame. I’ve not sought glory, but I find out that the world will come to you, if you don’t go too far afield...”⁷⁶

This said it is also necessary to emphasize that this exploration into Brewster’s life, works, and influences is only the beginning. This research was begun to spark a curiosity about the life of Brewster as an influential figure in the political, social, and religious aspects of the Civil Rights Movement and to begin to interpret some of his works by situating them alongside one another in order to gain a more comprehensive perspective into his life. There is still work

⁷³ “Study Due of Pastor, His Music.” Article used by permission of James and Bernice Gailey.

⁷⁴ Coffee, Gertha M. “Dr. Brewster Humbly Takes Honor.” *The Commercial Appeal*. 15 August 1980. Accessed 23 June 2009. Main Library – Memphis Room, Brewster Biographical Collection.

⁷⁵ Ibid.

⁷⁶ Brewster, Dr. William Herbert. Interview by Dr. Charles W. Crawford. Project: Robert R. Church Family. Tape recording. East Trigg Baptist Church, Memphis, TN. 6 July 1983. Trans. Pg. 7.

to do on many fronts. There remains a wealth of information to preserve, archive, investigate, and eventually make available to the curious public. This 'tip of the iceberg' would not have been possible if not for the generosity and determined efforts of the East Trigg Baptist Church of Memphis, Tennessee.

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